

CHAPTER FOUR

Twentieth Century *Maya*: *Vaanaprastham* and Other Films

Previously it has been shown that the idea of *maya*, foundational to Indian philosophy and religion and consequently to its cultural expression, has been demonstrated in literature, in art, and in the life and thought of an influential founder figure of independent India. With independence, a new era began in which the nation moved further into implementing the modernising structural, economic, and social changes that were rapidly spreading worldwide in the second half of the twentieth century. Charting the cultural landscape of this period, reflecting and informing the nation's direction, was the burgeoning Indian film industry, which by the century's end had become the most productive and popularly successful cinema in the world. Indian cinema is, therefore, the focus of this chapter. It will identify the way in which the idea of *maya* continues to be used in both figurative and direct terms in Indian film, and it will analyse the inferences of that finding. The films selected are illustrative of explicit references to *maya*, or of the themes within the concept, such as illusion, or the arbitrary and constructed nature of appearance. They are also chosen because of their distribution across half a century of changing times and two predominant categories – that of popular and 'art' film. Firstly, though, it is necessary to justify the connection and its meaning for history of the juxtaposition of '*maya*' and 'cinema'.¹

It is immediately apparent that cinema, in its creation of whole new – but illusory – worlds of sight, sound, knowledge, and experience, is the twentieth century exemplar of *maya*. Two well-known Indian film magazines are, in fact, titled *Cinemaya* and *Mayapuri* ('illusion city'). Most importantly in an historical sense, cinema has been termed 'the dominant cultural institution and product in India',² and like other cultural products there, it embodies, seamlessly, the sacred and the secular.

¹ Of course, there are innumerable methods through which to 'read' Indian film. This thesis is a study of *maya* in cultural manifestation, using film as artefact and example. It is not primarily a study of Indian film.

² Jyotika Viridi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Film as Social History*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 2003, p. 1.

Beyond its value as entertainment, cinema not only portrays the attitudes and aspirations of the nation, but it is very influential in creating and reinforcing them.³ Through its imagery, Indians themselves and people worldwide formulate ideas of the country and its people. As such ideas can be hotly disputed,⁴ and can reinforce social ideology, cinematic images clearly hold political capital, becoming the site of power-play through their capacity of definition. And their power of definition is widespread, for, since its inception in the 1890s, cinema has revolutionised mass communication throughout the world, transcending boundaries of nation, literacy, and language. But, in particular, script writer Javed Akhtar thinks that:

India has a unique relationship with its film industry. No other country can quite mirror this relationship. We are a nation of movie buffs and films provide us with two things we love most: we like to worship and we like to listen to stories ... Hindi cinema must be taken very seriously; its significance cannot be overestimated. It is an extremely important socio-economic phenomenon, a mirror of our social history.⁵

Because of that mirroring of social history, Indian cinema also mirrors the continued understanding of the concept of *maya*, and the multiple uses of that concept. The sights and sounds of films pervade India. *Filmi* music is heard in fields, mountainsides, and city streets, while song and dance routines from popular films are replayed continuously on television in public places, and enormous film posters have their own developed and prominent art form in the urban landscape. The combined regional film industries produce ‘a thousand films in more than twelve languages each year’.⁶ As fantasy, as a vehicle for education and propaganda, for questioning and reinforcing social realities, for reworking religious themes and mythologies, this is a powerful medium. Ever more easily available through the spread of television

³ Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Film (New Revised Edition)*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p. 10.

⁴ *Bandit Queen* and *Pather Panchali*, for example, were acclaimed in the West but many criticisms were made by Indians themselves, as they perceived that stereotyped images of Indian poverty, backwardness, and cruelty to women were perpetuated through these films.

⁵ Javed Akhtar, ‘Barber from Bollywood’, *Tehelka* Vol. 3, No. 5, Feb. 2006. http://tehelka.com/story_main16?filename=In021106BarberFrom_p50.asp Accessed 08/02/2006.

⁶ Lalitha Gopalan, ‘Indian Cinema’, in Jill Neimes (ed.), *An Introduction to Film Studies* 3rd edn., Routledge, London, 2003, p. 360.

and the VCR, cinema is the new storyteller. Moreover, Indian cinema has inherited the sensually affective nature of its cultural background, founded on the aesthetics of *bhava*, *rasa*, and *darshan* (emotion, transcendence, and epiphany) which are essentially linked to the idea of *maya*. These affective aesthetics, translated into Indian cinema through its own particularly developed conventions, maintain a link with the nation's historical past, making cinema (and, in a manner, a continuity with the past) 'immediately accessible to the people'.⁷ This aesthetic familiarity, with its emotional emphasis, allied to storylines and social structures also inherited and familiar, has long ensured that India's own cinematic productions remain, for the nation, favoured well above imported films, even those of Hollywood: Western films are considered 'cold' by mainstream Indian audiences.⁸

Cinema also has a socially unifying influence, so that its influences are spread across society regardless of caste or creed. As anthropologist Milton Singer noted in the mid twentieth century, it served then as a democratising force in India, for in order to be economically successful, films must be available to the maximum audience and therefore were made to 'bypass distinctions of caste, sect, language'.⁹ This effect was further promoted because the new picture theatres and travelling film shows were open to the masses of people who formerly were excluded from recitals held in temples.¹⁰ Now, in the early 21st century, economic trends following a growing wealth in the middle class have seen niche markets develop, and multiplexes being built in the cities, so that there is an emerging pattern of 'different films for different segments: different for rich and poor'.¹¹

All the same, Indian films provide a shared identity for Indians of all persuasions not only within the subcontinent itself, but for those of the diaspora.¹² For instance, a

⁷ Asha Kasbekar, 'Indian Cinema', *ibid.*, p. 384. Other critics find 'unconvincing' the notion of an 'indigenous aesthetic' applying to Indian cinema, interpreting, for instance, emotional display as melodrama rather than as *rasa*-based effect. See Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2002, p. 28.

⁸ Rosie Thomas, 'Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity' in *Screen* 26, nos. 3-4, 1985, p. 121.

⁹ Milton Singer, *op. cit.* p. 151.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹¹ Javed Akhtar, *op. cit.*

¹² Vijay Mishra states that Bollywood film has created 'a culture of imaginary solidarity across the heterogeneous linguistic and national groups that make up the South Asian (Indian) diaspora'. Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*, Routledge, New York, 2002, p. 237.

glance at the newspapers produced for South Asian Australians at the time of writing will show that many more pages are devoted to 'Bollywood' news, stars, and music than are film pages in their general Australian counterparts.¹³ Islamicist Ziauddin Sardar has written that for an Indian growing up in England, Indian cinema of the 1950s and 1960s was a 'reservoir of aesthetic and cultural values' that not only 'established the family's cultural and intellectual priorities' (through the films' social commentaries), but even more importantly he adds:

For us, Indian cinema was just that: Indian in a true multicultural sense. There were no divisions here between 'Muslims', 'Hindus', 'Sikhs', or 'Pakistanis' and 'Indians' – all of us identified with the characters and found meaning in the narratives. The films testified to the fact that all were culturally and socially one.¹⁴

This observation over-rides the *maya* (the framing) of communal boundary lines between Indians, affirming their common ground. But multiplicity within unity must be acknowledged in the holistic viewpoint, and in one that is truly democratic.¹⁵ An iconic 'Hindu' film such as *Mother India* had a Muslim star and was directed by a Muslim;¹⁶ one of the best loved classics of Indian film is *Mughal-e-Azam*, a mythological love story set at the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar; and India's regional cinemas have their own distinctiveness of language, setting, and custom. Yet most observers would find cause to agree with Sardar that there are common values, arising mainly from the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which affect Indians regardless of caste, creed or religion, so that they are 'not Hindu values per se'.¹⁷

¹³ For instance, newspapers such as *The Indian Down Under*; *Beyond India*; *Bharat Times*; *Indian Link*.

¹⁴ Ziauddin Sardar, 'Dilip Kumar made me do it', in Ashish Nandy (ed.), *The Secret Politics of Our Desires*, Zed Books Ltd., Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998, p. 21.

¹⁵ Conversely, Sardar regrets that as the century advanced, communal differences were more fully stressed in Indian films, with the rise of Hindu fundamentalism and the 'fissures and fragmentation of the Indian personality'. As films became more formulaic, and increasing westernisation saw cultural concerns replaced by 'action' films, characters were reduced to one-dimensional caricatures, thus differentiating figures such as 'the Muslim' into a defined and separate identity. *Ibid.*, pp. 62 – 66.

¹⁶ This observation, made by Ashish Nandy, is reiterated by Christopher Pinney in his 'Introduction', in Rachel Dwyer, Christopher Pinney (eds.), *Pleasure and the Nation*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001, p. 10.

¹⁷ Vimla Patil, 'Mythologicals in their modern avatar', in *The Sunday Tribune*, 17/3/2002, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2002/20020317/spectrum/main7.htm>, accessed 16/11/2005. Also see Pinney, *ibid.*, p. 10. and Mishra's comments on 'crucial cultural intertexts' in Mishra, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

The epics are essentially the reservoir from which India's distinctive film industry draws, and upon which it is founded, for the earliest Indian films were 'mythologicals', re-presenting revered characters and well-known stories. Literary and film scholar Vijay Mishra has written that not only do Indian filmic texts 'endlessly rewrite the *Mahabharata*' but that indeed they 'retrieve the rules of their formation' from that text.¹⁸ So it is unsurprising that the very first film, *Raja Harishchandra*, released in 1913, was an instructive and inspirational story from the *Mahabharata*, of an heroic exemplar of truthfulness. Many similarly devotionally oriented films followed.¹⁹

For Indians to see their Gods, saints and heroes 'alive' on the screen was more than mere spectacle, it was an act of worship, an exchange of *darshan*. The *maya* of cinema could become, like so much else in India, a means to remember the *maya* of the world and to connect with that of the Gods – a serving of that 'uber reality' and morality dressed in high drama, emotion, beautiful visions, familiar storylines, and song and dance. David Smith makes the noticeable connection between the 'virtual reality' of Hindu devotional worship and that of the cinema, when he writes that:

It might be said that Hinduism had long been waiting for the cinema. Like film stars, the gods manifest both the unreal and a surcharged reality. The gods mirror the human world, but the mirror is a magic mirror, that shows the hopes and fears and the world in graphic reality. Segal argues that Hollywood film stars are the modern secular version of gods: like gods, the stars live forever in their films, reappearing in new roles, larger than life, seldom seen by ordinary people, with superhuman powers. In Bollywood, the Indian film stars have that and more when they take on the roles of gods in film. In modernity the make-believe of Hollywood is a separate world of play, and arguably a continuation of mythology in the secular world, enchantment amid disenchantment. In Hinduism

¹⁸ Vijay Mishra, 'The Great Indian Epic and Peter Brook', in David Williams (ed.), *Peter Brook and the Mahabharata: Critical Perspectives*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 195.

¹⁹ Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 1980, p. 14.

modernity's technology gives renewed vigour to the continuous tradition of divine forms.²⁰

That 'renewed vigour' ensured that cinema, like other Indian art forms, could also serve to overcome *maya* (as separation from the divine). Viewing the earliest mythological films, audiences prostrated themselves in devotion before the cinema images of Rama or Krishna.²¹ Such fervour to connect with the world of the gods was also evident at the end of the 1980s when the enormously popular television versions of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were screened on the state television station, Doordarshan. It was reported in national newspapers that, in readiness for the gods' appearances in the serials, people bathed for purification, and performed *pujas* before television sets which were garlanded, and decorated with sandalwood paste; normal commercial and social activities ceased, and traffic quietened for the duration of the screenings so that whole streets were almost deserted. Television sets were installed on temporary altars in public places, some of which were 'sanctified with cow dung and Ganges water, worshipped with flowers and incense'.²² The *maya*, the form or appearance of the Gods, was accomplished through film just as it was, in India, through the other arts of image making. Cinema too is *darshan* made sacred.

For many Hindu families at home and abroad, watching any devotional films became an addition, or even a substitute, for other religious practices such as reading holy books or temple worship.²³ The final instalment of the *Ramayana* saw festivities in many states that imitated the usual religious celebrations marking the epic events (such as the slaying of Ravana and the return of Rama), yet it has been said that there was an accompanying feeling of loss because that weekly 'feast of *darshan*' was over.²⁴ Linda Hess, in her study of the *Ramlila* in Varanasi, reports a similar sadness of spectators, an emotional loss that the pageant was gone from the streets; she calls it

²⁰ David Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2003, p. 144 – 145. Segal quote from Robert Segal, Inaugural Lecture, Lancaster University, Lancaster, 2000.

²¹ Erik Barnouw and S. Krishnaswamy, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²² Philip Lutgendorf, 'All in the (Raghu) Family', in Robert C. Allen (ed.), *To Be Continued... Soap Operas Around the World*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 327.

²³ Lutgendorf, *ibid.* p. 327; Marie Gillespie, 'Sacred Serials', *ibid.*, p. 361.

²⁴ Lutgendorf, *ibid.*, pp. 328, 332.

‘the shock of transition from one frame of reality to another’.²⁵ The ‘greater reality’ beyond *maya*, the world of the Gods, could be vividly accessible through video recordings, but this individual viewing could not hold the same power as that shared simultaneously by an entire nation.

The cinema experience, with its absorbing, transporting sight and sound effects, allied with the surrounding street poster images and a proliferation of popular cine-magazines all combine to elevate the superstars of Indian film, as I have described above, to a Godlike realm towards which ordinary mortals direct their dreams. Like the Gods too, stars are seen as bearing particular recognised characteristics that in the public eye transcend their ‘personal’ selves. They become prototypes, as do the Gods, so that as Lakshmi signifies riches, Amitabh Bachchan personifies the romantic loner, or rebel, taking a stand against society’s injustices. The stars are so well recognised to Indian audiences that very often their names are not even included in the film’s credits – a source of frustration to any newcomer trying to learn about the world of Indian cinema. And just as the Gods are a key to realms beyond the mundane, so too are film stars. The stars, and the characters they portray, are models of human behaviour; in popular Hindi films individual nuances beyond that which form the character type are unnecessary. Krishna appeared as both God and human in the *Mahabharata*, and now the idolised Shah Rukh Khan is allowed, in interviews, to be shown as at once human (humorous, humble, loving his family), while very much set apart from the masses by wealth, fame, and adoration. Film stars, like films, typify *maya*, as an illusory ‘reality’ – they are representations of archetypal values, not the individualised ‘real’ human that fans cannot know: they both are and are not as they appear.

Altering standard types of the hero and villain, or alteration of the depiction of women’s roles and rights, are amongst many ways of ‘reading’ changes in Indian film over the decades, in order to assess the processes of history. Films document socio-political history by mirroring prevailing trends in aspects such as costume styles or

²⁵ Linda Hess, ‘Staring at Frames Till They Turn into Loops: An Excursion through Some Worlds of Tulsidas’, in Bradley R. Hertel and Cynthia Ann Humes (eds.), *Living Banaras: Hindu Religion in Cultural Context*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993, p. 96.

changing technologies, and also by reflecting current social pre-occupations. Similarly, the manner in which the idea of *maya* is represented in film, and the fact that it is represented at all, can also be revelatory of the age. Since *maya* is, in one assessment, a gauge of truth and reality, it is indelibly associated with ideas of realism, a customary locus of film critique.

The definition of realism is not only integral to the idea of *maya*, but also to the perceived divide between ‘art’ and ‘popular’ film, categories themselves defined by the *type* of ‘reality’ they privilege, and their methods of doing so. This divided relationship has instigated matching disjunctions within Indian audiences, which have carried politically charged overtones, and have marked social divisions. The educated, ‘westernised’ audience, the upper class intelligentsia (and Western audiences too, if they watched Indian films *at all*), for many years decried the Indian popular film format as over-emotional, imitative, vulgar, clichéd, and unrealistic (and frequently too long), evaluations which, as the often-cited film scholar Rosie Thomas points out, were made ‘according to the canons of European and Hollywood filmmaking’.²⁶

Popular Indian films had transgressed the conventions of Western realism in several ways. As explained previously, characters are portrayed in ‘exaggeratedly stylised’ fashion, with ‘disregard for psychological characterisation’.²⁷ The frequent inclusion of song-and-dance sequences, so essential for drawing the crowds to Indian cinema, interrupts the linearity of the narrative flow and sweeps the viewer, in an instant, from the dusty streets of a Rajasthani village, to an episode of water skiing on a Swiss lake, or to views of the lovers strolling the boulevards of Paris. During these sequences the lover protagonists appear in a rapid succession of different clothes that may have no connection to their economic or social situation, but are wonderfully colourful and romantic.²⁸ Settings are unnaturally spectacular – palaces, fields of flowers, cliff tops with crashing waves below. The likelihood of the characters actually finding themselves in such a location is irrelevant: it is the aforementioned

²⁶ Rosie Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

²⁷ Rosie Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

²⁸ Clothing worn in films is highly suggestive and symbolic, as Rachel Dwyer has explained in Dwyer and Patel, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-99.

rasa effect, the emotional sensation, which is sought. The aspects of melodrama and ‘vulgar’ bright colours of costume, scenery, and makeup, which are typical of ‘Bollywood’ (as the popular Hindi films are known), all encourage emotionally elevated *rasa* states. That overt emotion (the heroes themselves often weep) is enhanced by the ‘tableaux’ effect produced by the camera lingering on particular important shots. Even the amplified sound effects in violent scenes – the smack of fist on cheekbone – have a visceral impact. Drama critic Rustom Bharucha, when commenting on English director Peter Brook’s film version of *Mahabharata*, and berating him for his seeming lack of understanding of ‘fundamental principles underlying traditional narratives in India’, has emphasised that:

The purpose of traditional performances is not to tell a story from beginning to end, but to dwell on specific moments in the story, so that its minutest details can evoke a world of sensations and truth.²⁹

That familiar ‘rule’ of Indian theatre, that the emphasis is on *how* things happen rather than *what* will happen next³⁰ reflects an attention to meaning rather than progression, to the *affect* of the moment. It echoes the immediacy that is the ascendant intention of traditional art in India, its ‘breaking through’ the mundanity of *maya*. Thus, reading Indian popular film through elements of the nation’s own aesthetic tradition, such as the longstanding device of *rasa* can, in part, answer criticisms of ‘unreality’, and simultaneously be informative of the worldview underpinned, as explained previously, by acknowledgement of *maya*.

If Indian popular films are clichéd, imitative of Western styles, or repetitive ‘formula’ stories following rehashed familiar plots, these points are irrelevant to viewers and producers as long as the films serve their function to delight, and incidentally or purposefully to deliver moral lessons (and, of course, to be a commercial success). The films are longer than the Western norm because, again echoing the format of Epic stories, so much must be included: many subplots, music

²⁹ Rustom Bharucha, ‘A View From India’ in David Williams (ed.), *Peter Brook and The Mahabharata*, Routledge, London, 1991, p. 235.

³⁰ Rosie Thomas, op. cit., p. 124.

and dance, comedy, tragedy, fights, and love scenes. Dharmic and non-dharmic order must be presented so that *dharma* may be finally restored, with the viewers' beliefs in these rights and wrongs reinterpreted for current times, and thus reinforced.³¹ Other 'non-realist' (in a western sense) aspects commonly found in Indian popular film are also true to Sanskritist dramatic formulas: for instance, grim situations may include comic remarks and behaviour, or improbable feats of strength may be performed by the hero. These characteristics create an accepted brand of realism sanctioned by traditional forms and popular acclaim. The 'real and the 'not-real' exist simultaneously, and are not seen as mutually defining opposites. The world that is *maya* is displayed in all its inclusivity, as it is in classical painted and sculptural representation. Literary theorist Kumkum Sangari has explained of the social perception of art in India that:

The perception does not always constitute the real and the non-real as a binary opposition, but as co-existent; and in it, sacred and secular art forms can be read as miracle or *chamatkar*, signifying not the presence of the miraculous *per se* but an elasticity and a capacity for wonder on the part of the listener/reader that can give the quality of a revelation. As an aesthetic of creativity and response this is quite different from the consciously engineered 'surprise' of the unexpected juxtaposition that is central to Euro-American modernism.³²

An important criterion of realism in Hindi film is that which is *believable to its audience*: as Rosie Thomas argues, Indian audiences have a high tolerance for fantasy and 'impossible' solutions, yet will not easily accept transgression of the codes of 'ideal kinship behaviour', for instance, if 'a son kills his mother'.³³ This idealism of storyline is 'unrealistic' in a western sense in the same manner that Indian film characters, in their formulaic, caricatured, and melodramatic style, may be. The

³¹ Vijay Mishra, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³² Kumkum Sangari, 'The Politics of the Possible', in Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, Vivek Dhaireswar (eds), *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1993, p. 261. Sangari is writing at this point about the novels of Salman Rushdie, but her assessment holds a wider application for Indian art.

³³ Rosie Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

formulaic agenda removes the nuances of individuality so central to modernist, realist ideals. The pivotal role of realism in India's claim to modernity has been recognised, too, by film scholar Sumitra Charavarty, in writing of national identity in Indian film. She perceives that the rational, scientific attitude that was a characteristic element of the perception of British (and subsequently Western) superiority, both by the colonisers themselves and by the educated aspirational Indian middle class, favoured a 'realism' that had, historically, only a marginal place in Indian epistemology.³⁴ Chakravarti writes that this realism seemed to deny:

... Indian literary, dramatic, and philosophical traditions. Moreover, the call for realism meant that the cinema should project not images of what Indian society was but what it *should be* ... Strong ideas about individualism, democracy, linear time, and material progress go against the grain of Indian philosophical speculations and experiential value systems; however, the educated middle class was affected by Western ideas, and 'realism' as a representational strategy in fiction was one way of coping with the processes of industrialization and modernity.³⁵

The signifiers accepted as 'realist' and 'the modern' by Western audiences and Indian critics alike were hailed in the films of director Satyajit Ray, after his debut production, *Pather Panchali*, won an international award at the Cannes Film Festival of 1956. Hence Ray's films lent Indian cinema 'respectability and status that it had never known before'.³⁶ His films are 'realist' because they depict the everyday world of Indians encountering the modern, whether in village or in city. They reflect his own background, a fusion of western education combined with a rootedness in his own country's culture and history, and they reflect the times in which the films were made: post-independence India with its socialist, industrialist and secular vision, and with its idealist nation-building platform of individual rights, especially those of the marginalised, such as the poor, or women.

³⁴ Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947 – 1987*, University of Texas Press. Austin, 1993, p. 82.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 83.

³⁶ Asha Kasbekar, *op. cit.*, p. 408.

This stance is made clear in Ray's 1960 film, *Devi (The Goddess)*, in which the *maya* of delusion is foundational to a story of misguided patriarchy masquerading as religious fervour. *Devi*, along with the film which is the major focus of the present study, Shaji Karun's 1999 production *Vaanaprastham*, can both be classed as 'art' films. *Devi* is a useful adjunct to the study of *maya* in film, for its similarity of genre but disparity in time with *Vaanaprastham* illustrates the way *maya* is presented with different intent in a different age. Importantly, the ideas of *maya* appear in many popular and commercially successful films over the same period: it is not therefore simply a classical (and possibly archaic) reference to be found in 'art' films which are frequented mainly by the intelligentsia. 'Maya' as both term and concept is notable in several films of iconic producer, director, and actor, Raj Kapoor, which span the mid-century decades. Those films, Dev Anand's *Guide*, and several productions from the close of the century – the 'globalised' era, influenced by the interests of the monied new Indian diaspora, the Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) – will be included as illustration of *maya* in this chapter. It will also be shown that 'maya' is a significant word in the title of some films.

The multi-award winning *Vaanaprastham (The Last Dance)*³⁷ is conspicuous for its careful use of *maya*-based themes in its unfolding exposition. In using these themes, this film encompasses many points of interest, including traditional roles in culture and community, modern change which affects these roles, and questions of selfhood applicable to both individual and society. It does so with the stated intent of its director (and clearly that of its script writer and actors) to represent aspects of Indian life in the southern state of Kerala of the mid twentieth century. *Vaanaprastham* uses established social and cultural modes to ponder the intersection, the overlap of the worlds of social reality and the 'imagined' mythological world. This conjunction is an important one in recognising the vexed place of myth and religion in the modern world, which defines itself, in part, by separating these 'worlds' into binaries of mythic/real, religious/secular.

³⁷ *Vaanaprastham*, 1999. Director; Shaji Karun. Producer: Pierre Assouline. Cast: Mohanlal, Suhasini, Mattanoor S. Marar, Kukku Parameshwaram.

One critic has named *Vaanaprastham* ‘a deep meditation on fiction and reality’,³⁸ for it is a narrative built upon ideas of *maya* – of illusion and the creation of realities. The film depicts a quest to understand and express identity, and the layered realities inherent in that quest. Malayalam ‘superstar’ Mohanlal portrays the Kathakali dancer, Kunhikuttam, who enacts the role of mythical warrior-hero Arjuna to such perfection that the Dewan’s daughter-in-law, Subhadra, falls in love with the costumed character, while rejecting the real man behind the mask.

Vaanaprastham does more than illustrate the continuing (and common) theme of *maya* as confused reality, and as art, that can be traced in classical Indian drama and literary tradition.³⁹ The film also employs the *maya* concept to examine meaning and truth in regard to the vital social issues of caste and class, in a timeframe that spans India’s pre- and post-independence years, an era of rapid social change. In doing so, *Vaanaprastham* brings together continuing traditional elements – the dance-drama of Kathakali, familiar Epic narratives, and the ancient philosophy these both incorporate – with the emphasis on human equality and freedom that is a foundational component of the ‘modern’ age.⁴⁰ This confluence appears to be that which art historian Geeta Kapur has named ‘a desire to invest faith in tradition as well as an inclination to dismantle cultural codes from a position of profound suspicion’.⁴¹ Similarly, the film also addresses the tension which Sumita Chakravarty identifies at the heart of ‘...

³⁸ ‘Vaanaprastham – the Last Dance’, *Au-cinema Reviews*, <http://www.au-cinema.com/Vanaprastham.com>, accessed 4/2/04.

³⁹ See, for example, the section on *Shakuntala* in the previous chapter. An excellent essay on the topic is that of D. F. Pocock, ‘Art and theology in the *Bhagavata Purana*’, in Veena Das (ed.), *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 19. No. 1, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 9 – 41.

⁴⁰ A major criticism of India made by the British imperialists during their rule was that the country was bound by despotic ‘feudal’ governance practices and enslaved by superstitious religious belief; the caste system was held up as evidence of both. Yet it was a similar ‘caste’ system of racial hierarchy that was a tenet of British rule. See, for instance, David Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2003, pp. 93 – 95.; George D. Bearce, *British Attitudes Towards India 1784 – 1858*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1961. For an overview of the extensive European opinions on caste in the colonial era, see Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India*, Hurst & Company, London, 1990, pp. 49-84. The caste system therefore became a focus of social reform in the project of ‘modernising’ India. D. R. Nagaraj writes in his introduction to Ashish Nandy’s collected essays *Exiled at Home* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005) that Nandy’s school of colonial theory stresses the mutual transformation of coloniser and colonised, a non-essentialist viewing of the process of modernisation that allows retention of tradition alongside evolving social practice.

⁴¹ Geeta Kapur, ‘Revelation and Doubt in *Sant Tukaram* and *Devi*’, in *When Was Modernism?*, Tulika, New Delhi, 2000, p. 233.

Indian sensibilities regarding realism: the manifest need to present at once an individualized consciousness *and* a prototype, and agent *and* a victim.’⁴²

Vaanaprastham depicts, in the microcosm of individual lives, the changing directions in society, and therefore in the self, that echo the struggles of the new nation comprised of a heterogeneous mix of peoples in moving towards goals of national unity and social justice. In its reworking and repositioning of mythological stories, the film revivifies them, and re-emphasises the ongoing relevance of these mythologies. Shaji Karun himself has stated that the film reaches out to reveal elements of Indian philosophy and mythology to Western audiences, so that they may understand the unique dance form of Kerala depicted here which, he explains, ‘For us ... is a kind of self-expression’.⁴³ The reliving of age-old tales and familiar characters is clearly ‘self-expression’ for both the individual and the community. Karun’s statement is a noteworthy exception to the comment by Rosie Thomas that ‘... most present-day film-makers make no conscious reference to this heritage’,⁴⁴ for, although Thomas’s words are in the context of her association of Indian popular film with Sanskrit aesthetic tradition, such tradition is explicitly upheld in *Vaanaprastham*, and Karun acknowledges its contemporary role.

Kathakali theatre in itself is an expose of *maya*: it is the dance-drama which, arguably, most directly depicts Gods and Epic heroes ‘unveiled’ to its viewers. Dancer Leela Sampson calls it ‘the most explicit, passionate, and colourful dance form of India’.⁴⁵ That description is noteworthy in relation to the dance’s affective quality, which is especially relevant to the film’s female protagonist who, in her perception of reality, crosses a threshold between mythic and historical worlds. It is that threshold which is indicated to visitors at one of the oldest Kathakali theatres, the

⁴² Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947 – 1987*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1993, p. 96.

⁴³ Sharmila Taliculam & Shoba Warriar, ‘I wanted to change Western opinion of Indian films’, *Rediff.com*, Movies: Shaji Karun and Vaanaprastham, August 22, 2000. <http://rediff.com/entertai/2000/aug/22shaj.htm>, accessed 4/2/2004.

⁴⁴ Rosie Thomas, ‘Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity’ in *Screen* No. 26, 1985, p. 130.

⁴⁵ Leela Sampson, *Rhythm in Joy: Classical Indian Dance Traditions*, Lustre Press Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1987, p. 120.

Devan Gurukulam⁴⁶ at Ernakulam in Kerala, where they are instructed that the curtain (*tirassila*) which is held across the stage before a performance is, indeed, *maya*. Once the curtain is lifted, the larger, more ‘real’ world of the Gods is revealed.⁴⁷ The Kathakali characters *are* large, made so by their striking costumes and makeup (see Figure 28 and Figure 29).

The wide skirts, high circular crowns, and extraordinary painted faces of Kathakali dancers remove them from the ‘normal’ world. The dramatic makeup acts as a mask which ‘reveals more than it conceals, exposes more than it hides, uncovers more than it covers ... it is Maya ... it is what it is not’, wrote M. L. Varanpande.⁴⁸ With the added enhancement of flickering oil lamps and mesmerising drumming and song perfusing the hot night air, a magical realm is created where the ancient stories of India are given new life. As in all traditional Indian arts, nothing is left to chance; it is not merely costumes and masks that make Duryodhana, Krishna, or Hanuman appear upon the stage. Rigorous training in formally classified movements of hands, body, and facial expression is the dancer’s discipline, but this physical perfection is still not enough to embody a God. The particular experience of *rasa* which is the hallmark and essence of each character can only be conveyed by an actor who knows that emotion, who has internalised the love and serenity of Krishna, or the nobility of Arjuna.⁴⁹ To aid such attainment, the actors ‘read and re-read’ the sources of the Kathakali plays – the Epics and Puranas – so that they know entirely the acts, deeds, motivations, ethics and character of their role model, whether hero, anti-hero or demon, God, queen, or monkey-king.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ This small theatre is run as a tourism and cultural promotion venture under the name ‘See India Foundation’. Phillip Zarilli is critical of the over dramatic emphasis placed on ‘culture and tradition’ by its director, while conceding that the director’s brother is a famous Kathakali actor. However in 2004, twenty years after Zarilli’s publication, the Devan centre continues its small instructive Kathakali performances for visitors from within India and from abroad. Phillip Zarilli, *The Kathakali Complex*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 318-322.

⁴⁷ Zarilli (ibid. p. 166) explains the several dramatic uses of the curtain: for practical ‘end of scene’ purposes, or to give enticing glimpses of the character about to enter, creating excitement.

⁴⁸ M. L. Varadpande, ‘Masks’, in Shanta Serbjeet Singh (ed.), *Indian Dance: the Ultimate Metaphor*, Art Media Resources Ltd., Chicago, 2000, p. 183.

⁴⁹ Zarilli, op. cit., p. 141.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 142.



Figure 28⁵¹



Figure 29⁵²

⁵¹ Kathakali, Fort Cochin, (Julie Marsh, 2004).

⁵² Kathakali, Fort Cochin, (Julie Marsh, 2004).

Kathakali recreates the cosmic worlds of the divine, but the everyday world of humans and nature is notably included within this ambit. Both human and godly qualities are portrayed through exquisite detail of mime and gesture, in evocation of such full visions as ‘the flowers along his path, of the woman he loves, of the dense forest he walks through, of the arrogance of his enemy and of his vow for vengeance.’⁵³ A complete landscape, the heavenly realms, times past and future, and a whole range of thoughts and emotions can be conveyed, wordlessly, on an almost bare stage. The resulting intimacy of detail and insight into the character’s mind absorbs the viewer into the *maya* of the play, so that many hours – a whole night – may pass in this world. But in *Vaanaprastham* the realities of the Kathakali realm and the mundane world – the roles of Gods and humans – become confused.

The film’s unfolding story is absorbing and comprehensible even to a cultural outsider, and even more detailed and nuanced on closer reflection. The protagonist, Kunhikuttam, is the illegitimate son of a servant woman, Bhagirati, and consequently, of very low social status. He makes a meagre living as a Kathakali dancer, is despised by his wife (perhaps for his poverty and lowly position) and adored by his young daughter, Sharada. The film opens in the year 1953, with the Kathakali troupe returning to their village homes after a night’s performance in a dawn storm. The *chanda* (drum) player, Raman remarks, ‘For a Kathakali artist like me, life has no shelter’. This comment hints at the difficulties of their lives as artists, who are reliant on the patronage of the wealthy landlords and the temples, patronage which is unpredictable in both frequency and remuneration. Raman’s words also suggest the exposure the artists feel, living in two worlds – that of their daily lives and that of the Gods, which is always like a shadow by their sides.

Kunhikuttam’s present role is to embody the demoness Poothana, she who (in the epic *Bhagavatham*) is sent by King Kamsa to kill the baby Krishna. The story-play of Poothana is not shown in *Vaanaprastham*, but its references would be self evident for Indian viewers, as one of the classic tales of mythology. In familiar Indian narrative style of ‘story within a story’, the Poothana legend itself is one of *maya*, which:

⁵³ Samson, op. cit., p. 126.

... constantly plays on the contrast between appearance and reality. The omnipotent, omniscient god, 'the infinite immortal', is concealed in the form of a helpless baby, an allusion to the *atman* or individual soul in whom the infinite or *brahman* resides.⁵⁴

While Krishna's form is an infant, Poothana herself takes the form (*maya*) of a beautiful maiden (*lalita*), and offers her poisonous breast to Krishna, knowing that if her death comes through him she will be delivered to salvation. Krishna draws out her life blood, but changes the poison to the nectar of eternal life; Poothana reverts to her true form and dies, in *moksha*. Poothana's goodness in her previous life is in this way karmically rewarded as it is revealed through the double unmasking – that of the demoness Poothana, and of her *lalita* form.⁵⁵ The reference to Poothana's story serves as one level of the layered realities of *Vaanaprastham*, for, by the film's conclusion a parallel can be drawn between the demoness and her saviour, and Kunhikuttam and his beloved daughter Sharada. This allegory is alluded to when at the mention of the demoness's name Sharada comes running to her father, laughing, and is told by him, 'you are my little Krishna'. But her mother calls out from the kitchen, 'Poothana's breast is poisonous. Do you want that?' It is clear she is jealously warning the child away from her father, using the myth as metaphor for a relationship she sees as damaging.

Kunhikuttam's emotionally and financially complex world is further revealed after Raman accidentally breaks the skin of his *chenda* and they must borrow a replacement from the local landlord's mansion, which was also the site of the Kathakali school of their student boyhood. The landlord Thirumeni, grey bearded, his face and body striped with the ashes of Shaivite devotion, exchanges a silent gaze with Kunhikuttam; his friends proudly report that Kunhikuttam is now a 'Master' of

⁵⁴ Marlene B. Pitkow, 'Putana's Salvation in Kathakali: Embodying the Sacred Journey', in *Asian Theatre Journal* Vol. 18, No. 2, 2001, p. 240.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

the dance, and tomorrow will play the highly respected role of Nala.⁵⁶ Low caste Kunhikuttam is now graced with the aristocratic persona of a *pacca* character, the category of Kathakali appearance which signifies divine figures, epic heroes, and kings.⁵⁷ Thirumeni listens to the drum sound, and remembers a time many years ago.

A flashback shows some young boys taking a Kathakali class, observing the gestures of their *guru*, when Thirumeni, then a much younger man, enters to inspect the class. He notices Kunhikuttam and chases the low-caste boy from the room, saying he is a ‘fatherless good-for-nothing!’ It is not only the boy’s illegitimacy that is the problem. The historical lineage of Kathakali is of a joint tradition in which the dance was performed ‘only by the Nayar warrior caste under the supervision of the Nambudiri Brahmin caste’.⁵⁸ It was not until the 1930s when Kathakali, which had faded almost to non-existence under Christian influence, was revived by the opening of a new teaching centre, the Kerala Kalamandalam, and opened its doors to all castes – though not yet to females.⁵⁹ So the idea of teaching the tradition to a low caste boy would, in Kunhikuttam’s youth, still have been novel and viewed with distaste by some Nambudiris. The era is more egalitarian in some aspects, but attitudes do not change so fast.

The teacher Kunju asks the landlord’s permission for Kunhikuttam to return to the class, saying he is exceptionally talented, and besides, the boy must work to support his mother. The landlord frowns at the mother, Bhagirati, but gives his permission for the lower caste boy to rejoin the others. We learn later that the landlord is, indeed, Kunhikuttam’s father. But it is the teacher of his art to whom the boy *salaams*, to whom he gives the respect and devotion due to the teacher in Indian tradition

⁵⁶ One of the best-known story plays is *Nala Caritam*, and Zarilli’s research found that ‘the role of Nala is considered by most present Kathakali actors as the most complex and difficult of all Kathakali roles’.
Zarilli, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁵⁸ Manjusri Chaki-Sircar and Parbati K. Sircar, ‘Indian Dance: Classical Unity and Regional Variation’, in Allen G. Noble and Ashok K. Dutt (eds.), *India: Cultural Patterns and Processes*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1982, p. 155.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

Several years pass: it is 1955. Kunhikuttam, now 'Master' of the dance, is called to appear at the temple in Trivandrum, the capital, for a festival performance. He asks Sharada to accompany him, and see the Maharaja, but his loving daughter, in another of the many references to perception that this film makes, replies that she has seen him – it is Kunhikuttam who is Maharaja to her. In Trivandrum the Dewan, the Maharaja's minister, has a niece who wants Kunhikuttam to enact the play 'The Kidnapping of Subhadra'. Her name too is Subhadra, and she is writing her own version of the famous *Mahabharata* episode where the great warrior hero Arjuna 'kidnaps' the willing sister of Lord Krishna, Subhadra. Kunhikuttam is honoured and flattered that someone as knowledgeable and refined as the Dewan's niece admires his work. But the *maya* of his princely role is sadly revealed when, still dressed in the grand costume and crown of Arjuna, he must beg the case of the poverty stricken artists after performing for the Maharaja. Money is given to all the grateful troupe, but only when the Maharaja has first consulted his wife. His ignorance of the artists' circumstances illustrates the changing times: in an earlier era he would almost certainly have been the traditional patron, and regularly subsidised the performers.⁶⁰ Subhadra, meanwhile, had watched the performance from a window, and writes in her play, 'I saw his luminous eyes, and his seductive body deifies the heavens'. An educated woman, married but lonely, and restricted by her high caste to a closed world, she romanticises through art – an art which is legitimised as a 'higher' version of reality by its suffusion with religious and moral ideals. Already she is avid to be seduced by Kunhikuttam's Arjuna, to be transported to an alternative realm of being, beyond the *maya* of mundanity.

In time, Thirumeni dies, leaving a parcel of land to Kunhikuttam. In doing so, the landlord acknowledges his child as he never would do in life. Kunhikuttam is angry at never having been accepted as his father's son during his life. His illegitimacy has forced his mother to live in shame and his wife to resent her marriage. Kunhikuttam weeps in sadness, but his next play is to be *Gitopadesham*, in which Arjuna requires Krishna to resolve his doubts as they ride towards battle. In this famous scene from the *Mahabharata* the warrior Arjuna's doubts concern his looming fight to the death

⁶⁰ Zarilli explains the traditional forms of patronage here, revealing that the companies were subsidised even in the rainy season, when performances were rare. Zarilli, op. cit., p. 265.

with his own kin, his cousins the Kauravas. The interface of myth and reality is revealed by this allusion, reflecting the unity of 'reality' beyond *maya*, for family relations are no less a battle for Kunhikuttam. He struggles with his own ideas of injustice, and although he prays to Krishna, he does not have, apparently, the same effective divine connections as does the Arjuna he enacts.

In the finery of Arjuna, Kunhikuttam meets Subhadra after the performance. She is caught in the *maya* of the performance; or, alternately, the world's *maya* has been dispelled, for her, through partaking in it. It is in the nature of *maya* that 'reality' is so questioned. Subhadra, then, is thrilled that 'Arjuna' stands before her, the only human who conversed with the God Krishna (see Figure 31). Bemused, Kunhikuttam tries to awaken her (see Figure 30) to his own reality, saying, 'I act my role with all that I have learned. But in truth, Arjuna is a stranger to me'. He may mean that the character is still new to him; he may mean that he does not identify with Arjuna's iconic warrior hero status. Kunhikuttam's life has been too grounded in the difficult realities of his world, marginalised by poverty and social illegitimacy, and by lack of love and respect where it should be found, in father and wife. His *maya* of escape is found not entirely in his art, but also in sleep and alcohol. But he continues to play Arjuna's role on stage, and Subhadra continues to write her version of 'The Kidnapping of Subhadra', becoming more entranced with each performance she sees. After one finale, Kunhikuttam tells her, 'You seem lost in another world!'

She is, she tells him, lost in a world of love for Arjuna, the paradigm of manhood. In a thrall (*maya*) of *bhakti*-like elation, she wishes to be the Subhadra who has the 'unique destiny' of being loved by Arjuna. Looking at the moon overhead she tells Kunhikuttam that it is the same moon under which Krishna and Balarama spoke. Myth and the mundane world are as one for Subhadra. The mighty events and characters of the *Mahabharata* are timeless for such devotees, just as the lessons and conduct they teach are endlessly real in their application. As, for some, sacred time is ever-present, there remains 'a persistent Indian conception of a transcendent reality as

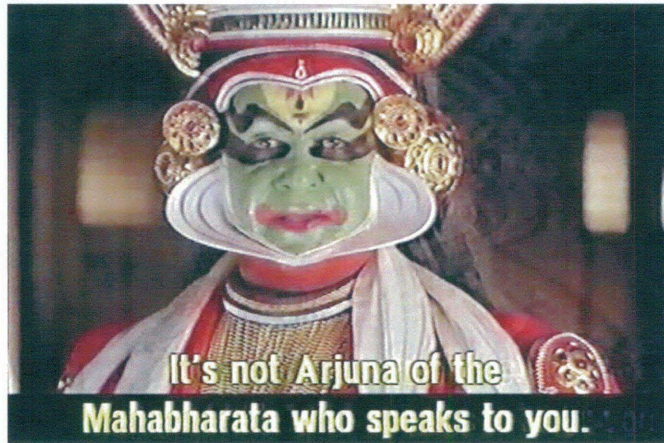


Figure 30⁶¹



Figure 31⁶²

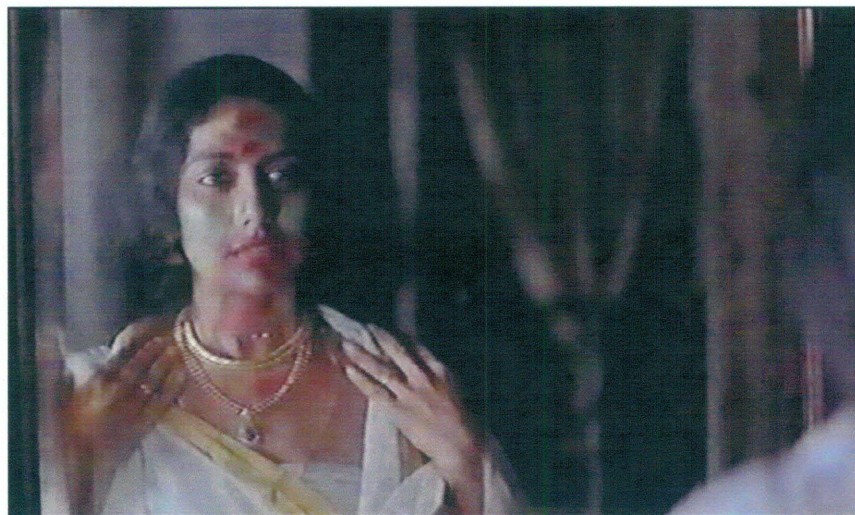


Figure 32⁶³

⁶¹ Kunhikuttam tries to Subhadra to his own reality. *Vaanaprastham* op. cit.

⁶² Kunhikuttam meets Subhadra after the performance. *Vaanaprastham* op. cit.

⁶³ Subhadra looks in the mirror with wonderment, with the smudges of green makeup. *Vaanaprastham* op. cit.

more important than the phenomenal world it underlies and sustains'.⁶⁴ Time is part of that 'phenomenal world,' which is *maya*. In that thought, time is not a line of progression, but a cycle in *samsara*. The word for time, *kal*, time, signifies both past and future. '*Kal* can mean tomorrow or yesterday, a moment or an age; it may refer to an event which just happened, or to a future likelihood', states psychologist Sudhir Kakar.⁶⁵ Kathakali re-presents epic time, and the audience by its presence participates in it, so that the performances are, in cultural scholar Phillip Zarilli's words, 'like ritual, modes or domains of cultural practice knit into the fabric of local communities'.⁶⁶ He explains, further, that the Kathakali 'space' is the entering of another conceptual and discursive world:

Not only are performances of Kathakali and other traditional arts 'events'. The entire training process of the Kathakali performer ... (are) implicitly understood to be 'events', i.e., sites where things *can* happen – places where identities, persons, society, and culture and/or discourses about any of the above are negotiated and constituted. These practices are not simply a means to an end, or an activity that represents something else, but are an end in themselves. They were traditionally a way of life.⁶⁷

Subhadra longs to join with her beloved, in a union in which the spiritual and physical are as one.⁶⁸ She yearns to overcome the *maya* of separation. In tune with Zarilli's explanation above, feels she can enter that state of unity through the Kathakali (literally, 'story play'). She wants Kunhikuttam to *be* the Arjuna of her play, so that she will be transformed into the Subhadra of mythology, and 'know that ecstasy un hoped for in this life'. It is a culminating moment for her to realise the next performance will be held in her ancestral home: her identity switch with the mythical

⁶⁴ Hajime Nakamura, *The Notion of Time in India*,

<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/india/philosophy/phil2.html>, accessed 17/07/2005.

⁶⁵ Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1978, p. 46.

⁶⁶ Phillip Zarilli, 'Kalaripayattu and Kathakali', in Shanta Serbjeet Singh (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶⁸ 'The notion that love is spiritual and not merely physical is crucial ... for an understanding ... of Indian culture itself. Mysticism is a central feature of both Islam and Hinduism. In their unconditioned love of God, the mystics seek total annihilation of their Self in the Divine. Since both Islam and Hinduism see the physical and spiritual as an integrated whole, it is natural for Indian culture to postulate that true love, love worthy of serious consideration, must move from physical to spiritual realms ...' Ziauddin Sardar, *op. cit.*, pp. 29 – 30.

Subhadra, whose experience she craves, will be seamless in that place which for her has special power, where her young self ‘studied, read and dreamed’. So convinced is she of this alternative reality that she breathlessly tells Kunhikuttam that if he performs her script then, ‘with unprecedented daring, the Arjuna in my play abducts me’.

Sure enough, at Mavelikara, Subhadra becomes part of the play from the audience by adding her mimetic hand gestures (*mudras*) to those of the actors. She is the epitome of the ‘ideal’ spectator as outlined in the *Natyashastra*,⁶⁹ educated in all aspects of text, language and gesture, so that she is capable of ‘meeting the performer as an “equal” in the process of exchange ... [t]he ultimate realization of this process of communication is the realization of *rasa*.’⁷⁰ Subhadra is, moreover, interacting with the unfolding events on stage in a manner typifying the dialectic of *katha* (storytelling) tradition.⁷¹ Consequently, the enraptured Subhadra does not just watch, as Arjuna enfolds the ‘stage’ Subhadra in his arms, in her own experience she *becomes* the maiden with her face on his breast.⁷²

Later, a suggestive image of two flames drawing together is shown, and at dawn the following day, Kunhikuttam leaves silently from the mansion, the crown of Arjuna in his hand. Subhadra, splashing her face with water, looks in the mirror with wonderment. Her joyful face is luminescent with the smudges of green makeup worn by *pacca* (noble) Kathakali – by Arjuna (see Figure 32). Kunhikuttam, meanwhile, submerses himself in a pond,⁷³ while thunder rumbles overhead like a voice from the heavens. He regards, on the bank, the discarded costume of Arjuna. The real man who stands before the thundering Gods feels no identification with that rumpled heap of clothes.

⁶⁹ Dr. N. P. Unni (trans.), *Natyashastra* Vol. 3, Nag Publishers, Delhi, 1998, pp. 731-748.

⁷⁰ Zarilli, *The Kathakali Complex*, op. cit., p. 267. For an explanation of the role and importance of *rasa* in Indian art, and its relation to the concept of *maya*, see the previous chapter.

⁷¹ Lutgendorf writes of viewer reaction to the televised *Ramayana* when the heroes lie wounded on the battlefield, and ‘some devotees took ritual baths, as during an eclipse, for protection during the Lord’s period of helplessness’. Philip Lutgendorf, op. cit. p. 344.

⁷² This sort of imaginary ‘joining’ has, historically, religious precedence in *bhakti* tradition.

⁷³ Actually, he is washing in a temple tank, a place of purification.

Dressed in full Arjuna regalia, he meets Subhadra again in this guise at their next engagement at the palace. She comes to him coyly, after waiting outside while he dressed in his crown, saying, 'I wanted to tell you something while you were in this costume'. She is pregnant, and says 'It is Abhimanyu'.⁷⁴ Kunhikuttam looks at his painted face in a hand mirror, as if to see to whom Subhadra had spoken. The mirror (*darpana*) is itself a form of *maya* – a reflection. Yet in Hindu symbolism, and as an attribute of many female gods, *darpana* is also wisdom for that very reason – because it reflects 'the emptiness of all worldly matters'.⁷⁵ This theme of the mirror is one that is repeated at critical moments in *Vaanaprastham*, used by the characters to assess their own changing realities, as if to seek truth from their own appearance.

Several years pass, and Subhadra refuses to see Kunhikuttam when he visits the palace 'without a crown or costume', as he remarks to his friend. In a comment that further underlines his perception (and that of the viewers) of the 'game' of reality, Kunhikuttam adds, 'I was stupid to come here as lowly Kunhikuttam. She's playing a different game now'. Subhadra eventually agrees to meet him after a performance, and places the baby in 'Arjuna's' arms. But she warns that, 'I consider him as the son engendered by Arjuna. He is not Kunhikuttam's son'. Embittered, Kunhikuttam swears to his friends that he will no longer play noble characters, saying, 'let my head be uncrowned', placing the crown down with care, and a sighed prayer of 'Krishna'. He recognises the *maya*, the deluded vision, of Subhadra's self-absorbed world, but it does not lessen his reverence for the play or the role, as represented by the crown. He assures his friends that 'the play won't be interrupted. None of us can interrupt any play'. Of course, this uninterrupted 'play' is *lila*, the eternal unfolding of the universe, which will roll on in great cycles of time unhindered by actors who are merely portraying the Gods. Behind that *maya* of their role lies the dismaying lack of power over events in their own lives.

Five years pass. Kunhikuttam roars, dancing his new role of black-faced villain on the stage. We (the film audience) see him in other roles, we see his dejection as

⁷⁴ Abhimanyu is, in the Mahabharata, the son of Arjuna and Subhadra, and is himself a perfect warrior in skill and bravery, who is killed in the great battle at Kurukshetra.

⁷⁵ Eva Rudy Jansen, *The Book of Hindu Imagery: Gods, Manifestations and Their Meaning*, Binkey Kok Publications BV, Havelte, 1993, p. 47.

Subhadra still refuses to meet him, and we see his sad helplessness as his friend, the singer Namboodiri, lies dying of throat cancer. The voice that sings the story is eaten away with disease: an allusion to the decay behind the façade that is their Kathakali lives, and the silencing of their truth in the historical situation in which ordinary men must live. It may indicate a malaise underlying the tradition itself, and its changing role in twentieth century India, where its presentation and patronage is more frequently devoted to the uninformed curiosity of the tourist trade.⁷⁶ Kunhikuttam's best comfort for his dying friend is to tell him, in a direct reference to the *maya* of selfhood and masks 'You're lying here free of your costumes while I dance in mine, unable to free myself of them'.

Soon after, Kunhikuttam presents himself to the Maharaja, again following a performance. This time he is dressed in the distinctive costume of Hanuman, the popular monkey hero who, in the epic *Ramayana* helped Lord Rama save his wife Sita, the paragon of womanhood, from her kidnapping by the evil Ravana. One of Hanuman's most famous exploits, characterising his great strength and devotion, was his valiant flight from the Himalayas to the southern tip of India holding a whole mountain in his hand, carrying to Rama its healing herbs to save his wounded brother, Lakshmana. Now Kunhikuttam in Hanuman garb is on the same mission – he makes a plea to the Maharaja to help with money for Namboodiri's treatment, and some is given. But Kunhikuttam is a supplicant, not a saviour. Again the *maya* of his costume is revealed in its sad irony. Despite all the lauding of the dance and the public adulation of Hanuman, the man who embodies the hero is, for all practical purposes, ignored in his penury. Yet the director has used the appearance of Hanuman to symbolise Kunhikuttam's task: the appearance is both deceptive and instructive, *mayalike*.

Tired of all the roles in his life, Kunhikuttam craves the absolution of peace, and follows his boyhood mentor, Master Pisharadi, to the holy city of Banaras (Varanasi). Here, at the river Ganga, Kunhikuttam resolves to perform sacred rites for his father, and for himself on behalf of his son, though his mother has begged him to desist,

⁷⁶ Phillip Zarilli has examined the changing nature of the Kathakali audience and the consequent changes in the content and duration of the plays. See Phillip Zarilli, op. cit., pp. 318 - 322.

saying it is a sin for a low caste man to perform rites for a Namboodiri (*brahmin*). Bhagirati is a humble, submissive woman who is tied to past attitudes, unlike the film's younger generations of females – her daughter-in-law, and Subhadra and Sharada – who are all self-assertive in ways that accord to their different personalities. The depiction of the women echoes the changing expectations of women that accord with India's passage through that era, as the traditional ties were loosening.⁷⁷

Master Pisharadi, also of Bhagirati's generation, gives him the same advice to bow to tradition. But Kunhikuttam replies:

Despite everything, I'm the son of a man. My father refused to acknowledge me. I now have a son whose mother refuses to avow my paternity. Father, mother, son, or daughter, this is just gesture language for a Kathakali artist. A caste-free language, where each word is sacred.

Living in two worlds, dancing in the realms of the Gods and playing his lowly role in that of mortals, Kunhikuttam knows himself to be a man, who just wants the human touch of father and son, which is beyond artificial divisions of caste – the *maya*, or illusion, of difference and separation. Kunhikuttam stands for the rights of the individual, and now he longs to find the place where 'sorrow and joy are one'. This desire alludes to the film's title, for *vaanaprastha* is the third designated stage of Hindu life – the time of the forest dweller, where the delusions of the world (*maya*) are renounced.

Kunhikuttam performs rituals and takes blessings, then returns to his home deciding to incarnate Arjuna one last time. He will dance Subhadra's play, but this time with his daughter as his (Arjuna's) love, Subhadra. It is as if Kunhikuttam vows to transgress all barriers, since the normal relationships of father and son have been denied him: as *vaanaprastham*, he no longer follows social form. His wife is horrified, believing Sharada's life will be destroyed if she goes on the stage and,

⁷⁷ There is much that could be inferred from *Vaanaprastham* in regard to the changing role and depiction of women, but a close dissection of that issue is not directly relevant to the current discussion.

worse, dances with her own father as his lover. But Sharada, like the little Krishna she was called as a child, can overcome any poison in her devotion to her father, and by doing so can absolve his pain. She dances with him, and for the first time in many years, the 'real' Subhadra watches the play, unreadable emotions on her face. She seems to have awoken from her illusions and realized the mistake she has made in denying Kunhikuttam's manhood all this time, and later, dresses in her best silks, preparing to receive him. She looks in the mirror, marking her forehead and hair parting with the red *kumkum* signifying marriage – taking her 'true' role as Kunhikuttam's wife (or as Arjuna's?). It is too late. A voice in the corridor imparts the news that Kunhikuttam has died, collapsing after his 'last dance'. Subhadra, like a true widow, smears the red across her forehead and falls in distress to the floor, watched, from the doorway, by Abhimanyu.

Subhadra and Kunhikuttam have each, tragically (or, in Indian terms, through *karma*) been caught in identity *maya*. The film's director, Shaji Karun, has, to all appearances, used the *maya* theme purposefully. As is true to the nature of *maya*, and demonstrating the useful vision of this concept, there is no clear verdict on selfhood delivered by the film. Selfhood, like truth, is a shifting concept changing according to social or individual perspective. Yet there is danger in such nebulous perception, when the nature of *maya* is forgotten, and that is Subhadra's downfall. For her, Kathakali may also be a 'caste-free language', but the daily world is not. Falling victim to her dreams and desires, she forgets to see Kunhikuttam as he really is; she 'separates off' aspects of him – the low caste man is separated entirely, in her mind, from the noble, princely warrior, Arjuna.

But Kunhikuttam, at one level of perception, *is* Arjuna. As he said, he 'reincarnates' Arjuna, he re-presents the form and qualities of Arjuna for the community. As stated previously, Karun has said of Kathakali that 'For us ... it is a kind of self-expression'. This statement can be taken at both a personal and community level. On both those levels, Kathakali acts out social and ethical dramas, presenting dilemmas and resolving them, while depicting the whole spectrum of human and godly qualities. These qualities are, ultimately, undifferentiated in

foundational Hindu thought, where *atman* (self) and *brahman* (the soul and essence of the universe) are as one.⁷⁸ Since Kunhikuttam embodies the qualities of Arjuna, even temporarily, then that is one aspect of himself, and similarly, the Subhadra of the film is, in one aspect, the eternal mythic Subhadra. Her *maya*, or self-deception, is that she divides the world up into categories of her own preference, refusing to recognise the whole picture.

In this, Subhadra is aided and abetted by the divisions inherent in India's social structure. The *atman/brahman* philosophy and, more overtly, that of the social role ordained to each person through his or her *dharma* and *karma* has conditioned ideas of the individual for Hindus, an influence which has affected all Indian social formations. Writer and literary critic Nirmal Verma explains, in an essay which critiques European colonization of Indians' 'sense of space and time' and 'concept of self' that:

... the self could never be completely colonized, for the identity of a Hindu, unlike that of a European, never resided in the self as an autonomous entity, but in a larger pattern of beliefs, ritualistic observances and caste obligations...⁷⁹

Kunhikuttam and Subhadra are both enmeshed within this social pattern. Shahji Karun, looking back half a century from his 1990s vantage point, focuses on the individual struggling to emerge from the grasp of traditional structures, while acknowledging the prominent role that mythology, so at odds with prevailing western 'modern' conceptions of reality, still plays. He has found that the theme and lens offered by the *maya* concept enables a complex reading of competing views, for within the created world that is *maya*, more than one world view is available – is, in fact, the necessary condition of things. India, a fledgling democratic nation in Kunhikuttam's time, discriminates (undemocratically) against a man for his

⁷⁸ The notion of the inner self and the universal essence as one entity is famously illustrated by the phrase *tat twam asi* ('you are that'), from Chandogya Upanishad (VI.9.4.) in S. Radhakrishnan (ed., trans.), *The Principal Upanishads*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, 1978, p. 460.

⁷⁹ Nirmal Verma, 'India and Europe – Some Reflections on Self and Other', in Fred Dallmyr and G. N. Devy (eds.), *Between Tradition and Modernity*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1998, p. 338. First published in the journal *Kavita Asia*, Bhopal, 1990, pp. 121-144.

circumstances of birth, yet can simultaneously elevate him, through the mask of *maya*, to the status of king and hero.

Most importantly, though, this overlapping of identities is very commonplace in Hindu mythology and religion, where Durga, Vishnu, or Shiva each has multiple names, specifying their many qualities. Yet any one of these major gods can be claimed by their devotees to be the One God, who contains all qualities (and, as *nirguna brahman*, none at all, being beyond the *maya* of differentiation). Krishna's role as child god, warrior philosopher, and divine lover of the *gopis*, for instance, is one example of the enigmatic nature of identity, which reflects the view of the world (and of identity) as change and multiplicity. Reincarnation happens at every moment of the world's turning, cells divide and die, saintly or demonic thoughts flit across the human mind, so that Rama or Ravana are ever-present. The divisiveness of the caste system⁸⁰ and the parables of *maya* as the illusion of separateness exist side by side, just as *brahman* is both 'nirguna' (without qualities) and 'saguna' (with qualities) at the same time. As Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty has written:

Many Indian texts are troubled by contradiction ... [a]nd all of them distinguish, at least nominally, between appearance and reality. But they do not ultimately iron out the contradictions; they alter their definitions of reality in order to let the contradictions survive intact.⁸¹

Vaanaprastham reflects that contradiction: the Gods, meant to represent the higher truth beyond *maya*, become instead the illusion, veiling the realities of human life⁸². *Vaanaprastham* also reflects the conflicts of modernity, the perspective of a film director looking back from the end of a century at the difficulties and enigmas of

⁸⁰ The caste system divides up society, yet within this system each division is seen as an essential part of the whole, *purusha*, the universal man. But what of the outcastes, and non-Hindus? This is a contradiction that twentieth century Hindu nationalists of the 'fundamentalist' variety will not reconcile with the clichéd claim of Hinduism's tolerance and syncretism. The claim that 'we are all Hindus' can be used to undermine the specific claims of the poor to gain equality. See Rukmina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 167.

⁸¹ Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1984, p. 11.

⁸² Thanks to Dr. Joan Relke for that insight.

change. Yet Karun's era, the 1990s, saw a renewed tolerance, even a new search, for traditional culture throughout a world becoming increasingly homogenised by 'globalisation'. As people migrated to further shores, their roots became precious; the tourist trade also valued 'traditional' aspects of culture as beautiful, strange, or exotic. Karun's film reflects this feeling of value for Keralan culture, while acknowledging its social failings. A director even more highly acclaimed than Karun, and whose approach was far more direct in its criticism of the mores and ties of tradition, was Satyajit Ray. His critical eye could also be claimed to reflect his working era, the 1950s and '60s, for India of these newly post-independence years was seeking its 'new' face, not turning towards the old. His film *Devi* serves to illustrate the *maya* of delusion so forewarned in Indian teachings. Yet, ironically, ideas of a more powerful truth attainable beyond everyday appearance can also be the progeny of delusion, too.

*Devi (The Goddess)*⁸³ is set in nineteenth century Bengal although its innate message could be applied equally to the present. It concerns the household of a wealthy patriarchal widower and feudal landlord (*zamindar*), Kalkinkar Roy. He is a committed devotee of the Goddess Durga, the great mother, Mahamaya (see Figure 33). As the story unfolds, we see that the rational sensitivities of his city educated (western educated) younger son, Umaprasad, provide a contrast to the father's beliefs, suggesting them to be outdated and superstitious. Finally, these 'irrational' beliefs prove to be fatal for the younger generation.

Dayamoyee is the beautiful young wife of Umaprasad, docilely tending her father-in-law, and lovingly befriending her young nephew while she waits for her husband to return upon completing of his law degree in Calcutta. Kalkinkar watches her with pleasure as she massages his feet, and as she kneels in *puja* before the Goddess of the household shrine. Daya has wide dark eyes and impassive face, as does the icon. The young woman and the Goddess become identified in his mind: he is struck by the revelation that Dayamoyee *is* the Goddess incarnate. She is *ma*, little mother, woman and Goddess – Ma Durga. He announces this 'miracle'; he has the alarmed girl

⁸³ *Devi* (Motion Picture), India, Satyajit Ray Productions, Director: Satyajit Ray, 1960.



Figure 33⁸⁴



Figure 34⁸⁵

⁸⁴ The great mother, Mahamaya, from the film *Devi*, op. cit.

⁸⁵ Daya exchanges a look of despair with Umaprasad, *Devi*, op. cit.

garlanded and enshrined. She is too obedient to resist her father-in-law, whom she has been taught to serve and revere, as are all young Indian wives.

Kalkinkar enlists the local priest in his project of deifying Dayamoyee. Soon, people from nearby and afar hear of this miracle and travel to have *darshan* of the Goddess, to beg her help and blessing. Umapasrad returns, and is shocked to see his Daya sitting dazed and exhausted before a trail of pilgrims; she exchanges a look of despair with him (see Figure 34). But even her husband cannot persuade his father to release the young wife from this bondage. And Kalkinkar's claim that Daya is divine is cemented in his mind when, brought to her presence, a young boy is apparently healed of his near-death state.

Umapasrad determines to take Daya away to the city. Walking near the river, they see, in the water, the half sunk figure of a Goddess, remnant of a festival. Daya herself has begun to doubt who she is, and takes the sight of this figure as a sign. Perhaps, she thinks, she really does embody the Goddess, and by leaving she will endanger the *dharma* of herself and all around. She runs back to the house, in fear, and Umapasrad has to return to the city alone. Daya is increasingly isolated, as the servants and her beloved nephew Khoka no longer know how to relate to her as human. Only her sister-in-law, Khoka's mother, retains a realistic view of Daya.

It is then, even more worrying for her when Khoka falls ill, and Kalkinkar decrees the child must spend the night being nursed by the Goddess, rather than receive the services of a doctor. Daya holds the boy with care, but by the morning he has died. Umapasrad returns from the city to the stricken household, but it is too late for Daya. Her hair wild, her eyes smudged deeply with *kohl*, pale faced, she no longer responds to her husband. Demented, she runs from the house into a field of flowers, and throws herself to her death in the river, where the forms of the Gods and Goddesses are sent, to dissolve into the formless.

Satyajit Ray's modernist and realist credentials rest partly on his westernised narrative style and subtle characterisation, but also, as in *Devi*, on his criticism of

religious superstition and its retarding hold on the advance of such desirable causes as the autonomy of women, and of rational scientific thought. Some excellent assessments of the film have been made on the issues of anachronistic patriarchal power and the destructive negation of Daya's (and by extension all Hindu women's) individual development.⁸⁶ But there is undoubtedly a hint of another question running parallel to those main themes, and one that was suggested by Daya herself: did she, in some manner at least, really embody the Hindu idea, the truth, of the Goddess? For the Goddess is destruction as well as creation and nurturance. She destroys, in order that life's cycle continue and begin anew. Ray, from Bengal, a state where the Goddess is worshipped as the blood thirsty Kali, to whom sacrifices continue to be offered, would be quite aware of that aspect. Kalkinkar's *maya*, his power and his delusion, turns an innocent girl to a beneficent, life-draining Goddess. Like a house of cards that begins to fall, all are affected, even the little boy, who senses a change in his beloved aunt: she looks different, and is treated differently – therefore, she must *be* different. The *maya* of false appearance, of delusion, the power to change, all are represented in *Devi*.

Ray's production plays upon the thrall of superstition that historically has been strong in India. Holy men of all types, such as wandering *sadhus* and *brahmin* priests, have been commonly felt to hold the magic power of transformation (*maya*) through their connection with the creative power (*mayashakti*) of the source itself. This power is attained by ritual practices such as *mantra*, sacrifice, or pilgrimage, and by more feared *tantric* practices, which are often sought in 'polluting' places such as burying grounds. There is a long mythical tradition of humans being able to embody this power, to become, if only temporarily, an *avatar* of God, and people seen as possessing it are respected, feared, and sometimes adored. The *guru* can hold this power over his pupils, for good or ill; *hijras* (trans-sexuals) have it, as they are shape-changers, androgynes like the God Shiva. Women, as creators, have this power (and so must be contained by the family). Street magicians and even snake-charmers have

⁸⁶ Geeta Kapur, 'Revelation and Doubt: *Sant Tukaram* and *Devi*' in Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, Vivek Dhareshwar (eds.), *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1993, pp. 19 – 47; Darius Cooper, *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 108 – 114.

maya, the ‘magic’ power to transform. The modern magician calls his magic *Maya*, *Mayajal*, *Indrajal*.⁸⁷

Kabir has written:

I am a spectator at god’s uncanny magic show:
Playing his drum, he sets it up, performs,
And spins the wheel!
The magic may be false
(We do not know what we do know)
But the magician is true –
He and he alone is real.⁸⁸

Devi is a warning of *maya* in a world of power-play over gender and ego. Film scholar Rosie Thomas has deduced that arthouse films such as *Vaanaprastham* and *Devi* are the ‘Other’ of Indian films, just as Indian film is ‘Other’ to the West.⁸⁹ The films of iconic actor and director Raj Kapoor are, in contrast, hugely popular classics in India – they were big hits when they were released, and are still well-known and watched decades later. Kapoor uses the idea of *maya* to create a moral perspective: why be greedy, envious, or cruel when the whole universe is yours, a part of yourself or a part of God? Greed is *maya*, the illusion of separateness.

Shri 420,⁹⁰ which remains Kapoor’s best known and best loved film, uses the moral connotations of *maya* to emphasise a mindful approach to the changing values of post independence India amidst the general repositioning that was happening across the globe post World War 2. In *Shri 420*, Raj, in a famous imitation of Charlie Chaplin’s little tramp (everyman), travels on foot through the countryside on his way to the big city, Bombay (Mumbai), to seek his fate. The city, whether Bombay or Calcutta, was then, as it remains still, the centre of many social and economic

⁸⁷ Lee Siegel, *Net of Magic*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991, p. 4.

⁸⁸ Kabir, in *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸⁹ Rosie Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁹⁰ *Shri 420* (Motion Picture), India, R. K. Productions, Director: Raj Kapoor, 1955.

changes, and a magnet for rural workers in search of a better life. But hopeful arrivals often end in the midst of crime and exploitation, living on footpaths, or in city slums.⁹¹

Raj sings a song that was to become (and remains) a great favourite of Indians, *Mera jhoota hai japani*. Its words can be read as reflecting India's newly Independent nation state, taking its place on the world stage, but still in the process of self-definition through ideological and economic direction, and the moral and social values associated with such changes. The idea of India and of being Indian had been a much-debated and very prominent aspect of India's struggle for independence from British rule (consider, for example, the division of the subcontinent into two separate nations based on religious identity). In fact, the idea of what it means to be Indian has continued to have major political implications internally as well as in external relations, with neighbouring Pakistan for instance, and with 'the west' and 'westernisation' more generally. Thus, Raj walks towards the great postcolonial metropolis singing of his own position, which is also that of the nation on the threshold of a new world:

My boots are Japanese, my pants are English,
The cap on my head is Russian, But my heart is Hindustani
I venture into the big wide world, I walk with my head held high.
Where does my destination lie, where will I ever settle?
Like true soldiers we forge ahead.
Up and down, round and round flow the eternal waves of life.
Foolish are those who sit on the sidelines, with little care for their
country's fate.
To forge ahead is like life, to stop still is like death.

India too must forge ahead in a worldly manner: that is the message, but the method of doing so must be checked. Would the new democratic nation care for all its peoples with the true equality that one of its founding fathers, Gandhi, would have

⁹¹ Divia Patel, 'The Art of Advertising' in Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, op. cit., p. 154.

wished? As it was, India in 1955, the year this film was released, was into a process of modernisation and industrialisation directed at overcoming the nation's massive poverty.⁹² Vijay Mishra writes that '*Shree 420* moves into the domain of truth and social responsibility on the part of the capitalist nation-state at large'.⁹³ As the film unfolds, it is a direct criticism of unethical capitalism and of political chicanery, and a plea for the recognition of the rights of the common people.

Raj encounters all these categories of people when he enters the city. Penniless, he finds a home with a community of street dwellers, but despite his BA and a school medal awarded for honesty (of which he is very proud) he cannot at first find work. He meets a woman who epitomises ideal Indian womanhood. She is caring for her crippled father, and runs a small school for children. She is poor but morally pure, and her name is Vidya, which means 'Knowledge' (see Figure 35). Knowledge, traditionally in India, meant knowledge of the truth through knowledge of the scriptures, of correct *dharma*, and of pure practices. To have that type of knowledge is also to have insight – not to be caught in the snares of *maya*.

Vidya typifies virtuous womanhood. She wears the traditional Indian sari, and has her hair uncut and tied back. This appearance of virtue and simplicity signifies her goodness, as do her sweet expressions, her honesty, loyalty, and kindness of action.⁹⁴ Raj falls in love with Vidya and wishes to marry, but has no money. He finds a lowly paid job in a laundry, and while returning clothes to a big hotel, meets the 'bombshell', Maya, who opens up a very different world to him. Maya, her name representing the 'ephemeral pleasure of all desires',⁹⁵ lures Raj with illicit money-making schemes that endanger the precious savings of the very people he cares for, the street dwellers. Maya is the epitome of non-ethical materialism, and selfish amorality, cast as the attributes and allures of Westernisation. She sings in a night club, is seductive in a predatory way; she smokes with a long cigarette holder, drinks alcohol, wears tight revealing evening dresses, she is sharp tempered and totally

⁹² Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema*, op. cit., p. 107.

⁹³ Ibid p. 107.

⁹⁴ Rachel Dwyer, 'Film Style: Settings and Costume', in Dwyer and Patel, op. cit., pp. 81 – 100.

⁹⁵ Dinsh Raheja, "'Shree 420': The battle between virtue and sin", *Rediff.com Movies: Classics Revisited*, <http://www.rediff.com/entertai/2002/feb/21dinesh.htm>, accessed 10/07/2006.



Figure 35⁹⁶



Figure 36⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Vidya, *Shri 420*, op. cit.

⁹⁷ Maya, *Shri 420*, op. cit.

untrustworthy(see Figure 36). Money seems to be her only love. The word ‘*maya*’ is also sometimes defined as ‘riches’, for the wealth of the material world.

Ultimately, Raj sees through the veil of greed when his street mother, Ganga Ma, offers *her* savings to the fraudulent scheme he fronts. Ganga Ma – named after India’s sacred river, Mother India herself in all her self-sacrificing love, cannot be betrayed, just as, the film spells out, the new India which is trying to provide for the poor must not be betrayed by corruption and deceit. Raj rejects Maya’s world and returns to that of Vidya, who has remained steadfast in her loyalty to the ‘true’ Raj despite his almost tragic misdirection. Clearly, the idea of *maya* plays a central and clearly defined role in *Shri 420* as the opposite to righteousness, as the analogy of ‘the crooked path’. *Shri 420* translates as *Mr 420*, the number being that given in the Indian Penal Code to fraudsters, and commonly known in India as code for deceit.⁹⁸ Moreover, ‘in the popular imagination, the scope of “420” extends to the more significant villainy of politicians and businessmen’.⁹⁹ To the audiences of *Shri 420*, Kapoor has used the idea of *maya* to help define an ideal ‘Indianness’, by positing its opposite in Maya herself, just as the idea of *maya* suggests truth by providing its foil. *Maya* here is code for deception, for a form of deceit – a ‘420’. It is also a warning to Indians not to be blindly seduced by the new materialism offered by ‘westernisation’, so often equated with ‘modernisation’.

Raj Kapoor used the quest for truth, the discernment of illusion, *maya*, in different forms in many of his films. In *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*¹⁰⁰ (‘Truth, God, and Beauty’), Kapoor emphasises the real meaning of these ideals in the title. After the film’s dedication to the God Shiva, the film opens with the sun rising, and a narrator who asks, ‘what is truth, what is Godliness, what is beauty?’ The reply is that he who sees the sun rise sees that as truth, but he who sees the sun set sees that as truth also. Next, the image is that of a narrow country road, with a large stone beside it(see Figure 37 and Figure 38).

⁹⁸ Mishra, op. cit., p. 108.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁰⁰ *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram* (Motion Picture), India, R. K. Productions, Director: Raj Kapoor, 1978.



Figure 37¹⁰¹



Figure 38¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram, *ibid.*

¹⁰² Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram, *ibid.*

The narrator tells us that if asked, we would say we see a stone. But then a group of villagers come to the stone, pour water upon it, and bow to it. What is the stone now? ‘Bhagwan’ (God), is the reply. ‘What made a God of it?’ the narrator asks, and answers that it is your belief, faith, and love, which is Truth, God, and Beauty.

This philosophising is not unusual in Indian films, and nor are the attitudes expressed by the narrator’s words. Linda Hess, an authority on the *Ramayana* of Tulsidas, tells us that the poet wrote that ‘According to the feeling within him/her, each saw the form of the Lord’, so that:

... to warriors he looks like the embodiment of heroism, to wicked kings he seems terrifying, and to demons he appears as Death itself. Women see him as eros personified; Janak and his queens see him as their child. The learned see his cosmic form with myriad faces, hands, and feet. Yogis see the refulgent absolute. And Ram’s devotees see their own beloved personal Lord.¹⁰³

Hess translates this philosophy to the daily life at the *Ramlila* pageant at Varanasi, where, ‘If you come with devotion, you will see God. If you come with cynicism, you will see little boys in threadbare shorts ... our realities are mind-made’.¹⁰⁴

So too, in *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* Kapoor exposes the ‘mind made’ prejudices of both village people and the modern educated Indian, their *maya*, or false perception. The priest’s wife has died giving birth to a daughter, who is immediately viewed as ‘inauspicious’, not only for her female gender but because of the misfortune that marked her birth. Later in her childhood she is further ill-fated when she is splashed with hot cooking oil, and one side of her face is disfigured by burns. But she sings beautifully at her father’s services in the temple. One day her pure

¹⁰³ Linda Hess, op. cit., pp. 94 – 96.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

voice is heard by a young engineer who is visiting from the city to work on a nearby dam construction.¹⁰⁵

The young engineer falls passionately in love with the pure voiced woman, but when they meet she always keeps the scarred side of her face hidden by her hair or by her veil (a common symbol of *maya*). He insists on marrying her, though she protests, knowing he will turn against her when he sees the unveiled truth. And he does! How can this scarred woman be his vision of beauty? He refuses to believe she is his Rupa. The meaning of her name, Rupa, is ‘appearance’ ‘form’ or ‘version’ – almost interchangeable with ‘Maya’. This Rupa is another woman, who has tricked him into marriage, he rages.

At the film’s climax, the giant wall of the dam breaks under an unusually torrential rainfall. Various other climactic events added to this catastrophe bring the hero to an awakening. He realises that the beautiful soul he loves does indeed reside within both faces of Rupa, the perfect form of one side of her face, the scarred side of the other. He sees this truth just in time to save her life in the flood. The moral is of course that appearance, Rupa, can be misread, for it is *maya*. Truth and beauty were hidden, first behind Rupa’s veil, and then behind the scars on her face, for he saw only what he wanted to see as his idea of perfection. He was caught in *maya*.

Kapoor had previously used the metaphor of a scarred face, half perfect, half flawed, in one of his first films, the 1948 production *Aag* (Fire)¹⁰⁶. Here the hero, Kewal, is always searching for his childhood girlfriend, Nimmi, and finding her in idealised versions of other women. At the film’s beginning (which is also its ending, as he relates his life looking back) Kewal asks, rhetorically, ‘Why does a person want to live in a world of dreams? And what is the reality of these dreams ... like a drop of water ...’. This dream metaphor is repeated at the end of his story, when, his face disfigured in a fire at his theatre, he pleads, ‘Nimmi, face isn’t everything. A dream, just with a small jolt, melts away like wax.’ These words of dreams are familiar *maya*

¹⁰⁵ Dam projects, scientists, and men in dinner suits seem to be, in Indian films of the 1960s and ‘70s, the representation of India’s modernisation.

¹⁰⁶ *Aag* (Motion Picture), India, R. K. Productions, Director: Raj Kapoor, 1948.

teachings, reminding of life's impermanence. *Aag* is, too, about *maya* as creation, as creativity, for Kewal and his friend Rajan are artists, one a dramatist, one a painter, who, like Gods, both create and destroy their worlds. Rajan slashes his paintings of his dream woman, and Kewal's theatre burns to the ground. The world that is created, *maya*, does not endure, but it is constantly reborn, as are the lives of Kewal and Rajan, who begin again with new hope.

The film of Kapoor which is perhaps the most famous is *Awara*¹⁰⁷ (The Vagabond), made in 1951, which questions the social construction of the self. Judge Raghunath had decreed that criminality is an inherited trait, that the son of a thief will be a thief. His prejudice is tested, unbeknown to him, through the life of his own son, Raj. Raghunath has disowned his beloved wife, following her abduction by a local gangster.¹⁰⁸ But she is pregnant with the judge's son, and after his birth, must raise him in dire poverty. The boy is befriended by the gangster, Jagga, who induces him into a life of crime as a way of survival and as revenge against the judge. Raj comes before the judge's court, and is sentenced to prison, but because he and Raghunath's ward, Rita, have fallen in love, the story of his true identity is revealed through a complex series of events and coincidences. The film is founded on the premise of the uncovering of truth, of questioning identity, and of Jaghunath's delusion and false judgement: truth and delusion, the two faces of *maya*.

Raj Kapoor's films are thematically typical of Hindi films in several ways. The question of truth and illusion is found in Indian films noticeably often, so much so that it could be said to be characteristic of them. In most cases, it is to do with mistaken situations or mistaken identity – who am I really? Vijay Mishra writes that 'No comparable civilization has argued over definitions of selfhood as much as the Indian'.¹⁰⁹ Truth and selfhood are questions that reflect both the nation's recent history, in its definition by British scholars, administrators, and even novelists,

¹⁰⁷ *Awara* (Motion Picture), India, R. K. Productions, Director: Raj Kapoor, 1952.

¹⁰⁸ This rejection of his wife because of possible doubt cast on her character (and therefore on his own) follows the precepts of Lord Rama in *Ramayana*, who exiles his pure and loving wife Sita because she had been kidnapped by his enemy.

¹⁰⁹ Vijay Mishra, 'Defining the Self in Indian Literary and Filmic Texts' in Wimal Dissanayake (ed), *Narratives of Agency: Self-Making in China, India and Japan*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 117.

through to its division into two nations defined by religion, and its contemporary struggle for self-definition in the melting pot of the globalised world and in its own many layered, multifarious community. In the Vedic long-ago past, the question of identity was answered by the reply '*tat twam asi*': you are that, the seed or essence of life that, many believe, is *brahman*. This meant that, peeling off the layers of what you are *not* (the *maya* of incomplete answers, of impermanence, of partiality) the mask of *maya* would be removed and the *atman* attained. In that way, the Indian self was always a matter of becoming, of working through the *karma* of the present and the lives of past and future. And, in a less metaphysical worldview, Indian selfhood is still composed of many elements, and is much more defined than that of most peoples. It is defined by creed, class, and caste, by family name, profession, by region, nation, and stage of life. Yet, ultimately, selfhood and national identity are, seemingly, impossible to define. They are composed of the many ever-changing layers that are contradictory, confusing, deceptive: *maya*. Raj Kapoor's films point to this, question their viewers' truths, hold up the crucible of values to the light.

Kapoor's films also feature another theme which is common to many Hindi films. It is that of the lovers separated at childhood and searching to be reunited, or alternately, falling in love at first meeting and having to overcome obstacles before they can marry. This recurrent theme certainly underlines the Indian focus on familial relationships, and in almost all cases, questions the conflict between personal choice or dutiful obedience to the 'arranged marriage' tradition. An article of modernity is the rights of the individual, and in an era of aligning India's concept of 'rights' to fit that which is seen as 'modern' (following the western example), women's rights and arranged marriage are consistently in the spotlight. But there is another arena with which the theme of yearning lovers has long been associated, and that is devotional religion – *bhakti*, and the mystic element of Islam so often found in Urdu lyric poetry and song. The *maya* of wrongfulness (*adharmā*), of thwarted destiny, of separation from the beloved, or of mistaken identity is unravelled in these films, until the lovers unite as one. The certainty that they belong together as two halves of a whole is portrayed as an eternal, fated truth. It echoes, too, the male and female dual

composition of the Hindu Gods. The converse of that path to fulfilment is another path, also strongly embedded in Indian cultural tradition – that of the renunciant.

He or she who sacrifices love, life, or wealth for the good of another, or for the community, is a familiar figure in Indian films. The renunciant elevates him/herself to a standing outside lower human concerns, to a mythic level of being, and serves as an example to others of the love and selflessness that is ‘truth’, beyond *maya*. In Hindi films, this is most often depicted as the self-sacrificing mother, or as the lover who gives up his/her claim on the loved one to a friend who is a rival for the beloved’s hand. Another, though somewhat ironical example of this renunciant figure is depicted in Dev Anand’s *Guide*¹¹⁰.

Guide, made in 1965, has been so enormously popular that it has been credited with representing ‘a checklist of the Bombay cinema’s “success formula”’¹¹¹. It is the story of an ordinary man who becomes, at first, successful and wealthy, yet having found himself (quite accidentally) acting the role of a saint ascetic, he dies of starvation, fasting to save a village from drought. Yet is he acting, after all? For finally Raju becomes the figure he pretends to be, as truly as he has been his mother’s son. It is the last of his roles, his masks, of self – he has been shopkeeper, tourist guide, showbusiness entrepreneur, son, and the lover of the dancer, Rosie. He has been a wealthy man of influence, an imprisoned fraudster, and a saint.

The arbitrary, dreamlike nature of life as *maya* that is presented in this film is indicated near its very beginning when Raju, mistaken for a holy man, asks the name of a young woman whose uncle has approached him to ‘guide’ her, to persuade her to marry. She says her name is Maya, and Raju, acting his expected role, intones in kindly wise voice, ‘The Lord creates these illusions, this earth, the skies, nature, this temple, you, me, Bhola – everything is an illusion, isn’t it?’

Yet at that time, Raju is still pretending, still seeing himself and others as pawns to be moved about in the game of life. But finally, in answer to his conscience, and

¹¹⁰ *Guide* (Motion Picture). India. Navketan International Films, Director: Vijay Anand. 1965.

¹¹¹ Sumita S. Chakravarty, op. cit., p. 46.

unable to deceive the starving villagers by stealing blessed food from the altar, he surrenders. He gives up eating, and with that ultimate sacrifice, gives up all acts of pretence. As the crowds chant 'Sitaram, Sitaram', Raj has an epiphany, hears a voice that tells him, 'I am within you and all around you. Everywhere, I am everywhere'. Raju the saint, having broken the bonds of *maya*, tells Raju the guide:

I am free! I am beyond emotion and beyond pain. In my hands I hold life and death, a plaything. You are the manifestation of my ego. You must die. I am the soul (*atman*), beyond life and death, beyond pain and pleasure. Beyond human bondage, beyond man, beyond god. Only I.

The 'enlightenment' of Raju in the story of *Guide* is reminiscent of the story of the sage Narayan, which has been told in so many ways, and to which I have made reference in Chapter One. Narayan, who wanted to understand Vishnu's *maya*, was taken through a life journey, and awoken at the end to realise it was all like a dream. So too the viewers of *Guide* are taken through Raju's life journey, the joy and ambition, the love and greed, humility and acclaim, poverty and wealth, until Raju comes to the same realisation as Narayan: 'I was asleep all the while, but now I am coming awake'.

Guide is not an ideological fable, though it is suggestive of ethical behaviour. It is humorous yet thought-provoking entertainment, which portrays the varied and changing faces of India: the village in drought, the tourists from abroad (an element of modernity) arriving in Udaipur to view its historic palaces and timeless alleyways, the high art of Rosie/Nalini's dancing, the chicanery of the village brahmins. Its theme is illusion, the *maya* of the world. Sumita Chakravarty sees it as a film of historical interest which:

... captures a particular ethos of the postindependence era in India, a kind of turning point in the sixties when the moral earnestness of the years immediately following the end of colonial rule has not evaporated into the national cynicism and artistic polarizations of the seventies and eighties

... The film pits the modern sensibility against age-old belief and prejudice, desire against disillusionment, cynicism against redemption.¹¹²

Guide encompasses acceptance of all these contradictory elements, an acceptance that the condition of life is that they exist side-by-side, mutually defining. If *Guide* 'captures a particular ethos' in time, then a search for the idea of *maya* in cinematic representation must also reach beyond the classic producers of the 1940s to the 1970s, and the 'art' films such as *Vaanaprastham*, and move to the popular films of the 'globalised' era supported by the economy and the lifestyle of the Non-Resident Indian (NRI). Within that period, from approximately the late 1980s to the early years of the present century Indian films have become reflectively 'westernised' in many aspects. They seek to please the modern sensibilities of the aspirational youth, the growing Indian middle class, who look to the west for economic, and often social, advancement. This new generation of films depicts realities such as the flow of immigration of the 'dotcom' generation to London or New York; they show Indian nationals in top scientific jobs at NASA, and leading wealthy, jetsetting life styles. They draw the new identity dilemmas: the conflicts over how much Indian tradition to maintain, whether to return to their nation of origin, and whether to obey parental injunctions, usually in regard to marriage. The young, especially, are depicted wearing casual western clothes (which are often American brand-name sporting outfits) and baseball caps, playing guitars, leading a 'beach' lifestyle, living in huge modern houses. Yet always such accoutrements are, ultimately, *maya*, the mere *appearance* of change, for traditional values of family and social acceptance triumph finally as 'truth'. It is still the old stories, but they are played out on a new stage.

The new generation of films are faster-paced and perhaps have fewer sub-plots than films of earlier eras, but they retain the song-and-dance routines, the special glances, the emotional flavours, the dharmic resolutions of fated love. The longest-playing Hindi movie, perhaps the most successful ever, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*¹¹³ (1995), is one example that exhibits all these themes in a setting of two worlds –

¹¹² Ibid., p. 46.

¹¹³ *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (Motion Picture), India, Yash Chopra Films. Director: Aditya Chopra, 1995.

Europe and India. Elsewhere, the image of recurring lifetimes, the cycle of *samsara*, remains a motif that resolves narrative dilemmas, or is their focus. In *Karun Arjun* (1995)¹¹⁴ two brothers who have been murdered reincarnate to avenge their deaths, and save their mother from the evildoer. *Kal Ho Naa Ho*¹¹⁵ is a hugely popular film from 2003. It is set amongst NRIs in New York, and the hero, played by 1990s idol Shah Rukh Khan, dies of heart disease, leaving his beloved to marry their best friend. But he tells his beloved that in the next lifetime she will be his! Identity remains a key theme, as illustrated by *Veer Zara* (2004)¹¹⁶ (see Figure 39). This great romance problematises the India/Pakistan, Hindu/Muslim separation, revealing the *maya*, the artificial separation, of people and land. The hero's identity, which has been mistaken and lost while he is imprisoned over many years, is found and becomes the key to his freedom and new life. United again with his beloved, Veer's identity is a metaphor for the reality of India's identity itself, the joining of the lovers a symbol of hope for the divided countries of the subcontinent. The 2005 'hit' film *Paheli* (Riddle)¹¹⁷ is another of which the theme is mistaken identity. Here, the lead character is a ghost who can alter his shape to any form of being: *maya*.

'*Maya*' in film titles is self-descriptive, pre-ordaining the illusionist motif within the film. Two such films of recent years are *Maya Memsaab* (1992)¹¹⁸, and *Maya* (2001)¹¹⁹. The former is a retelling of the classic French story *Madame Bovary*, which tells of the tragic outcome of a young woman's search for wealth and pleasure, without moral restraint. *Maya*, the debut film of young Canadian NRI director Digvijay Singh provoked outrage in India amongst those who felt it presented a false image of their religious customs. The film tells of the innocence of a young girl named Maya, who is abruptly and cruelly wrenched from her childhood illusion of the world's goodness and safety when, at puberty, she is ritually deflowered by temple priests, with the blessing of her family. The '*maya*' of the title may refer not simply to the girl's loss of innocence, but to her family, deluded by their belief in the priests into betraying the trust and wellbeing of the child they love.

¹¹⁴ *Karun Arjun* (Motion Picture), India, Filmcraft, Director: Rakesh Roshan, 1995.

¹¹⁵ *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (Motion Picture), India, Dharma Productions, Director: Nikhil Advani, 2003.

¹¹⁶ *Veer Zara* (Motion Picture), India, Yash Raj Films, Director: Yash Chopra, 2004.

¹¹⁷ *Paheli* (Motion Picture), India, Red Chillies Entertainment, Director: Amol Palekar, 2005.

¹¹⁸ *Maya Memsaab* (Motion Picture), India, Forum Films, Director: Ketan Mehta, 1992.

¹¹⁹ *Maya* (Motion Picture), India/Canada, Kundalini Pictures, Director: Digvijay Singh, 2001.



Figure 39¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Film poster, Shimla, (Julie Marsh, 2004).

These films are windows through which to understand the many facets of the idea of *maya*, and they are testament to its continued relevance in Indian expression. *Maya* illustrates the puzzle of identity and its ever-changing nature in the search for authenticity and completeness, as in *Vaanaprastham* and *Paheli*. *Aag* and *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* reiterate that belief is *maya*: relative, created and therefore deceptive. It is a warning of immorality, and simultaneously an inspirational reminder of renunciation and of selflessness, as in *Shri 420* and *Guide*. It tells of life's vanities, as in *Maya Memsahib*, and the theme of reincarnation that appears in *Karun Arjun* and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* reflects the circle of *samsara* that is the trap of *maya*.

The films discussed here are necessarily selective, but they are indicative of the repeated element of *maya* philosophy, which underlies not only these themes of truth and identity but also their enunciation through the distinctive aesthetic devices of Indian cinema. As the images of Indian cinema are instrumental in depicting a vision of national identity, they hold a power which can make cinema a field of contention, and a political force. The next chapter will further explore the *maya* of identity, and the *maya* of politics, through the public controversy surrounding the screening of the 1998 film, *Fire*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fire

What is in a label? ... Everything is in a label, Srikanta Babu. What is more real in the world than words? Don't you know how man's thoughts can be perverted by giving them a wrong name?¹

Maya as *nama-rupa*, name and form, is the defining art of labelling which, as expressed in the above quotation from an early Bengali novel, can change and recreate truths and lives. The idea of *maya* in twentieth century India, beyond its application in religious teachings and as the primary motif for India's classical art, has been demonstrated previously through the life of Gandhi, and in the public culture of Indian film. The present chapter,² by assessing a series of linked incidents of the late 1990s, brings together the elements of political symbolism, film, and women's rights to autonomy, in order to direct a fuller comprehension of *maya* and its role as perspective on truth and history. The connecting point for these elements of discussion is the controversy surrounding the screening of Deepa Mehta's 1996 film, *Fire*,³ which threw out a web of competing and complementary viewpoints.

The story of *Fire* and the controversy which followed its screening are illustrations of the attempt to consolidate realities through their framing: through the delineation of name and form, which is *maya*. History, like fiction or myth, teacher or leader, makes order of events to explain them, and by doing so gives coherence and meaning to life. Across the range of possible realities, or perceptions, those prioritised are given value through their selection and 'framing'. They are endorsed, and made 'more real': in the words of cross-cultural theorist Linda Hess, 'the activity of framing has much to do with what we consider to be real'.⁴ Framing draws attention

¹ A quotation from the 1917 Bengali novel, 'Srikanta I', by Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, in Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1985, p. 103.

² Some of this chapter will draw on a pilot publication by Julie Marsh and Howard Brasted: 'Fire, the BJP and Moral Society' in Ian Copeland (ed.), *South Asia* New Series, Vol. XXV, No. 3, South Asian Studies Association of Australia, Melbourne, 2002, pp. 235 – 251.

³ *Fire* (Motion Picture), Zeitgeist Films, Canada/India, 1996. Producers: Bobby Bedi and Deepa Mehta. Director: Deepa Mehta.

⁴ Linda Hess, 'Staring at Frames Till They Turn into Loops: An Excursion through Some Worlds of Tulsidas', in Bradley R. Hertel and Cynthia Ann Humes (eds), *Living Banaras*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993, p. 87.

to that which it contains. It is, in other words, ‘a conceptual marker of limits and an aid to representation’.⁵ Yet each aspect of life is ultimately interlinked, a veritable ‘Indra’s net’ of reflections and connections. The story of *Fire* and its surrounding controversies encapsulate and illustrate this metaphor, by framing many contested versions of reality and their mirrored angles on the broad canvas of cinema, public space, halls of government, and the media.

The realisation of the power inherent in framing stories and events from contested perspectives made *Fire* the target of political interest, for feminists, civil rights activists, and politicians alike. Others, such as journalists and actors, were caught up in the drama of the events surrounding *Fire*. The film questioned social constructions and beliefs: it altered the boundaries of the Indian familial world in its framing of new possibilities, new identity roles. The divisions and layers within society that were revealed in the debate, and the symbols of the Hindu world which it employed, are *maya*: representation, not reality; framed selections, not the whole panorama. Recognition of that truth is revelatory of the social and political climate of the era, while simultaneously reflecting on past tradition. But why did the screening of one film elicit such a complex response, a fabric of claim and counterclaim, image and alternative image? In answering that question, it is necessary to survey the events that occurred, the substance of the film itself, the reactions to that conjunction by a range of social groups and individuals, and the historical context.

The film *Fire* had opened in cinemas across India in November of 1998, after having been internationally acclaimed and receiving much advance publicity because of its possibly controversial theme. It chronicles a love affair between two Hindu sisters-in-law in middle-class New Delhi. *Fire* screened to full houses across northern India for three weeks, provoking ‘hardly any protests or catcalls’,⁶ until in early December a group of Hindu communalists attacked two cinemas in Bombay. The attackers were members of the Shiv Sena (‘Shivaji’s Army’), a militaristic political party aligning itself with the image of named the seventeenth century Maratha

⁵ Mani Shekhar Singh, ‘Poetics of Frame and Field in Maithil Painting’, in Veena Das, Dipankar Gupta, Patricia Oberoi (eds), *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 34, No. 3, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2000, p. 424.

⁶ Madhu Jain and Sheela Raval, ‘Ire Over Fire’, *India Today*, 21 December, 1998, p. 80.

warrior king, Shivaji. The Sainiks (Shiv Sena members) smashed windows and tore down posters, until the threatened patrons fled. The director of the film, Deepa Mehta, an Indian-born woman now based in Canada, was visiting Bombay and was made fearful for her life. *Fire* was the first of her projected trilogy of films about India – *Fire*, *Earth*, and *Water*.

A few days after the incident in Bombay, cinemas in New Delhi also were forced by the vandalism of rioters to stop screening the film, and similar threats were being made in other cities across north India. A chain of developments unfolded from this moment. Some leading Indian newspapers reported the progress of the dispute on their front pages every day for a fortnight. It was mentioned as far afield as the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Legal actions were begun, shouting matches in Parliament occurred, candlelit vigils were held by civil rights groups, and poster campaigns were instigated by lesbian activists. Death threats and intimidation continued towards actors in Bombay who dared speak out against this enforced censorship. Altogether, a great *tamasha* (a spectacle) was played out.

It was a spectacle with serious intent. The initial riots were just the beginning of this matter, for long after all immediate reaction had subsided, controversy was to continue as the film became a forum for debate on many aspects of current social attitudes: debates on the framing, the *maya*, of identity rights. Opinions and reports flourished in electronic and print media. Two aspects of the phenomenon appeared predominant. One was the paradox that this film, which offered the suggestion that alternative and therefore liberating ways of living can exist for women, was being used by neo-conservative groups to reinforce support for restrictive mythologies. ‘Reality’ can seem different when presented from different angles. The feminist message was being turned upon itself, made into that which, in fact, it opposed. Beyond this, it was clear the film challenged the acceptable boundaries, the frames, of Indian middle-class life, questioning values that delineated social ‘normalcy’. Moreover, these values were being debated not only on dualistic left-versus-right, traditional-versus-modern stances, but from points right across the spectrum. *Fire*,

and the attention drawn towards it from the protests, had shaken the framing lines, the *maya*, of Indian identity.

It was an important debate. Whole dossiers on *Fire* were compiled at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society in Bangalore, and at the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi. The existence of these files confirmed the significance of the *Fire* episode; they also call forth the question of the film's larger context. That context is essential to the elucidation of *Fire*, which is set against a background of 1990s urban India, where neo-traditionalist attitudes and the materialism, fashion and ideologies of the modern world were both increasingly gaining currency, provoking a confusing clash of values and competing realities. There were two main aspects of this film that were most threatening to the nationalistic paradigm of Hindutva ('Hinduness') which was the prevailing political climate, and which will be discussed below. One challenge to this branch of politics was the fact that change was wrought by the agency of women, and that the change entailed rejection of the family, the cornerstone of Hindu sanctity. The other aspect of provocation was that the film was made by 'an outsider' – but who has the right to draw those boundaries?

The Hindu nationalist organisations, the Sangh Parivar and the Shiv Sena, were one group who believed they had the right to frame 'Indianness'.⁷ That ideology drove their outrage at having their version of selfhood challenged and, just as importantly, their ideology also drove the display of that outrage. Their framing was limited and restrictive, disallowing opposing points of view: it was an ideology of *maya*. Accompanying the violence of the nationalists' reaction, and the street demonstrations of lesbian activists and those of general human rights groups, an argument dominated by women's voices erupted in the print media. These women realised, from varying viewpoints, that the debates around *Fire* could have a tangible effect on Indian society. Selective mythologised images of Indian women had long

⁷ Sangh Parivar is the communal 'family' of organisations based on a philosophy of 'Hinduness'. It is comprised of the central militaristic youth wing, the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the political party the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a religious wing, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a youth wing the Bajrang Dal, and others, including some women's organisations. It is ideologically allied to the Shiv Sena, the nativist Hindu party of Maharashtra.

been seen to entrap real women in ways that devalued and even endangered their lives, as *Fire* itself had shown.

All viewpoints are valid in the world seen as *maya*: remembrance of *maya* tempers all arguments. It is the forgetting that this is so which, Indian teachings have warned, is *avidya* – ignorance, and *asat* – non-truth. The controversy around *Fire* revealed the complexity of identity, but a common thread united the debate. All concerned were aware, consciously or not, of the power inherent in storytelling – that the dominant story, the *maya* of image, could create the direction and reality in which the nation must live.

The story in *Fire* opens with a scene of memory and a teaching on the nature of reality. A girl (Radha) and her parents sit in a field of yellow mustard flowers, and the child's mother is telling her that even though the ocean is far away, still, 'What you can't see, you can see'. She is suggesting that limits are not just physical, but illusory.

Now, in the present, we see the Taj Mahal, the symbol of lost love, where the newly married Sita and Jatin wander, awkwardly and unhappily together. Jatin is clearly bored, and so Sita feels rejected, although she is excited by the romance of Shah Jahan's story. In Delhi, they are to live with Jatin's older brother, Ashok, and Ashok's wife, Radha. Radha is seen tending with gentle resignation to the brothers' mute mother, Biji. The newlyweds are greeted on their return with a ceremony of welcome and blessing, and Sita touches Ashok's feet to show her devotion to her elder. But Jatin soon leaves the house; Sita, left alone in their room, throws off her sari, pulls on a pair of Jatin's trousers, and dances to a Hindi film song in front of the mirror. Clearly, Sita has the imagination to create her own realities.

Jatin has an illicit sexual life, which is the reason for his neglect of Sita. His lover is a Chinese hairdresser, Julie, who has refused to marry him, fearing the excitement of their passion might wane; besides, he says bitterly to Ashok, she would not want to be a 'baby-making machine for a joint family'. Jatin feels pressured, trapped between his love for Julie and his duty to the family to marry. Now, married, he openly

continues his liaison with Julie, whose father curses Indians as an uncivilised nation of people with primitive habits, who persecute minorities such as his family. Jatin can only answer, 'Well yes, we are a complex people'.

Ashok is a responsible elder brother who views his family with a fond but shortsighted eye. He cares for them, but is also dedicated to his *guru*, Swamiji, from whom he has taken the creed that 'desire is the root of all evil'. The motivation for Ashok's devotional aspirations is revealed when Radha informs Sita of her infertility – 'No eggs in ovaries'. Later she confides further in Sita, telling her that Ashok practises celibacy, and requests his wife's presence in his bed only as a test of his own will to reject her sexually. For thirteen years she has acquiesced in this ritual, though she finds it humiliating, because of her 'unworthiness' for not being able to bear a child. Both women feel sexual and emotional rejection from their husbands. But Sita's coming into the household begins to change its pattern and unveil its hidden realities.

Sita's youthful horizons have not yet become confined, and trying to express her longings for the possibilities beyond her limited surroundings, she says to Radha, 'I just want to see the ocean'. The infinite ocean, the source of all things, is a symbol for the eternity from which the whole world was born and to which all things return. It is beyond the *maya* of this world. Radha remembers her mother's words: 'What you can't see, you can see', and more frequently she begins to question, not meekly accept, her existence. When Ashok explains that his celibacy and his religious teacher, Swamiji, help him to come closer to the 'universal truth', Radha asks 'How does it help me?'

The two women both begin to question marriage and the meaning of duty; and comforting each other's loneliness, find desire awakened between them. Their love kindles happiness and confidence, and gives moral strength to both, but as well, forces confrontations. At first these are with their own beliefs, but ultimately with their husbands. Sita and Radha choose to leave the family that has shown so little concern for their emotional needs.

Sita leaves the house in the dark and the rain, to wait for Radha at the Nizamuddin Shrine. Radha wants to tell Ashok that her leaving is for her own sake, not because of him, for Ashok, in his own way, has been kind. But he warns her of the ruin brought by desire, and she replies that without desire she was dead. In Ashok's anger the kerosene stove is upset, and Radha's sari catches fire. Flames leap up around her. Ashok does not try to help, but carries his mother away from the danger. Radha is finally seen, exhausted, arriving at the arches of the shrine where Sita is waiting.

It has been previously mentioned that *Fire's* urban middle class family lives in 1990s New Delhi. The era, and that rapidly growing section of the community were both dominated by the cultural politics of the Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, and its affiliates. The choices and the changes, the new parameters and possibilities ushered in by the influences of globalisation shape the film's setting. India had opened its doors to the world's consumer goods and, more importantly, its attitudes, with the advent of satellite television, and with more Indians moving abroad to work and study. *Fire* depicts the tensions set up between this changing Indian world and the forces urging adherence to a notion of Hindu cultural 'tradition' that was being continually reconstructed and enforced. Reflecting that background, *Fire* contains numerous symbols, themes, and social mores associated with Hinduism, which shapes the broader Indian community. Duty, *dharma*, was one such theme that overshadowed all else: was it more important to be dutiful to one's own fulfilment, or to that of the family – to the wider society? Must those choices be mutually exclusive? If *dharma* is the path to truth, the path through the wrongness, or non-truth (*asat*) of *maya*, who is to interpret that path for the present age? *Fire* elicits that question, amidst the symbols that so entwine Indian mythological and national identity.

The prevailing symbol (*maya*, as appearance) is that of fire itself, which in Hinduism is the sign of God's presence, and the intermediary between God and

humanity.⁸ Fire, *aag*, is therefore a passage through *maya*, a connection with the Absolute. With its ephemeral, transformative power, it is itself the *maya* of miraculous creation. It makes the darkness light, forming illusory, shape-changing shadows on the world and transforming all it touches. Ritual austerities (*tapas*, meaning ‘heat’), which are offered up to the gods as sacrifice, are seen as a ‘burning up’ of past and future *karma*.⁹ *Agni*, fire-god of the hearth, is closely linked to women, for fire is connected with the womb, with the hidden energy (*mayashakti*) within growing things, and with completion, or ‘cooking’.¹⁰ Fire is creative and destructive: it ‘magically’ changes substances, making them gain or lose form, or disappear. In a different metaphorical sense, fire may create negative symbols of ‘Indianness’ – of funeral pyres, of widow immolation, of the burning murders of young wives, or the ‘trial by fire’ of the mythical Sita.¹¹ Elisabeth Bumiller has commented that:

Sita’s ordeal has left an indelible mark on the relationship of Indian women to fire, which remains a major feature of their spiritual lives, a cause of their death and a symbol, in the end, of one of the most shocking forms of oppression.¹²

That oppression is present in *Fire*, accompanying the association of fire with human passions, blazing, scorching, smouldering while it heats, illuminates, and completes (often by destroying) all it contacts. For Radha and Sita too, individual liberation, a completion, grew from such processes. Fire is a noticeably potent symbol even in a land of potent symbols.

⁸ Especially powerful divinities were given epithets such as *jvalit*, ‘possessing fire’, or *jajval*, ‘burning’. Not only Hindus express this divine connection, Indian Muslims too conceive of a human in communication with God as ‘burning’. From Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1964, p.475.

⁹ Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 2nd edn., State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994, p. 179.

¹⁰ Jyoti Sahi, *The Child and the Serpent*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1980, p. 59.

¹¹ In the epic tale *Ramayana*, the heroine Sita must prove her purity and loyalty to her husband Rama by being embraced by the god of fire and truth, Agni. She emerges unscathed by the touch of fire. Valmiki, *Ramayana*, trans. and retold by William Buck, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976, pp. 364-365.

¹² Elisabeth Bumiller, *May You Be the Mother of A Hundred Sons*, Random House, New York, 1990, p. 45.

Symbols indicate the formless idea behind the form; symbols, like art, are *maya* that both informs and deceives, and which above all, must be remembered as such. They hold great significance in a country of ancient tradition, and like *maya*, can be a force for good or ill intent depending on the intention and the perception of their use. *Fire* is replete with symbols, which, as stated above, are *maya*, and they are *maya* in two ways. They are the indication (*maya*) of a implicit truth, but as form (also *maya*), they are limited, created, and therefore deceptive. That twofold nature typifies the riddle of *maya*, and is well employed in *Fire*, where symbols are used to enhance the film's meaning, but also to be dismantled in the challenge to accepted order which is so much its theme.

Thus the symbolic circling of the sacred flame greets Sita when she first enters the household of her marriage, and it finalises the fasting day of *Karva Chauth*, the women's austerity rite performed for their husbands' longevity. An analogy of the 'trial by fire', the *Agni parika* of the much revered Sita, heroine of the epic *Ramayana*, is repeated in several forms.¹³ It is shown on a video version of the *Ramayana* screened on the family's television; it is performed at Swamiji's temple by actors (with Sita played by a man – illusion within illusion); and it is re-enacted metaphorically, yet this time in the film's 'reality', when Radha escapes with her life from the flames set alight by Ashok's anger. These re-enactments of *Agni parika* repeatedly evoke the symbol of the mythological Sita, whose faithfulness, purity, and selflessness are the framed ideal of Hindu womanhood. In contrast, the film's Sita is passionately self-affirmative and assertive; she questions the limits of traditional roles. It is a much-needed questioning, for the near-burning of Radha by the fire of the kitchen stove is a reminder of the more sinister evolution that has come about through conformity to a rigid interpretation of Hindu lore, the increasingly common 'dowry deaths'.¹⁴ The static expectation of Hindu womanhood was exposed in other ways in the film, too, noticeably in the frequent references to duty.

¹³ The mythical Sita must prove her purity by walking through fire.

¹⁴ Rehana Ghadially & Pramod Kumar, 'Bride -Burning: The Psycho-Social Dynamics of Dowry Deaths' in Rehana Ghadially (ed.), *Women in Indian Society: A Reader*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p.167. The practice of murdering a wife by dowsing her with kerosene and setting her alight is apparently on the increase in India as higher class status is sought through increased wealth. These murders are called 'kitchen accidents' and prosecutions are rarely brought against the perpetrators. They are motivated by

‘Sita says the concept of duty is overrated’, Radha replies to Ashok, when he asks why she did not come when he summoned her. Ashok answers ‘She’s young, but you know its importance’. But Sita too would know the importance given to duty in her culture – how could she not, when it was the foundation of Hindu society? She replies to Jatin ‘I don’t have a choice’ when he suggests she need not keep the *Karva Chauth* fast on his account. For she is aware of the unquestioning obedience and devotion to her husband that was a Hindu woman’s *dharma*, her religiously ordained duty. To keep to one’s *dharma* was to enjoin the correct order of the whole universe, according to Vedic law.¹⁵

Historian K. M. Panikkar notes that the ‘most authoritative text’, the *Bhagavad Gita*, recognises that ‘Dharma requires to be restated in every age and society must be reorganized to suit new needs’.¹⁶ Even the lawmaker Manu¹⁷ had recognised that *dharma* must be adjustable to ‘actual human conditions’.¹⁸ Yet the role of the Hindu female as *pativrata* – chaste and obedient wife – had been drawn in the firmest of frames in recent times particularly, in the creation of a national identity that could attain independence from foreign rule. Story, song, and discipline prepared even the twentieth century Indian girl, from childhood, for her place in her husband’s household.¹⁹ There, she would be on the lowest rung of family hierarchy until she became the mother of sons. And her duty of service and devotion to her husband, and to the family, and the advance of her husband’s spiritual wellbeing, must be kept, no matter what his behaviour. Manu had decreed:

greed for higher dowry payments than the bride’s family can deliver, and as the practice of dowry has increased in recent decades so have these ‘accidents’.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Ainslie T. Embree, *The Hindu Tradition*, Vintage Books, New York, 1972, pp. 74 – 78.

¹⁶ K. M. Panikkar, *The Foundations of New India*, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., London, 1963, p. 42.

¹⁷ Manu is ‘the mythical ancestor of all humankind’ and said to be responsible for the Vedic social law text Manusmriti. ‘The Laws of Manu’. Klostermaier, Klaus, *A Survey of Hinduism*. State University of New York Press, Albany, 1989, p. 51.

¹⁸ Ainslie T. Embree, op. cit., p. 93.

¹⁹ Sudhir Kakar, ‘Feminine Identity in India’ in Rehana Ghadially (ed.), op. cit., p. 50.

Though destitute of virtue or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife.²⁰

and:

By violating her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world.²¹

Radha must, in humiliation, do her duty as Ashok's wife by assisting him to 'test' his celibacy; and dutiful devotion to the husband is also shown in the myth, as related by Radha, of *Karva Chauth*. It is, as are so many Indian stories, one of *maya*: of deception and mistaken identity, and of overcoming that *maya* through penance. A proud king is cursed by the gods, and thousands of needles appear on his body. The queen tirelessly plucks out all the needles until only the two remain which pin his eyes closed. But she is called away, and a servant girl takes out the needles. The king, opening his eyes, mistakes servant for queen, and treats her as such, while the real queen must work as a servant. On advice from a holy man, the queen practices austerities until the king sees the truth, and she wins him back. Now Radha and Sita perform the *Karva Chauth* fast and rituals for their husbands' wellbeing. But Sita's continual small rebellious remarks illuminate customs which previously Radha had unquestioningly accepted. Sita comments that the queen of the story 'was a wimp, and the king a real joke!' She is reframing the *maya*, the definitive standards of husband and wife, through her own ethical vision, one that is shaped by the modern era and its valorisation of the individual's autonomy.

Hindu men must be dutiful, too. Jatin and Ashok argue over duty, for Jatin had been pressured to marry, in his duty to the family to provide male progeny. Now, he has a duty to Sita as well, Ashok points out. Jatin, frustrated, accuses Ashok of ignoring *his* family duties in his devotion to 'that bloody Swami of yours'. Both

²⁰'The Laws of Manu', 5. 154, in Sarvapelli Radhakrishnan & Charles Moore (eds), *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1957, p. 191.

²¹'The Laws of Manu' 5. 164, *ibid.*, p. 191.

brothers, although they make cursory attempts at kindness towards their wives, are in truth neglectful of the women's needs for sexuality, affection, and respect. The men are behaving well enough according to their personal beliefs, for Jatin's self-image is of a *laissez faire* modernness and Ashok's in Swamiji's version of tradition and the search for liberation. But, like the king in the story, caught in *maya*, they see only the appearance of things, not the underlying realities. The solutions they propose for their wives' unhappinesses are superficial, as the men themselves, caught in the prescribed frames of their societal roles, cannot conceive of any truly alternative view or behaviour. Ultimately, this leads to the verification of the warning of the *Manu Smriti*: 'Where the female relations live in grief – that family soon perishes completely.'²²

The role firmly drawn for women in marriage in India is one explanation for the hostile reception of the film in some quarters. Marriage as a duty is questioned in this film along with the whole concept of 'the family'. Such questioning remains controversial, for in its Indian conception, marriage was essential for spiritual salvation as well as being the basis of social cohesion and continuity. An Indian woman was defined, even more than most women are, by her relations to other people – she was daughter, wife, and mother, and in these roles she held the honour which underpinned a whole community where social structures rest on the gaining of purity and the avoidance of pollution. She was property, to be passed from father to husband, so that an 'independent' unmarried woman of childbearing age was considered a danger to her family's honour. As married woman she was both safe and productive, and therefore auspicious. Her husband was *patidevata* (the husband, or lord, who is god), and devotion to him the only acceptable purpose of female spiritual practice.²³ Just as the Sita of the *Ramayana* followed her wifely duty (*stridharma*) to perfection in her steadfast devotion and purity, so too her husband Rama symbolised the embodiment of perfect *dharma*, noble in his duty to his father and his people, triumphing over evil in the shape of a threat to his wife's purity – her kidnapper the

²² *Manu Smriti*, 3.55-57. Quoted in Theodore de Bary (ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol. I, Columbia University Press, New York, 1958, p. 228.

²³ Kathryn Hansen, 'Heroic Modes of Women in India', in Arvind Sharma & Katherine Young (eds), *The Annual Review of Women in World Religions*. Vol. II., State University of New York Press, Albany, 1992, p. 6.

demon Ravana. Yet even the revered Rama is *maya*, a manifestation in human form of Vishnu, the Absolute.

The irreverent and sceptical comments about marriage in *Fire* are unusual for Indian films, in which marriage is almost always the culmination of the characters' hopes and endeavours. As *Fire*'s Radha and Sita watch from the rooftop one night, a wedding procession is trumpeting by. It is a great display of joyous celebration, but Radha and Sita are aware that the realities of marriage often belie such appearances. 'Someone's getting married' Sita remarks, and Radha sighs, 'Yes, again someone', with resignation. Sita jokes impertinently that since *Karva Chauth* is about devotion, perhaps 'Ashok *bhai* should keep this fast for Swamiji'. Again she is redrawing the parameters of 'normal' practice.

For Jatin too, the family is a tie that restricts his freedom and keeps him dependent, as Ashok controls the joint bank account. The Indian 'joint family', another social frame based on both spiritual precepts and pragmatism,²⁴ most commonly associated with the upper castes, is often portrayed as socially desirable, as the typical and ideal Indian (Aryan) family.²⁵ That too may be illusion, for in actual social practice, this form of family may not be as prevalent as its depiction in folk tales and Hindu law indicates; it is, in recent years at least, more of an ideological model of upper caste family living.²⁶ Ashok, as the patriarch of the *Fire* family, clearly desires to maintain an image (*maya*) of himself as steering the ship of such an ideal family. But he is deluded by his beliefs, and sees what he wishes to see, not the reality. As they picnic one day in the Lodhi Gardens, he gazes benignly at the sleeping Biji, at Jatin lounging in the sun, at the seemingly faithful servant Mundu, and at Sita who is massaging Radha's feet (unbeknown to him, in an erotic, not a sisterly, fashion). He smiles contentedly, saying, 'I am lucky to have such a good family'. It is both sad and farcical, a mistaken appearance, for every member of the family is not conforming to his or her allotted role at all, and is trapped in their individual situations just as Biji is trapped in her mute body.

²⁴ See Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree*, Oxford University Press, London, 1974, pp. 101 – 2.

²⁵ Neera Desai & Maithreyi Krishnaraj, *Women and Society in India*, Ajanta Publications, Delhi, 1990, p. 179.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 174, 180.

Biji is old, omnipresent, demanding, and vying for authority with the forces of change – she is symbolic of Hindu tradition. Tradition too is ultimately *maya*, a construct, and like *maya* is simultaneously advantageous and obstructive. Tied closely to *dharma*, tradition also must be tempered to suit the times. Ashok, the eldest son, tries to balance two strands of Indian ideology that emerge from tradition. He is patriarch of the extended family, but practices celibacy to attain personal salvation. Ashok's sexual rejection of Radha is paralleled by the mythical Rama's rejection of Sita. The *Ramayana* Sita was rejected by her husband because her purity was under a suspicion which, even when proven false, left a taint on the family honour. Radha is rejected too, tainted by her barrenness, her 'false' womanhood.

The other son of Biji is 'modern' Jatin, whose self-image spurns tradition for a different frame, one which encompasses the material, hedonistic world which film and advertising were selling to middle-class India in these final decades of the twentieth century. It is a lifestyle adopting Western attitudes and fashions, Kung Fu movies from Hong Kong, and mobile phones from Japan. Jatin wears jeans, T-shirts, and sunglasses, and spins across the city on his motorbike to visit his lover, Julie. She exemplifies this material age too, and the desire for internationalism. Completely caught in the *maya* of worldly prizes, she is infatuated with glamour, with the glittering success that may lie over the horizon in Hong Kong. Julie has learned to speak in an American accent; she works as a hairdresser – her every aspect is concerned with the *maya* of artifice. She typifies Manisha Roy's description of a modern urban woman in India, 'a mixture of movie star, novel heroine and westernized city woman'.²⁷ This account may be applied to Sita too, with her love of Hindi film music and her criticisms of tradition – 'Sita madam is too modern', Mundu comments reprovingly. But Sita displays a conscious awareness of her situation that is grounded in reality. She remarks 'Isn't it amazing. We're so bound by customs and rituals. Somebody just has to press this button marked "tradition" and I start responding like a trained monkey'. Sita recognises *maya*, observing her situation with objectivity. Julie and Jatin are even more trapped by their 'modern' outlook than

²⁷ Manisha Roy, 'Concepts of Femininity and Liberation' in Rehana Ghadially (ed.), *op cit.*, p.138.

is Sita by tradition, for they are unaware that their buttons are being pressed by the forces marketing western attitudes and consumerism.

It is powerfully symbolic to have named the heroines of *Fire* Radha and Sita, the names of the female counterparts of the god Vishnu's human *avatars*, Krishna and Rama. Both Radha and Sita symbolise virtues that have long been the ideals Hindu women must emulate. Sita in particular forms the traditional idea of womanhood; standing for purity, patience, and self-sacrifice; she is worthy of eternal merit for her unwavering loyalty to her husband. Radha is known for her great passion for the god of love, Krishna. Her pining and despair when they are apart, and her ecstasy when they are together, is likened to the soul's longing for God, and is an enduring inspiration for *bhakti* (devotional worship). Radha represents surrender to passionate love, not maternal love, for she:

is almost never said to be a mother; when, on one rare occasion, she does give birth (to an egg), she kicks it away in anger, and her husband places a curse of eternal barrenness upon her.²⁸

The film's Radha is drawn in the mythic Radha's image, but there are other complex analogies and ironies to be drawn between the mythical and the film's 'Radha' and 'Sita'. The mythical Sita and Radha are both iconic Hindu women, exemplars of devotion. While the film heroines abandon their husbands, they act in devotion to each other. The whole complexity of gender framing is exposed by a close reading of *Fire*. Male *bhakti* followers of Krishna or Rama must internalise the female attributes of Radha or Sita; they must *become* Radha or Sita to feel the erotic (*shringara*) emotion, the desire for the male God. So Radha and Sita encompass a dual sexuality, an androgyny, in common with the Hindu gods, such as Shiva/Shakti, whose beings are a composite of both female and male aspects.²⁹ In *Fire*, this androgyny is simulated when a man takes the role of Sita in the *Agni Parika*

²⁸ *Bhagavata Purana* 2. 2-3. in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980, p.90.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.143-44. See also Klaus Klostermaier, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

enactment at the temple,³⁰ and by Sita dressing, twice, in men's clothes. As well, Radha and Sita's sexual relationship in the film echoes this ambivalent theology, and exposes the falsity of the essentialist notion of womanhood that plays so strong a part in Brahmanic Hinduism. Gender frames are *maya*, illusion, for they hold a picture too simplified and exclusive to be real.

The dual symbology thrust upon women by Brahmanic orthodox purity, that of mother-goddess or whore, are reflected in the servant Mundu's attitudes. For him, they could be 'a true Indian woman – a goddess', or the object of his sexual use by way of pornographic films. But as a servant, Mundu has just as few choices about his life as do the others in the film. His caste and class doom him to negation; he too is caught in a very limited framing, which does not allow full expression of his being.

India's history of sexual attitudes encompasses every imaginable form of eroticism as well as its opposite, asceticism. Both have been used as paths through the mundanity of *maya* in the quest towards truth. Implicit in these paths is the veneration for the potency of the seed, semen, equated with the life force. To retain the seed, it is believed, builds up spiritual and physical strength – this is the object of *brahmacharya*.³¹ The other use for the seed was, of course, the begetting of sons, which would also enhance spiritual prospects. Besides the carefully conservative attitude towards sex found in *brahmacharya* and the reverence for fatherhood lies the seemingly paradoxical aspect of strong eroticism in Indian culture and religion. This is historically displayed by the cult of the *lingam*, by the erotic sculptures on temples, by trade in aphrodisiac preparations, by literature such as the *Kama Sutra*, and by a 'sex-charged mythology'.³² Like Indian history and tradition, then, *Fire* depicts many different forms that sexuality and relationships may take, regardless of current notions of acceptability. By defining the contemporary liminality of these in Indian social culture, their 'otherness', it simultaneously frames that which is considered 'normal', and holds it up for scrutiny.

³⁰ Traditionally, all actors were male, so it is not unexpected that a male does play the role of Sita, especially in a temple play.

³¹ The austerity which is *brahmacharya* is itself a symbol publicly reinvigorated in twentieth century India, especially to Western eyes, through its practice by Mahatma Gandhi.

³² Arthur Koestler, quoted in N. Bhattacharyya, *History of Indian Erotic Literature*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1975, p. 3.

In *Fire*, the frame of ‘normality’ is shown to be *maya*, limited and illusory, and incomplete in the face of the deeper complexity of human life. Each character is constrained by the ties of custom and by roles dictated by their prescribed identity, and each is striving for his or her own version of freedom and fulfilment. The women bear the burden of maintaining social order and spiritual purity. Radha and Sita escape the framed ‘form’ of society by leaving the family and their allotted roles. They escape the *maya* of form, and of falseness. True to their symbolic names, Radha has found desire, the passion for life, and Sita, rejected as was her namesake, has found sanctuary in the feminine, just as the original Sita returned, finally, to the Earth goddess of whom she was an emanation.³³ The fire of passion freed them by lighting up the falsity of their family life, and transforming the women’s servitude and silence into voices of agency and autonomy. But this form of freedom did not suit the framework that was being built by those trying to establish cultural and political hegemony in the India of 1998, and their displeasure at *Fire* was violently and theatrically demonstrated

The riots against *Fire* began in Mumbai in Maharashtra, which was then under the governance of the Hindu nationalist party, the Shiv Sena. In an attitude redolent of the style of Sangh Parivar rhetoric, which plays strongly on aggression and symbolic image, Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray showed no equivocation in his attitude to the film *Fire*, or to the violent protests against it. ‘I added petrol to *Fire*’, he stated baldly in an interview for *India Today*.³⁴ The events that precipitated and continued to feed the furore about the film bore the mark of highly staged demonstrations. These attention-grabbing acts of *maya*, the manipulation of public thought by creating a scene, had become familiar ploys in the Sangh Parivar’s bid for advancement of their agenda of Hindu nationalism, from the time of the *rath yatras* (pilgrimages) that had led up to the demolition of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya in 1993.³⁵ That event was an apex of communal frenzy and carnage. Now *Fire* took its turn as the focus of the

³³ Nanditha Krishna, *The Book of Vishnu*, Viking, New Delhi, 2001, p. 125.

³⁴ Interview with Sheela Raval, *India Today*, 21 December 1998.

³⁵ The destruction of this mosque was a highly symbolic act of reclaiming the Hindu nation from past Muslim hegemony. The mosque was claimed by the Hindu right to be built upon a temple which, even more importantly, was supposed to be the site of Rama’s birth. The aim of building a new temple on this site continues to be a contentious political issue in India.

cry to ‘save Indian culture’ – but whose culture did this mean? Who would frame and define national identity?

A group of Mahila Aghadi members – the women’s wing of the Shiv Sena – had burst into the Cinemax theatre in Mumbai during a matinee screening of the film, and smashed glass panes, shouted slogans, and burnt posters, forcing this theatre to close. Later that day, 2 December 1998, a second Mumbai theatre was intimidated into closing. The same procedure was followed at Delhi’s Regal cinema on 3 December. The scenes of vandalism and threats were filmed by television crews, who clearly had been given advance notice by the rioters to aid in disseminating their message and creating an appearance of moral outrage; notably, though, the rioting was not interrupted by the police.³⁶ In other cities across North India (Pune, Surat, Calcutta) the film was attacked, until ultimately, on 8 December, *Fire* was sent back to the Censorship board for review, due to ‘public outrage’.³⁷

Yet, as the film’s director Deepa Mehta, pointed out, it had only been a ‘handful’ of people protesting – could they lay claim to the label ‘the public’?³⁸ A clamorous minority had succeeded in forcing its agenda onto the wider community by conjuring a public disputation, a true act of *maya*, that was to reverberate for months to come. In the ensuing events and debates, there was much to be learnt of the motives and methods of this minority, as there was of other aspects of Indian society which had been reflected and challenged by the film *Fire*.

The enforced theatre closures had been only the beginning of a series of staged events set in train by the Shiv Sena and members of the Sangh Parivar which would draw attention, not only to the film itself, but to the tactics and attitudes of its opponents. Before its opening in India, the film had been acclaimed throughout the world, winning fourteen different cinematic awards. Indian audiences were thus aware of the possibly controversial aspects of *Fire* even before its opening there, both from international publicity, and from the giant advertising hoardings so prominent in

³⁶ Madhu Jain and Sheela Raval, ‘Ire Over Fire’ in *India Today*, 21 December 1998, p. 78-82.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Indian cities, which depicted the two women protagonists of the film laughing and embracing. The Indian censorship board had passed the film uncut, with an 'Adult' rating. From 13 November it had begun screening in forty cities across India, to full houses and with no noticeable disapproval despite its inclusion of the possibly contentious scenes of lesbian love.³⁹ So the attacks, three weeks later, on the Bombay theatres were as shocking for their unexpectedness as for their violence, strategies which were in accordance with a Sangh Parivar trend of dramatic self-promotion to the centre stage. They were excellent proponents of *maya*.

Maya holds power. On cue, there was noticeable reaction to the rampaging Hindu nationalists in the following days, expressed not only in wide coverage of the incidents on the front pages of the nation's newspapers, but in the upper house of parliament, the Rajya Sabha. Members of the Shiv Sena, Congress, and the Left clashed over the issue, each trying to redraw the debate. Opposition members condemned the 'intolerance' and 'hoodlum rule' in Bombay, and regretted that the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Manohar Joshi, had not only supported the *goondas* (thugs), but had congratulated them.⁴⁰ Shiv Sena members protested this criticism, and Pritish Nandy (Shiv Sena) went further, drawing a parallel between the film and a recently disputed Marathi play about Nathuram Godse (the assassin of Mahatma Gandhi), saying, 'Let this house not waste valuable time in defending assassins and lesbians'.⁴¹ That parry of *maya* was countered by Mrs Bharati Ray (CPI-M) who commented, amidst loud interruption from Shiv Sena members, that the Sangh Parivar's current *rath yatra* threatening a Sufi shrine at Chikmagalu, and the disruption of the film, were 'two sides of the same coin'.⁴² This astute observation confirmed the Sangh Parivar trend towards using divisive symbolism (in the first instance related to Muslims, and in the second to women) as publicity-seeking tactics. Shabana Azmi, star of the film and Rajya Sabha member, sat silently throughout the parliamentary fracas, and in her own symbolic gesture, wore a black sari, suggesting

³⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

⁴⁰ 'Fire Generates Heat in RS,' in the *Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, 4 December 1998.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

a mark of mourning for Indian cultural freedom and the seeming demise of secular politics.⁴³

An interview with Sudha Churi, chief of the Mahila Aghadi, more firmly delineated Sangh Parivar attitudes. Condemning the portrayal of lesbianism, she said, 'The film is against the very structure of our society ... this behaviour is totally unnatural and bad.'⁴⁴ Meena Kulkarni of the Shiv Sena agreed with this, adding that, 'She has insulted Indian women ... even if such things go on on the sly, by showing them on the screen we are actually informing others about such acts of perversion. It will spoil our women.'⁴⁵ The film was not only accused of being corruptive, but was further described as 'unIndian' by Shiv Sena activists, who stated that homosexuality reflected 'western influence'.⁴⁶ A different objection was voiced by one of the two Muslim ministers in the BJP coalition government, Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi. He was defensive about perceptions of India, saying that 'the image of India as a land of squalor and poverty was being sold to western countries for a high price for many years.'⁴⁷ All these speakers, then, were concerned to see definitions of India that accorded with their own beliefs or aspirations.

The Hindu communalists' forced closure of screenings of *Fire* was not repudiated by either the state government of Maharashtra (Shiv Sena) or by the central government (BJP-led coalition), which, in fact, showed a tacit support for the rioters – their own affiliates – by sending the film back to the Censorship Board for review. But there was retaliation by a group of theatre figures, including directors Deepa Mehta and Mahesh Bhatt, who sent a petition to the Supreme Court requesting restoration of the film's legal rights. They condemned the violence against *Fire* and claimed the situation was a 'cultural emergency'.⁴⁸

⁴³ Arijit Upadhyaya, 'Fire Evokes Passions', *Feature*,

<http://www.ganashakti.com/old/1998/981207/feature.htm>, accessed 16/7/2006.

⁴⁴ 'The Rediff Interview/Sudha Churi', *Rediff On The Net*, 4 December 1998,

<http://www.rediff.com/news/1998/dec/04fire2.htm>, accessed 17/7/2006.

⁴⁵ 'Activists slam attacks on lesbian film, Hindus vow to widen protest', AFP, 3 December 1998,

SAWNET, <http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/index.html>, accessed 5/7/2001.

⁴⁶ *The Asian Age*, 4 December 1998.

⁴⁷ 'Hindu leader says lesbian film should be about Muslim family', AFP, 14 December 1998, SAWNET,

<http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/index.html>, accessed 20/7/2006.

⁴⁸ Madhu Jain and Sheela Raval 'Ire Over Fire', *India Today*, 21 December 1998, p.79.

Each day a new episode in the dispute unfolded and new participants were engaged, attempting to frame their version of events. The controversy was kept on the front page of newspapers by reports of counter-protests by civil rights activists in Bombay, and by women's and lesbians' groups in New Delhi, who held placards denouncing the Shiv Sena, with statements such as: 'Shiv Sena never challenges rape, but objects to love between two women' and 'We are Indians, lesbianism is our heritage'.⁴⁹ A Supreme Court lawyer described the forced closure of *Fire* as 'the worst kind of cultural censorship', and blamed the BJP for encouraging 'rabble rousing intimidation'; while historian K.N. Panikkar, recognising the need to draw alternative representations, urged counter-mobilisation, since the state had not acted to dispel this 'cultural fascism'.⁵⁰

While activists of another Sangh party, the Bajrang Dal, rampaged through Surat searching for copies of *Fire* in video parlours, spreading fear and panic among their owners⁵¹, a new complaint was raised against *Fire* in Bombay. This was by the Bombay Youth association, who objected to a segment of the film in which a Chinese character denigrated both India's standing in the modern world and Indian customs. The association determined to lodge petitions with the Supreme Court and the Central Board of Film Certification, asking for this 'vulgar' scene to be deleted.⁵² Once again, the portrayed image (*maya*) of India was of paramount importance.

On 12 December, Shiv Sainiks gained the limelight by holding a 'nude' demonstration (clad in their underwear) outside actor Dilip Kumar's Bombay residence, in protest at his support of the film. Shiv Sena M.L.A. Shrikant Sharmalkar said, cynically, that the Sena would shadow Shabana Azmi, her husband, and Dilip Kumar, with such demonstrations to 'support them and their championing of nudity'.⁵³ Dilip Kumar had spoken out against the Sainiks, remarking that the organisation was stealing India's cultural freedom of expression through organised

⁴⁹ 'Rally assails Sainik's act', *Hindustan Times*, 8 December 1998, p. 1.

⁵⁰ 'Fire scripts Delhi's tryst with "social terrorism"', *Hindustan Times*, 6 December 1998, p. 1.

⁵¹ 'Sena move against Fire to continue', *Calcutta Online*, 6 December 1998, <http://www.calonline.com/>, accessed 8/7/2006.

⁵² 'Controversy over 'Fire' takes new turn', *The Hindu*, 7 December 1998, p. 10.

⁵³ 'Sainiks strip to tease Dilip over Fire', *Hindustan Times*, 13 December 1998, p. 1.

violence and vandalism. Further, he had adduced a pattern behind such attacks, as based on the other recent 'illegal' censorship of books and paintings⁵⁴, and even of sport, citing here Bal Thackeray's refusal to host the Pakistani cricket team in Maharashtra, an action bound to attract attention.⁵⁵ The Supreme Court on 14 December ordered both the central and Maharashtra governments to ensure full security cover for Dilip Kumar and other film personalities threatened in these protests.⁵⁶

The Hindu communalists' protests had been ostensibly over their disavowal of lesbianism as 'Indian'. The focus on this one aspect of the film had forced Deepa Mehta to reiterate that *Fire* is, essentially, about lack of choices, with both male and female characters being 'a victim of society's rules and regulations'.⁵⁷ 'Lesbianism' was a far more clear-cut and emotive frame than an examination of 'choices' would be; hence it had been seized upon by those wishing to usurp the powerful position of moral (and therefore cultural) guardianship. BJP minister Uma Bharati accused Mehta of 'pervert thinking', and denied that lesbianism existed in India, despite her interviewer noting that Bharati's electorate itself contained the famous erotic carvings of Khajuraho, which depict every aspect of the sexual spectrum.⁵⁸ Meena Kulkarni of the Mahila Aghadi grabbed attention with a sweeping statement of hyperbole: 'If women's physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse, reproduction of human beings will stop'.⁵⁹ Chief Minister Manohar Joshi agreed, congratulating the protesters and saying 'What's depicted is against Indian culture'.⁶⁰ Other Sangh Parivar members concurred that lesbianism and homosexuality were alien to Indian culture, and had 'come in with the converts, with

⁵⁴ For instance, the attack on the painter M. F. Hussein's exhibition in Ahmedabad for portraying a naked Sita. See Shailesh Raval, 'Dubious Record', *India Today*, 21 December 1998, for this and similar controversies.

⁵⁵ 'Cine veterans flay Govt. action', *Hindustan Times*, 9 December 1998, p.1.

⁵⁶ 'Security further tightened for Dilip Kumar', *The Hindu*, 16 December 1998, p.15.

⁵⁷ 'An Interview with Deepa Mehta', *World Socialist Web Site*,

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/meh-a06.shtml>, accessed 6/07/2006.

⁵⁸ 'The Rediff Interview/Uma Bharati', <http://rediff.com/news/1998/dec/12uma.htm>, accessed 6/07/2006.

⁵⁹ Sunil Mehra, 'What's Burning?', *OutLookIndia.com Magazine*, 14 December 1998.

<http://www.outlookindia.com/>, accessed 6/07/2006.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

the westerners, with the colonialists',⁶¹ and hence stamping those groups as 'unIndian'.

Support for the Shiv Sena's stand on *Fire* came from the Muslim leaders the Imam Syed Ahmed Bukhari and Maulana Abdul Hamid Numani, who agreed that the film was contrary to the 'common heritage' of Indian culture and values. The Imam regretted, though, that the Shiv Sena had put a communal slant on their protest by insisting that the names of the film's lesbian lovers be changed from Hindu to Muslim names.⁶² He recognised, as did the Shiv Sena, that names – labels – held definitive symbolic power. The rhetoric of the Hindu communalists had continued to be narrowly focussed on their agenda of cultural domination throughout the *Fire* incidents, leaving little doubt that their objection to the film was only part of a larger aim. The true motivation of the communalist strategists became clearer when Bal Thackeray stated on 13 December that his party would withdraw its agitation against the film under two conditions – that the scene in which Indians are verbally abused be deleted, and that the two protagonists, Radha and Sita, have their names changed to the Muslim ones of Shabana and Saira. If this happened, he asserted, his party would even support the film.⁶³ Clearly, lesbianism would be allowed if those portrayed as such were Muslim, not Hindu, women: the 'Indian tradition' which must be protected was, therefore, Hindu tradition.⁶⁴ Yet it was a form of Hindu tradition that chose to ignore all but selected segments of Indian history and socio-religious beliefs.

The Delhi chief of the Shiv Sena, Jai Bhagwan Goyal, shed light on another aspect of the protesters' agenda when he boasted that their violence in Delhi had created such publicity that many new people were coming to join the Sena.⁶⁵ Moreover, he displayed a typical communalist attitude of pride in aggression, by such statements as 'When we don't get what we want after asking, then we have to get violent, like in the *Mahabharat*', and cited past examples of his party's brutal lawlessness, adding

⁶¹ Sunil Mehra, 'Women Without Men', *ibid.*

⁶² 'Muslims support Sena on Fire', *Hindustan Times*, 18 December 1998, p. 1.

⁶³ 'Advani slams Sena's strip act', *Hindustan Times*, 14 December 1998, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Gomathy and Bina, 'Fire, Sparks and Smouldering Ashes', *Women in Action (1:1999)*, <http://www.isiswomen.org/wia/wia199/sex00005.html>, accessed 6/7/2006

⁶⁵ Madhu Jain and Sheela Raval, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

‘We are not cowards’.⁶⁶ These, and the many other instances of overt threats and violence in the demonstrations against *Fire*, the attitudes of cultural hegemony combined with anti-Muslim and anti-Western defensiveness, were manifestations of the policies and philosophy of Hindutva (‘Hinduness’), which had been formed decades previously. The roots of this philosophy lay in the colonial past, but its fruit could be seen in the recent rise to power of the Hindu communalist parties: both areas illustrate the *maya* that is image and identity formation.

The attack on *Fire* by the Hindu nationalist parties is unsurprising in the light of their history, motivations, and methods. These affiliates, in particular, use their version (or framing) of Indian womanhood as the basis for national identity, and conversely, selected national mythologies have built that idea of womanhood: the interconnection can be exemplified by the iconic name and rallying cry *Bharat Mata* (Mother India).⁶⁷ The ground of this vision is the nationalist philosophy known as Hindutva, which itself was one result of a search within India for self respect and national unity, which had been largely driven by the political and psychological effects of British rule in India.

British rulers of India, through their practices and attitudes, had over time drawn their own set of admired human characteristics. By the Victorian era it could be generally averred that the British preferred a ‘stiff upper lip, no nonsense’ school of thought, as suited the image of Empire builders.⁶⁸ They prized as virtues attributes of action, hardiness of body and will, rationality and maturity, all defined in their own terms. The projected image of Victorian Christianity centred on respectability and puritanism. Material acquisition was admired as progress and as a demonstration of social virtue for, of course, the accumulation of goods was supportive of the growing industrialised trading economy.

⁶⁶ Madhu Trehan, ‘When we don’t get what we want, we have to get violent’, *Hindustan Times*, 13 December 1998, New Delhi.

⁶⁷ David Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2003, pp. 109, 189.

⁶⁸ Historian George Bearce has traced the course and the gradually cemented trends of imperial thought in *British Attitudes to India 1784 – 1858*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1982. He explains that although it is a generalisation to pronounce a formula of attitudes, there did emerge a set of ideas which ‘had a basic, permanent impact on India’. Bearce, *ibid.*, p.8.

Indians, in contrast to this pragmatism were, as described previously, drawn as ‘the Other’, the opposite to the scientific, modern European. The idea of the world as *maya*, interpreted typically as ‘nothing but an illusion, a dream, a magic spell’,⁶⁹ accompanied by the persuasion that *karma* equated to a passive fatalism, undoubtedly helped to feed British perceptions of Indians, especially Hindus, as ‘irrational’, ‘mystical’, and lazy.⁷⁰ The world-ordering rationality prized by the imperialist nation stood in contrast to the picture of Indian spiritual holism evoked by romanticist, orientalist Europeans such as German philosopher Hegel, for whom it was ‘the defining characteristic of Indian culture’.⁷¹ ‘Holism’ is clearly the definition given to the *maya/brahman* concept, as it has been described as:

... collapsing the spiritual and material world into oneness, and eradicating the cleavage between the objective world and individual consciousness through incorporation into an all-pervasive Spirit.⁷²

This ‘imaginative spiritualism’ was understood as the antithesis of the logic of Western thought, while as a ‘feminine’ quality, linked with superstition and childishness, it was another sign for its British rulers that India was bound to be controlled under their superior stance of ‘masculine’ enlightenment.⁷³ Moreover, Indian notions of cyclical time, a preference for mythological spans over historical particulars as worldview, with the accompanying alternative interpretations of ‘progress’ and ‘reality’⁷⁴, helped mark it through British eyes as unscientific and disordered. Indians were perceived – and in many cases came to perceive themselves

⁶⁹ Diderot, quoted in Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’*, Routledge, London, 1999, pp. 118, 237n.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, passim. Richard King explains the formation and conjunction of ideas of secularism, religion, and mysticism and the way in which they have been imposed upon India. Also, see Ronald B. Inden *op. cit.*, pp. 14 -18 for discussion of India’s lack of ‘world-ordering rationality’ in relation to European ideas of scientific classification, cosmic laws, and political organisation.

⁷¹ Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999, p. 67.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁷³ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1988, p.4.

⁷⁴ ‘Progress’ in Indian thought was more tied to the progression through necessary incarnations towards *moksha*; while ‘reality’, as described previously, was the world seen as *brahman*, rather than the ‘separate’ sensual, material world.

– as heathen, diseased, undemocratic, primitive, and untrustworthy.⁷⁵ All in all, the British contended that Indians were incapable of self-government, lacked the potential of national unity and were the product of a decayed civilization, the latter concept exemplified, they posited, by the degraded status of Indian women. These women were seen to be the victims of social customs such as child marriage, widow immolation, and seclusion. The British Raj was justified, then, by a need to bring reform and instruction to this benighted country – a perception which defined the image of *both* countries and their people.

Indians of all persuasions were humiliated by these perceptions, and began (with the aid of European scholarship) to reassess their religions and traditions. As well as condemning the nature of Indians, Europeans such as Schlegel had romanticised people of ‘the East’ into an exotic commodity of mystery and spirituality. This vision worked to vilify Indians as superstitious, but also revealed the ‘good’ Orient, that of an aesthetic civilisation in a classical past.⁷⁶ These conflicting attitudes, both negative and positive, served as background and direction for the ideologies of emerging movements for national independence. An Indian identity needed to be defined that would be an antidote to negative perceptions held both by Indians themselves, and by their British rulers.

A major factor in this identity definition was unity. It had become clear to Indians that to gain autonomous nationhood, they needed to show they were a united body, despite the obvious diversity that composed the subcontinent. The political implications of demographics confused this issue of unity. British administration framed community divisions by religious groups with ‘immutable interests and collective rights: these Hindu and Muslim, Christian and Parsi communities were tagged as the eternal elements of Indian society’.⁷⁷ Some communities were favoured over others for particular employment. For instance Sikhs, who were viewed as a

⁷⁵ Francis G. Hutchins, *The Illusion of Permanence*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1967, pp. 53 – 78; George D. Bearce, *op. cit.*, passim; Ronald B. Inden, *op. cit.*, pp. 85 – 130; Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin, London, 1995, passim.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, Hamish Hamilton Ltd., London, 1997, p. 25.

martial race, were recruited for the army.⁷⁸ Larger communities had more lobbying power and, ultimately, were assigned more electoral constituencies⁷⁹, so religious communities became defined as homogenous entities. Formerly blurred boundaries between groups were now drawn in firmly by census surveys, and the challenge to native religions from Christian proselytising added to Indian communal self-awareness.⁸⁰ These practices – the *maya* of separation and framing – exacerbated communal consciousness and divisive competition.

Moreover, the search for a unified national identity produced two alternative conceptions of India's past. One was an inclusive, liberal view, which saw India as being composed of a tolerant synthesis of mutually enriching cultures. The other view was excluding: it stressed that Hindus, the true 'people of the Indus', had for the past thousand years struggled under an oppressive tyranny of Muslim rule. The proponents of this latter view believed that India could be strong only if Muslims were to forgo separate cultural practices and assimilate with the majority.⁸¹ Otherwise, Muslims (and other non-indigenous religious groups) were to be mistrusted as subversives, whose true allegiance lay in a different spiritual homeland. This second view promotes the communal divisions within present-day India and is central to the myth of Hindutva, the foundation of the political and social agenda of the parties of the Hindu Right.

Hindutva is a philosophy of cultural nationalism, defined and articulated by V.D. Savarkar in 1924. It was one answer to the need for an Indian identity that would be a beacon for respect and unity. Harking back to a mythologised past, a Golden Age of Hindu culture, it was built upon the recognition of a shared cultural essence and heritage, a 'blood memory' of eternal Hinduness. Central to this idea was the sacredness of territory and a 'will to nationhood'.⁸² Furthering these ideas, the

⁷⁸ Daniel Gold, 'Organized Hinduisms: From Vedic Truth to Hindu Nation', in M. Marty & R. Appleby (eds), *Fundamentalisms Observed*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991, p.534.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 537.

⁸⁰ Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 158 – 9.

⁸¹ Raychaudhari, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁸² Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1999, p. 78.

influential ideologue of the militant Hindu organisation Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), M.S. Golwalkar, decreed strength of both body and character as the foundational element that would lead to the goal of the perfected Hindu nation. Past heroes such as Shivaji⁸³ were to become the foundational blueprints for the Hindu Right, which is described by journalist Achin Vanaik as:

a radical, modernist current to be distinguished from Hindu traditionalists and conservative. They were out to remould the ‘Hindu community’ and ‘Hindu society’, not to conserve it. The operative term for them was not ‘Indianness’ but ‘Hinduness’ or ‘Hindutva’. The ‘foreigner’ was not the non-Indian or simply the outsider beneficiary but all those not fully assimilated into Hinduness.⁸⁴

All the ‘naming and forms’ of identity are *maya*. The parties of the 1990s Hindu Right reflected their founding currents in developing their chosen form. They were aggressively anti-Muslim, and also anti-Western (and anti-Christian) when the West was seen to influence mores of Indian society that did not fit the stereotypical image of ‘Hinduness’ the Right favoured. They emphasised communal divisions, and accepted selected aspects of modernity, such as its useful technology.⁸⁵ Creating *Ramrajya* – Ram’s kingdom, the metaphor for the Hindu Golden Age – would require mass dissemination of Hindutva ideology, relying on an emphasis on religious symbolism that followed the style of earlier extremist nationalist leader, B.G. Tilak.⁸⁶ The British colonialist equation of gender and power was reflected in the emphasis placed on a chauvinistic masculinity, which invested its honour in women and the family.

The RSS embodies the ideals of Hindutva. Masculinity is equated with traits of domination and aggression. That image is goaded by the perception that Hindus had for too long allowed themselves to be ‘emasculated’, subjugated by foreign

⁸³ Shivaji was the seventeenth century Marathi king who successfully challenged the Mogul ruler Aurangzeb in his bid for empire expansion.

⁸⁴ Achin Vanaik, *The Furies of Indian Communalism*, Verso, London, 1997, p. 150.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79

⁸⁶ See, for instance, Jim Masselos, ‘Hindu Militancy and Extremist Politics’, *Nationalism on the Indian Subcontinent*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1972, pp. 79-81.

minorities, the Muslims and the British. The organisation cultivates dedication to the defence of *Bharat Mata*, Mother India, for it is rhetorically and graphically depicted that the Motherland has been raped and rent asunder by Muslim invasions, and by the bloody partition of India in 1947. Thus, the RSS promotes the splendour of *kshatriya* (warrior) traditions, in refutation of any postcolonial lingering doubts, by either Indians or outsiders, as to India's manliness. Traits that exaggerate this masculinity, such as strong physique, fearlessness, and proficiency in the use of weapons are cultivated under a disciplinary regime, to instil the 'Hindu character'. Their discipline demonstrates the asserted innate Indian racial qualities of moral and spiritual strength, which had been so denied by the British. Power and respect are the goals, disavowing any hint of weakness of individual or nation.

As a result, the BJP-VHP-RSS combine and their Shiv Sena allies are highly aware of the power of symbolism, and are ardent in its use to promote their chosen reality. That trait was noticeable in many instances before *Fire* became further grist for the propaganda mill. The great epic tales of Aryan warrior heroes and heroines, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, had been replayed in the late 1980s in televised dramas that had enthralled the nation and acted as a unifying force. Muslim and Christian Indians loved the *Ramayana* as much as did Hindus. It was an homogenised version, which eliminated the story's regional differences, and was perfect propaganda for the reductive Hinduism created by the Sangh parties.⁸⁷ The BJP even persuaded the actress (Deepika Chikalia) who had played the unsullied, glamorous but subservient (and silent) Sita to run on their ticket in the 1991 elections without having to speak a word – her image was sufficient to ensure success.⁸⁸ Ram, the god king, was newly portrayed on posters as an archer, in heroic pose and with bare, muscular chest emphasising manliness.⁸⁹ The symbol of modern middle class aspiration, the Maruti car, was displayed in the posters' corners.⁹⁰ The worship of Ram had increasingly become the epitome of Hindu nationalism through the *Ramjanmabhoomi* movement, which sought to build a temple on the legendary site of his birthplace in Ayodhya.

⁸⁷ Thomas Blom Hansen, op. cit., p. 156.

⁸⁸ Amrita Basu, 'Feminism Inverted', in Sarkar & Butalia (eds), *Women and the Hindu Right*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1995, p. 174.

⁸⁹ Thomas Blom Hansen, op. cit., p. 177.

⁹⁰ Raychaudhuri, op. cit., p. 225.

The frenzied destruction in 1992 of the Babri Masjid, the mosque built on that same site, had been one of the symbolic triumphs of the Sangh Parivar, enhancing communal hatreds and rallying many more Hindus to political alignment with the BJP.

The late 1980s and early 1990s had seen the Hindutva push gathering momentum. The *Bharat Mata* image was carried in garlanded jeeps from one end of India to the other in great *rath yatras* (pilgrimages) that were suggestive of the country's Hindu unity and at the same time propagated Hindutva ideology. The cow symbol was emphasised, seemingly for the dual purposes of alienating Muslims more emphatically, while suggesting the nurturing, mothering qualities of the nation. 1996 was declared 'Cow protection year' by Ashok Singhal, the leader of Hindu religious and cultural organisation the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Hindutva followers flew banners, coloured the orange saffron of Hindu asceticism, and used the Hindu prayer lamp, and later the lotus, as emblems.⁹¹ They built Hindu temples throughout India, collecting specially dedicated bricks from far and wide, creating an awakening of communal solidarity; many festivals in honour of Hindu gods were enlarged by BJP funds.⁹² The VHP had become a gateway for the authority of Hindu holy men to enter the broader sphere of political influence.

After their victory in the 1998 elections, the BJP seized the chance of making a resonant gesture to demonstrate Hindu power to the world, and exploded two nuclear devices, with the names of Vedic gods Agni and Prithvi, in the desert bordering Pakistan. In this linking of power and religion, consideration was given to building a temple on the irradiated desert sands where the explosion had taken place, or gathering some of the blasted sand to take on a pilgrimage of worship around the country.⁹³ But such displays of power and aggression, mainly aimed at uniting Hindus in drawing a common 'enemy', Muslims in particular, were not the only areas of the Hindu communalist's symbolic posturing. The role of women in Indian society was also the cause of much agitation and image-stamping.

⁹¹ Gold, *op. cit.*, p. 573.

⁹² Thomas Blom Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

⁹³ Peter Popham, 'Why can't Hindus and Muslims get along? It's a long story...' *The Independent International*, 20 June 1999.

British accusations of backwardness directed at Indian women had been deflected by the 'Aryan woman' prototype framed by Indian nationalists. It was this image, of upper-class women, that embodied the Hindutva paradigm and defined women's roles. The lifestyles of tribal or low caste women, and those of other religions, were rendered invisible.⁹⁴ The image of Aryan womanhood had been modelled on exceptional women traced in India's past, or in literature or mythology, amongst whom it was possible to find not only dutiful women such as Sita, but role models that suited women seeking an image of autonomy or power. Feminist symbolism had emphasised as female icons manifestations of the goddess Devi, who were warlike, aggressive, and beyond male control.

Hindu communalist political rallies turned to these images too, both to accommodate the activist leanings of modern Indian women, and to promote the image of an assertive and indomitable nation. But the potentially dangerous energies of these independent 'goddesses of tooth and claw'⁹⁵ were safely contained, in the Sangh Parivar women's branches, by their dedication to the national purpose, the Hindu *rashtra* (state).⁹⁶ Female warrior virtues of the past also were promoted as inspirational. These women were so selfless they would commit self-immolation, to release their men for battle without fear of *a-dharma*, the disorder that would result from the dishonour of their womenfolk being ravished.⁹⁷ Thus nationalists stressed the Aryan woman's courage, but also her purity, which is the essence of Brahmanical religious aspiration.

Although individual women became powerful figures in the Sangh combine, female selfless dedication to nation and family remained the keynote that subsumed all other qualities or considerations. Such dictates as those of *Manu Smriti*, which

⁹⁴ Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?' in K. Sangari and S. Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1989. p. 50.

⁹⁵ Gavin Flood has described the Goddess manifestations as depicted in two ways: 'goddesses of tooth', who are erotic, dangerous and dominate their consorts, and 'goddesses of breast', who are fertile, maternally bountiful, and subservient to their consorts. See Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 174.

⁹⁶ Flavia Agnes, 'Redefining the Agenda of the Women's Movement', in McGuire, Reeves & Brasted (eds), *Politics of Violence*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1996, p. 98.

⁹⁷ Uma Chakravarti, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

stated women's lifelong subordination and dependence on father, husband, and son, are deeply enculturated. These values and attitudes linger as the tradition advocated by Hindutva ideology.

This traditional framing of Indian womanhood can have a direct effect on women's lives. Despite the Sangh Parivar's self-projection as progressive and modern, its reliance on traditionalist images reinforced practices that Indian feminists had long disputed. Many of these, such as widow immolation (*sati*), child marriage, and the paying of marriage dowry had been legally banned, and measures to provide equality of opportunity across gender, class, and religion were inscribed in India's secular constitution. Feminists continued to fight to have these measures implemented, for as communalist views grew more strident over events made symbolic such as the *Ramjanmabhumi/Babri Masjid* dispute, or the continuing war in Kashmir, the cry of 'Hinduism in danger' received more attention, and issues relating directly to women's well-being were deflected by this 'larger' agenda. Also culturally threatening were the instabilities and changes generated by India's opening out to global market forces and directives, which were beginning to show effects in the last decade of the century. South Asian civil society expert Radha Kumar suggests that this insecurity led to enforced control over women, in one remaining area of male potency and authority – the family.⁹⁸

In maintaining the status quo of Brahmanical patriarchy which underlies Hindutva ideology, disputes relating directly to women had a history of being hijacked by the Hindu Right. In the *Fire* protests, they seized upon images intended as liberating for women (lesbian love, independence from family), and attempted to use them to reinforce the same cultural repressions from which the women in the film had escaped. This pattern of hijack can be seen both before and after the *Fire* episode, and served two purposes for the communalists. It channelled attention to their own agenda in an attempt to gain popular support, and it combated women's attempts to break free of the restrictive frame of 'Hindu woman'. Feminist rhetoric and symbolism were stolen, for instance, when in the name of Hindu 'tradition' a pro-*sati*

⁹⁸ Radha Kumar, 'From Chipko to Sati' in N. Menon (ed.), *Gender and Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p. 363.

organisation had, in the early 1980s, inverted feminists' rights slogans to that of the 'right' to self-immolate, in an artful example of *maya* as 'spin'. They had appropriated the feminist slogan 'We, the women of India, are not flowers but fiery sparks'.⁹⁹ Feminists struggling to have women's rights enacted were frequently derided as not being 'real women', or as 'anti-men'. Samiti activist Poonam Gupta protested about feminists: 'They teach women about their rights, they tell them to fight their men about these rights. We teach them how to sacrifice themselves to keep the family together'.¹⁰⁰

VHP image makers solicited heroic sacrifice from Hindu women to protect Ram's homeland in the *Ramjanmabhumi*/Babri Masjid dispute. They emphasised woman's role as motherly protector by focusing on a newly invented image of Ram – the baby Ramalala.¹⁰¹ This focus on a politicised 'woman as mother' to heroes and the nation followed Golwalkar's directives to train children into a submissiveness, both to the family and to the Hindu nation, that was free of any individual aspiration.¹⁰² The women in *Fire* rejected such injunctions. And for Hindutvas, the influence of the West must be resisted in the name of Hindu authenticity. The Indian feminists protesting the 1987 *sati* of young widow Roop Kanwar were scorned as being pawns of the Western cultural imperialists. They were accused of spreading Western immorality, just as were Deepa Mehta and her film *Fire*. Again had come the cry of 'Hinduism in danger'.¹⁰³

The Hindu Right's resistance to Western cultural imports which challenge their version of traditional Indian womanhood can be seen to follow an almost standard pattern as they determinedly enforce their preferred image: the *maya* of spectacle. In February 2000, Deepa Mehta's attempt to make the third part of her *Earth, Fire and Water* trilogy in the holy city of Varanasi was prevented by the destruction of the film's sets by violent VHP activists, an event much publicised. A Shiv Sena member

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 360.

¹⁰⁰ Tanika Sarkar, 'Pragmatics of the Hindu Right: Politics of Women's Organisations' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 July 1999.

¹⁰¹ Tanika Sarkar, 'The Woman as Communal Subject' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 August, 1991, p. 2058.

¹⁰² Tanika Sarkar, 'Heroic Women, Mother Goddesses' in Sarkar & Butalia (eds), op. cit., p. 188.

¹⁰³ Radha Kumar, op. cit., p. 365.

staged a suicide bid by jumping into the Ganges, the film's stars had to be provided with police protection, and the Sangh activists called for a Varanasi *bandh* (general strike).¹⁰⁴ BJP legislator Shyamdeo Ramchaudhary argued that just as the homosexuality portrayed in *Fire* did not exist in Indian lives, nor did the exploitation of widows that he believed was to be depicted in *Water*. He stated it was an insult to shoot 'negative stories, show them to the West and portray the wrong signals'.¹⁰⁵ A state BJP minister also accused Mehta of showing Indian culture in a poor light. Uma Bharati advised Mehta that if she attempted to shoot the film in Madhya Pradesh she would be 'greeted with stones'.¹⁰⁶ Shooting of the film in India was abandoned, again with much publicity.¹⁰⁷

It was not only the films of Deepa Mehta that were the targets of the Hindu Right's ire. Other protests, such as those over the Miss World contest in Bangalore in 1996, and the Shiv Sainik *goondas* yearly attacking of couples on Saint Valentine's Day, hold clearly defined elements of style and rhetoric in common. One element is the violence and aggression, of both word and action, to create a warrior-like image of strength. Another element is the determination to name the parameters of Indian (in reality Hindu) culture, and, central to this, to control the behaviour of women. The third reiterated theme is defensiveness and hostility towards Muslims, and to Western influence. Encompassing all these agendas is the desire to project an admired image, both in India and abroad: a *maya* of national appearance. Danish academic Thomas Blom Hansen, commenting on this quest for respect, finds proof of it in the central stanza of the RSS prayer: 'Grant us such might that no power on earth can ever challenge, such purity of character as would command the respect of the whole world'.¹⁰⁸ Respect, or esteem is the very category of self-hood that had been damaged by India's colonial experience, and upon which the Hindutva parties have drawn in their claim as nationalist saviours. Ironically, their agenda demonstrated glaring

¹⁰⁴ Suparn Verma and Sharat Pradhan, 'Shooting of Deepa Mehta's "Water" Suspended Again', *Rediff On The Net*, 6 February, 2000, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2000/feb/06water.htm>, accessed 19. 7. 2006.

¹⁰⁵ Suparn Verma, 'Interview: Shyamdeo Ramchaudhary', *Rediff On The Net*, 2 February 2000, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2000/feb/02inter3.htm>, accessed 19. 7. 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Neeraj Mishra, 'Maheshwar prepares for Mehta and Water', 11 February 2000, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2000/feb/11water.htm>, accessed 20/07/2001

¹⁰⁷ *Water* was finally filmed in Sri Lanka and released in Canada in 2005. It is due for release in Indian cinemas in July 2006.

¹⁰⁸ Hansen, op. cit., p. 110.

instances of the very danger of delusion against which the sages of their traditions had constantly warned. It was *maya* to be so overwhelmingly concerned with esteem (*man*), insult (*apman*) and pride (*abhiman*) for:

In the language of the Gita, this sense of I-ness has to be overcome and abhorred, is false and inflated pride, conceitful and vain, an exaggerated sense of self-worth, an obstacle in the realisation of true knowledge.¹⁰⁹

The ‘exaggerated sense of self-worth’ is *maya*, a failure to see the individual as an interdependent part of the whole and as they are in reality, in their full complexity. Psychiatrist Prakesh N. Desai, the author of the above words, names the experiences of esteem, insult, and pride as the ‘psychologically most valenced’ and ‘most potent’ in interpersonal relations in India, and those which have been the subject of myriad warnings (and humour) in mythology, cinema, and folklore. That this is so is another example of the attention to the constructed nature of the self, and the inquiry into its nature and meaning, upon which the Indian tradition is so firmly focused, and in which the idea of *maya* plays a primary role. Hindutva ideology would lay claim to be the true tradition of India, yet ignores the message of *maya* that lays the foundation of Hinduism’s acclaimed tolerance and inclusiveness: that all, ultimately, is part of the oneness that is *brahman*. The founders and proclaimers of Hindutva miss that point entirely when they nationalise a philosophy which has at its heart the message that an entity such as ‘nation’ is, after all, in the ephemeral realm of *maya*. *Ramrajya* is a knowledge, a way of being, not a place.

The ‘place’ of women had been a key element of the *Fire* controversy, and women themselves were determined to make their voices heard in response to the film itself and to the arguments that followed in its wake – to have a say in the framing of *their* place in the nation. The protests over the screening of *Fire* had dissolved into silence after the censor board reviewed the film and returned it, uncut, to be shown in Indian cinemas. The ending of physical protest left a space in which could be aired,

¹⁰⁹ Prakash N. Desai, ‘Personality Politics: a Psychoanalytic Perspective’, in Upendra Baxi and Bhikhu Parekh (eds), *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, p. 253.

discursively, other unresolved conflicts of opinion that *Fire* had stimulated: alternative claims to the framing of 'culture' and 'identity'.

Now, general assessments of the film as art and social commentary, which had been neglected during the fight for its on-screen survival, could emerge. The relevance, especially to women, of the issues of cultural identity raised by *Fire* and the anti-*Fire* protests became obvious through the well-contested and long-running nature of the debate that followed. The range of viewpoints revealed the complex nature of such identity debates in India, and it is for that reason they are of interest to this study. Whose idea of 'Indianness' is real?¹¹⁰

Madhu Kishwar, a woman at the centre of Indian feminist and human rights issues, and editor of the progressive women's journal *Manushi*, wrote an article in reference to Mehta which was titled 'Naïve Outpourings of a Self-Hating Indian'.¹¹¹ It contained an emotive argument, which served to reveal again the extent to which *Fire* had tapped into the problematic scenario of Indian sexual politics: more, into Indian identity politics. Kishwar's article took up several themes, all based upon her perception that Deepa Mehta – an 'outsider' – had made a deliberate attack on the Hindu culture and its people.

Kishwar appeared determined to defend the Indian ethos from Westernised interpretations which had, historically, created an Indian 'cultural cringe' since the time of colonial rule. For her, *Fire* was a 'dull and boring' film which had only been attended in India because Indians were so enthralled by its good reception in the West; for the same reason, she believed, reviewers in India were afraid to be critical of it. The success of *Fire* internationally, she added, was in reality because it fed the West with the stereotypical views of Indian women as oppressed and Indian culture as primitive that had been established during British rule. Because of these stereotypes, the West, and Westernized Indians, could rationalize their continuing indoctrination of India with foreign ideas. Kishwar did, however, quote Mehta's

¹¹⁰ It must be noted that this debate was conducted in English language journals and forums, and many correspondents were clearly tertiary educated.

¹¹¹ Madhu Kishwar, 'Naïve Outpourings of a Self-Hating Indian,' in *Manushi* No. 109. Nov. – Dec. 1998, pp. 3 – 14.

stated intention, which had been to make this film purposely to break myths and stereotypes about Indian society. Mehta had said that North American people were ‘amazingly ignorant’ about India, and viewed it through images of poverty, princesses, and the romanticised Raj. She wanted to portray instead ‘the throbbing middle class of India’ which ‘carries the burden of tradition more than anyone else’.¹¹²

Ironically, echoing Sangh parivar rhetoric, Kishwar, who has opposed the methods of Hindu nationalists, wrote that Deepa Mehta had exploited, demeaned, and caricatured Hindu family life, so that it was portrayed in a bad light to India and the world. Although Kishwar thought that *Fire* had even recommended the West, Islam, and varied sexual practices as the solution to India’s problems, her argument did not consider (for one thing) the film’s portrayal of Jatin and Julie, both infatuated with westernisation and its glamour, yet both unsympathetic characters – not drawn as admirable, at all.

Recognising the power of symbol, Kishwar claimed that, in *Fire*, Muslim monuments were metaphors for freedom while, ‘all the scenes associated with Hindu spaces and symbols are sites of oppression’. A counter argument would be that such architecture as the Taj Mahal is more suggestive of India than Islam, and that the Lodhi gardens are simply a popular picnic spot for New Delhi families. Kishwar’s viewpoint, *maya*-like, is not invalid, but is limited in vision. She argues that the film’s characters are drawn ‘as stereotypes of some or the other sexual kink’ when they are, more truly, indicative of individuals, not homogenous in their temperaments, who are each struggling for expression and fulfilment.

Kishwar is herself more guilty of stereotyping when she exaggeratedly claims that the film recommended lesbianism ‘as a universal antidote to bad marriage’; she also makes overstated claims for the Indian culture’s tolerance of homosexuality, a view vehemently opposed in later *Manushi* correspondence. In another mirror image of the Shiv Sena statement that all Indian women would turn to homosexuality after seeing

¹¹² Deepa Mehta interview in *The Asian Age*, 9 February 1997, quoted in Madhu Kishwar, *ibid.*, p.1 3.

the film, Kishwar expressed her concern that after *Fire*, women would be inhibited in showing their affection for other women at all. Altogether, she casts a veil of bad intention towards India over Deepa Mehta's film. This is indicated in her concluding view on Mehta, a comment that only people who understood Hindu tradition should engage in trying to reform its culture – not 'those who descend on us as attacking outsiders'. Even though Mehta was born and educated in India, Kishwar firmly explained her own version of middle class Indian life, claiming it was very different to that portrayed in *Fire*. It appears from this example that Kishwar herself wanted to stereotype Indians, framing their identity on her own terms.

Kishwar's article prompted an outburst of replies, both to *Manushi* and on South Asian Women's Network (SAWNET), a large website popular with Non-Resident Indians (NRIs). Eight of these letters were published in *Manushi* of June 1999. Indicating again (as *Fire* had done) that 'culture' and 'identity' are not monolithic constructs; there was both agreement and disagreement with Kishwar's assessment that Deepa Mehta had a 'superficial understanding of the traditional Indian woman's psychology and sexuality'.¹¹³

One correspondent supported Kishwar's view that 'Macaulay's children hate India.'¹¹⁴ She expresses many Indians' ongoing fear of cultural appropriation, for by 'Macaulay's children', itself a symbolic framing, she depicts the educated and westernised Indians such as Mehta.¹¹⁵ Still, that writer and others agreed that Kishwar had underestimated the problems faced by homosexuals in India, and wondered, too, why she had felt qualified to be the arbiter of Indian tradition.¹¹⁶

There were certainly grounds for objecting to the manner in which Kishwar had denigrated Mehta and tried to enforce her own version of censorship by dictating

¹¹³ Anu, from SAWNET in *Manushi* 112, May-June 1999, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Babington Macaulay in his 1835 'Minute on Education' for India, had advised forming 'a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect' – in other words, a class of 'brown Englishmen'. See Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 5th edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 215.

¹¹⁵ Shreya Kishore, in *Manushi* 112, May-June 1999, p. 4

¹¹⁶ Michael Schied, *ibid.*, p. 6.

cultural ‘truth’. Manjusree, from SAWNET, believed Kishwar had ‘a personal axe to grind’ in this ‘interminable harangue against Deepa Mehta’; and that Kishwar’s reality was ‘very different from the reality checks of others of us who also know India’¹¹⁷ – a true recognition of the diverse world that is *maya*. Another writer felt that Kishwar’s article disproportionately glorified Indian traditions while denouncing western ideas. This writer, Shibani, claimed that the film did depict ‘authentic middle class backgrounds’ and that the message it conveyed was enough of a shock to have forced people to think.¹¹⁸ Yet another correspondent critical of Kishwar’s article stated that no-one she knew had perceived *Fire* as undermining Hinduism or Indian culture; moreover, she found the suggestion by Kishwar that Muslim spaces were favoured in the film was both disturbing and dangerously provocative.¹¹⁹ Undoubtedly, she referred to the politically generated communal friction of the 1990s.

Madhu Kishwar responded to both criticism and agreement by repeating that the English-educated elite in India (of which she is one) were intellectually enslaved to the West.¹²⁰ Kishwar’s dislike of *Fire* could be traced to a larger abhorrence: that of Western influence and of any Indians tainted by it. Yet another issue of *Manushi* relayed fervent responses to the debate,¹²¹ which now had developed into a forum for assessing the cultural position of diaspora Indians. One correspondent explained that there now appeared to be three kinds of feminists involved – Indian feminists, white feminists (with neo-imperial agendas), and diaspora feminists. An insight into that difference in feminist groups, their varied background and motivations, goes some way to understanding Madhu Kishwar’s aggression towards ‘Westernised’ feminists.

Following Independence, Indian women’s movements, which had earlier directed their efforts to the cause of freedom from British rule, were reinvigorated by the economic difficulties of the 1970s,¹²² and by the worldwide blossoming of the

¹¹⁷ Manjusree, *ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ Shibani, *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹⁹ Ruby Ghuznavi, *ibid.*, p. 6.

¹²⁰ M. Kishwar, *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹²¹ *Manushi* 114, Sept-Oct. 1999.

¹²² Droughts, increased oil prices, growing unemployment, inflation, and the economic drain from the Bangladesh war led to strikes and protests, and women’s groups formed solidarity to take action in the

feminist movement. Their cause often being directed towards reform of social structures and cultural practices, emphasis on sexuality and power relations between men and women was not as pressing an issue as it was for Western feminists. Rather, the latter's push at international conferences for Indian women to be more assertive on those fronts was seen by the more traditionalist groups to be a new attempt to impose, yet again, the values of Western 'cultural imperialists'.¹²³ Again, this attempted achievement was claimed to be the result of targeting India's women, framing their adherence to 'traditionalism' as inferior to the 'modernity' of Western women.¹²⁴ It was envisaged that this new colonialism of the Western feminists was aided by the 'elite' urban Indian women who shared their values.

For that reason of renewed cultural appropriation, the question of what constituted Indian culture had also extended to who belonged in Indian culture, and who had a right to speak about it. Correspondents expressed much indignation that Kishwar seemed to deny the rights of NRIs on that issue. The *Manushi* letters demonstrated that the ripples from the *Fire* debate had spread far from their source to encompass questions of identity and belonging, cultural ownership or appropriation, sexual choice and marriage, and what constituted 'tradition' in the Indian context. Even India's place in the larger world community had become acknowledged as an important aspect of the debate. Each of those questions was met with contesting images, in recognition of the importance of claiming the legitimising power of framed (formed and upheld) identities. The words of media analyst Rima Bannerji exemplify that understanding. Bannerji stressed the importance of a lesbian relationship being portrayed in a film intended for a mainstream audience, writing that *Fire*:

implicitly brings up the legitimacy of lesbianism as another model of relationship outside of heterosexual coupling, another mode of female

general class movement of the time. Moreover, a significant government report (*Towards Equality*) on the status of women since Independence found that despite statutory changes written in the new Constitution to advantage women, they were actually worse off than before Independence. See Jana Matson Everett, *Women and Social Change in India*, Heritage Publishers, New Delhi, 1979, p. 196; Leslie J. Calman, *Toward Empowerment*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1992, p. 25; Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, *Daughters of Independence*, Zed Books, London, 1986, p. 4.

¹²³ R. Kumar, 'The Indian Feminist Movement' in V. Moghadam (ed.), *Identity Politics and Women*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1994, p. 284.

¹²⁴ Liddle and Joshi, op. cit., p. 239.

identity outside of prevailing notions of femininity, and the visibility of lesbian issues lifted out of their position of marginality vis-à-vis the mainstream. It is not a call for validation from the centre. Rather, heterogeneous representations are a necessary feature of living in a democracy ... especially in media-saturated societies where representation in public forums is of increasing importance for establishing an awareness of diversity.¹²⁵

That desire for recognition of diversity was echoed by other women specifically identifying themselves as South Asian lesbians, who expressed approval of the increased public discussion on lesbianism that was facilitated by *Fire*, describing their previous fear that, under Shiv Sena influence, ‘no differences would be tolerated.’¹²⁶ The articulation of lesbian identity is so vital, these writers contended, because the lack of it results in isolation and suicides – sad proof of the real effect of ‘labelling’. Yet the discussion became even more complex when the same article contained the criticism that the focus on the explicitly lesbian issues of the film had been hijacked by feminist protests. Feminists had complained that the Shiv Sena did not protest sexual violence against women, or obscenity in Hindi films, yet would not accept lesbianism as part of ‘Indian culture’. In making this accusation, feminists, it was claimed, were heedlessly associating lesbianism with deviant sexual acts such as rape or incest.¹²⁷

No-one voiced disagreement that it had been ‘the intimate gaze cast on the domestic scene’¹²⁸ that had radically disturbed some viewers with its reframing of family relations. Certainly, *Fire* did not fit the pattern or follow the moral order that is normally expected by the audiences of Hindi films, for whom kinship obligations and an acquiescence to fate denote ‘goodness’ in films that plainly delineate right from wrong.¹²⁹ The greatest act of resistance to this accepted order was not, in that case,

¹²⁵ Rima Bannerji, ‘Still on Fire’, *Mamushi* 113, July-August 1999, p. 18.

¹²⁶ Gomathy and Bima, ‘Fire, Sparks and Smouldering Ashes’ in *Women in Action* (1:1999), <http://www.isiswomen.org/wia/wia199/sex00005.html>, accessed 12/9/2001.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Bannerji, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹²⁹ Rosie Thomas, ‘Melodrama and the Negotiation of Reality’ in C. Breckenridge (ed.), *Consuming Modernity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1995, p. 165.

that these women made love together within the ‘heteropatriarchal, Great Indian Joint Family set-up’, but that they walked out of it altogether.¹³⁰ Following that definitive statement, further issues relevant to the broader cultural sphere appeared for discussion too.

Carol Upadhyia, a Western anthropologist resident in India, wrote in the *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)* that *Fire* had provided a perfect opportunity to initiate public debate on several issues crucial to the current seizing of cultural space by the forces of the Hindu Right, such as ‘control over education and the media; the role of the state in defining and controlling the zones of public and private’, for she warned that otherwise there as ‘a danger that the right will succeed in defining the terrain of Indian culture in such a way that it cannot be contested except on their own terms’.¹³¹ Upadhyia was warning, then, of *maya*: that one image of society would eclipse the multiple realities that exist. That narrow view was important to resist, she emphasised, as the right to define one’s sexuality and to choose a relationship based on equality rather than domination underpins many other rights, such as those of inheritance, access to employment, healthcare and education, and freedom from domestic violence and sexual harassment.¹³²

In reply, feminist academics Mary John and Tejaswini Niranjana claimed that by targeting women’s sexuality as underlying ‘patriarchy’, both Mehta and Upadhyia had mirrored the Hindu Right’s construction of Indian culture.¹³³ Furthermore, adding class issues to the *Fire* identity forum, they attacked what they saw as the film’s class-caste prejudices – judging that the servant is made to appear comical, while the emergent feminist self is ‘coded as upper caste and middle class’¹³⁴. These prejudices were echoed, they wrote, in the language used by newspapers to defame the Mahila Aghadi members protesting against *Fire*, which used words such as ‘stupid and

¹³⁰ Gomathy and Bima, op. cit.

¹³¹ Carol Upadhyia, ‘Set This House on Fire’ in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 December, 1998, p. 3176.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Mary E. John and Tejaswini Niranjana, ‘Mirror Politics: “Fire”, Hindutva and Indian Culture’, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 March, 1999, p. 581-585.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

ignorant', 'lumpen' and 'lunatic' to describe the protesters.¹³⁵ These writers also joined in the criticism of 'outside forces' having any opinion of, or contribution towards, Indian culture, placing both Mehta and Upadhyaya in this 'outsider' category. Upadhyaya replied with 'Counter Fire', drawing attention to the constantly recurring theme of 'the outsider', and criticising the 'nativism' of John and Niranjana.¹³⁶ Why should India not be compared to any other place, she asked?

The *EPW* exchanges had exposed different approaches towards analyses of *Fire*. Now on that forum New Delhi law professor Ratna Kapur observed that '[t]he Hindu right by protesting the film is seeking to rescue Indian tradition from the very contamination that Mehta contends has been a liberating force'.¹³⁷ Deepa Mehta had said that the cultural transformation of India was being fostered by 'the new openness' due to globalisation,¹³⁸ but it is clear some critics dispute that those changes were always of benefit – Madhu Kishwar, for example.

Kapur's positive observation about *Fire* was that it depicted female sexual pleasure, and that that was a welcome change from the 'unabated representation' of sexual violence towards females in Hindi cinema. Moreover, the women in *Fire* represented female agency, for Sita took positive charge of her own fate, strongly influenced that of Radha, and ultimately changed the lives of the whole family. Ashok's image of a big happy joint family was *maya*, an illusion; instead, for Kapur, so many varieties of experience were happening within this one family that *Fire* represented the confusing, contradictory, and uneven nature of culture.

She pointed to the many subversive moments in the film's subplots. These challenged the rather simplistic binary positions, so limiting themselves, which had been suggested in John and Niranjana's essay:

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Carol Upadhyaya, 'Counter Fire', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 May 1999, p. 1299.

¹³⁷ Ratna Kapur, 'Cultural Politics of Fire', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28 May 1999, p. 1297.

¹³⁸ John and Niranjana, op. cit., p. 581.

... the oppositions between sexual choice and gender oppression, the oppressed insider versus the liberated outsider, static Indian culture as opposed to the transformative and free culture of the west.¹³⁹

Freedom of speech would allow a better view of the realities of Indian society than would that *maya* of oppositional frames. Implicit in the struggle for freedom of speech and cultural expression was an ideological struggle: who counted as part of Indian culture and who would be excluded, deemed ‘outsiders’? Kapur concluded that because *Fire* attempted to show the ‘dynamism and fluidity’ of culture, to challenge and destabilise the fixed notion of culture that was being promoted by the Hindu right, it was a threat to their position, to their story, and to their version of truth.¹⁴⁰

Deepa Mehta had, like Ratna Kapur, indicated that interpretation was a central element in creating reality. She wanted to show that reality is what we perceive it to be. For, she explained:

[i]t’s that perception, of an identity, of what’s been given to women, how they clothe them, metaphorically, that plays a large part in the way we treat women.¹⁴¹

That statement by *Fire*’s director encapsulates the essence of the conflicting and complex layers of argument, an ‘Indra’s net’ of attitudes and beliefs, which were displayed through the women’s essays, letters, and interviews in *Manushi*, *EPW*, and other English language journals and forums. *Fire* and its aftermath had illuminated many contested aspects within the frame of ‘identity’ in both the present and the past: the place of tradition in a changing world, notions of women’s roles, the family, ‘outsiders’, and the interface of cultural, sexual and political power. Each of those images are social constructs, the limited *maya* of name and form.

¹³⁹ Kapur, op. cit., p. 1298.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 1299.

¹⁴¹ Deepa Mehta interview by Ginu Kamani, *Trikoni Magazine Archives*, Oct. 1977, San Francisco Bay, <http://www.trikone.org/magazine/archives/1997/oct97.htm>, accessed 20/7/2001.

Maya is the creation of frames of reference, which are essential as definitions and explanations needed to function in the world, but equally, full of divisive and deceptive potential. When *maya* is remembered, the deceptive use of naming and framing – or even its narrow vision – is limited by a recognition of the possibilities and alternative realities outside the frame.

Maya is also the use of symbol, which calls attention to the framed reality. The construction of woman as mother of the nation has been a powerful symbol in a country noted for thinking in ‘icons and images’ and for favouring ‘the presence and predominance...of the symbolical’.¹⁴² *Fire* had portrayed and inverted many iconic Hindu symbols and in doing so, called for a re-examination of their meaning for India in the late twentieth century world. Those creating (and those seeking) identity orientation commonly use mythological/religious concepts to mark tradition and find stability through times of social transformation. For that reason, the use of symbolism – *maya* – was foundational to Hindutva’s political success and popular support. Images of a masculine, active national persona, capable of defending its pure women and sacred land exactly as Lord Rama had done, held just as much importance at the twentieth century’s end as at its beginning, when those same images refuted British symbolic stamping of Indian innate femininity and unworldly fatalism.

In Hindutva’s clearly framed image of the Indian state the individual must merge into a collective conformity of will and ethos, and into a homogenised and pragmatic form of Hindu religion that meets the aspirational needs of the modernising and growing middle class and its desire for acceptance (and admiration) in the wider global community.¹⁴³ But the human community is non-homogenous, and choices, not static conformity, are the hallmark of the ‘individuality’ privileged by modernity.

Deepa Mehta had wanted to show people the choices humans can make, that limits are *maya*, illusory. Her film expressed the grief that can come from expectations of

¹⁴² Ronald B. Inden, op. cit., p. 127. Here, Inden is writing of the Romantic, idealist view of India which, understandable on its own terms of reference, has often been hijacked to imagine the Hindu mind as irrational and unscientific in its lack of objectivity. ‘Romantics’ viewed India as the exotic east, which still held the emotion and mystery which was lost to the pragmatic, industrialised west.

¹⁴³ Thomas Blom Hansen, op. cit., pp. 230 – 234.

rigid cultural conformity in a fluid and heterogeneous world. Yet she portrayed the traditional and the modern world existing side by side, and intimated that choices are introduced by this, too, in recognition of the fact that:

... modernity not only makes new identities possible, it does not leave older ones alone. Indeed, identities which existed in a different mode earlier undergo a crucial though often undeclared transformation, becoming old identities of a new type.¹⁴⁴

The 'identities' of late twentieth century India were not undergoing 'undeclared transformation', but one that was vociferously disputed in the public arena. The *maya* of framing, of creating realities, was hotly disputed in *Fire* and in its wake, with remembrance of Western depictions of India, both past and present, still smouldering. The many voices clamouring to have their stories heard held an awareness that political, cultural and, at times, even physical survival was at stake, for the reward of the winning story-teller is, at least temporarily, the power to shape the relative reality that is the *maya* of the world.

¹⁴⁴ Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Religion, Politics and Modernity', in Upendra Baxi and Bhikhu Parekh (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 300.

CONCLUSION

The concept of *maya* comprises a field of ideas which has been surveyed in the thesis in order to question the relevance and application of this concept in modern India. Apart from recounting and analysing *maya*'s complex meaning, its role in Indian cultural formation and expression, both past and present, has been illustrated as a central aspect of the argument concerning its enduring value. It is apparent that *maya* is not only a perspective on the nature of reality and truth, which has been important throughout India's cultural history, but that, more generally, it is a useful vantage point for historical assessment on two counts. Firstly, from its place as a locus of philosophical conflict within competing world views, a study of *maya* becomes a window on historical change: specifically, for the purpose of this thesis, on aspects of the modernising thought which accompanied Western imperialism on the subcontinent. Secondly, in its fuller epistemological significance, *maya* provides a fund of meaning and perspective not just on history itself but, more particularly, on such often-debated terms as 'nation' and 'identity'. *Maya* remains, therefore, as it has been from its earliest development, an informative and useful way of viewing the world and the place of humanity within it.

The thesis has demonstrated that from its role as a foundational motif in Vedic mythologies, as the 'magical' nature of creation, *maya* teaching evolved through later philosophical and religious systems, becoming for them a focal – even a defining – principle. As all aspects of Indian life were inseparable from 'religious' ideas, these were extant in artistic expression, where daily life and the world of the divine found form as one. Indeed, that realisation of the ultimate oneness of sacred and profane was the higher purpose of art and its symbols, which simultaneously celebrated and unveiled the world as *maya*. The aesthetic standards that developed in response to this worldview were applied throughout the canon of Indian art and, it has been shown, can be found to have persisted in the new art form of a new era – twentieth century cinema. In that potently influential genre of mass communication where pleasure and politics, history and fantasy combine, the idea of *maya* is an effective allegorical

emblem for film-maker, viewer, or critic alike. That is true no matter whether the term is directly employed, is subsumed in aesthetic suggestion or, in its purposeful analytical use, enhances narrative completion and understanding.¹ Furthermore, *maya* is an idea which can provide a lodestar for truth and morality in both the personal and public spheres as attested, for instance, in the films of Raj Kapoor and the life expression of Mahatma Gandhi. *Maya* is of unabated relevance despite the ever-changing climate of world thought, which has been predominated in recent centuries by the temporally progressive secular rationalism of modernity. That reasoning, with its accompanying laudation of individual and nation, presented notions of certainty, definitiveness, and an idolatry of materialism which opposed the inclusive, ever-changing, and vitality-charged nature of life that *maya* teaching sets out.

It has been shown earlier that it is inadequate to isolate any one meaning, or word, for the field of theory which the word *maya* encapsulates; to attempt to frame it in a single appellation, as so often has been done, is to misunderstand its full import. The intention here has not been, specifically, to contend with the many scholars, over centuries, who have explored the philosophical and linguistic content of the word. Yet it has been essential for the argument in this thesis that the widest understanding of *maya* be grasped so that its current significance is also understood. In summary, it is a seemingly paradoxical term, in one sense implying deceptive limitation and separation while, conversely, *mayavada* (*maya* teaching) is that of the limitless nature of things: all-inclusion. Ultimately, as stated previously, *maya* offers a moral perspective on elements of human behaviour such as greed, cruelty, deception, and on truth itself, through that message of the essential unity of creation. Because of the equation of truth with unity, the constructed (and divisive) nature of such terms as 'nation' becomes more apparent, with an accompanying clarity thrown on politically motivated fabrications of appearance: or, in current terminology, of 'spin'.²

It has been noted early in the thesis that as a central component of Indian cosmology, *maya* is enmeshed with other important terms such as *dharma*, *brahman*,

¹ *Vaanaprastham* exemplifies the latter use of *maya*. The film is more fully understood when the cultural and philosophical underpinnings are identified.

² There is, in fact, a link with the idea of '*maya*' and 'spin' as both are associated with the creation of a web of obfuscation.

and *samsara*, and the consequent ideas of cyclical time and reincarnation. *Maya* is the key to the standards of Indian aesthetics, *rasa* its handmaiden, symbol its counterpart. As a description of the nature of life, *maya* is a veiled window on an ever-changing world that is at once enchanting, terrible, and illusory; it is the play (*lila*) and power (*shakti*) of *brahman* that neverendingly unfolds. In more contemporary judgements, *maya* is the ‘fallback’ philosophy when worldly affairs go badly.³ It remains, as described previously, an element of condemnatory views of India as ‘fatalistic’, as ‘mystical’ – a vision which has played, and continues to play, a major role in images of Indian identity.

In further assessment, the idea of *maya* may be classed as a mythological view of the world due to the perspective it offers on time and space: that they represent created boundaries which reveal only partial truth. Yet, answering any criticism of *maya* as an ‘unworldly, irrational idea’, its import accords with scientific evidence on the nature of reality, as, when all its aspects are analysed, it must be acknowledged to accord with reasoned thought in general. Moreover, the worldview of *maya* (while allowing different *gradings* of reality⁴) sanctions as equally valid realities such ‘immaterial’ experiences as dreams, visions, and emotions, as well as the complexity inherent in the possibility of multiple and competing truths. That vision acknowledges the (apparently) contradictory nature of things, ultimately opposing such schisms as ‘God and Satan’, ‘yesterday and tomorrow’, even ‘male and female’. It could be argued that it is a parallel to post-modernism, or that it is nihilistic, but both those comparisons fail when the whole idea of *maya*, with its complement in *brahman*, is realised. The notion of *brahman* offers an ultimate truth that refutes postmodern groundlessness and nihilistic emptiness. *Maya/brahman* posits a world charged with vitality, not an ‘unworldly’ wraithlike and meaningless existence. Sanskrit scholar Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty supports that idea of *maya*’s positive worth, writing that:

³ Lawyer and historian Pavan K. Varma writes that ‘If a person is a winner, he is a successful practitioner in the world of maya; if he is a loser, he can console himself that his loss did not, ab initio, have any real value’. Pavan K. Varma, *Being Indian*, Viking, New Delhi, 2004, p. 101.

⁴ For a broad explanation of Indian and Western assessments of reality see Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusions and Other Realities*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, pp. 114 – 126.

... *maya* offers a balm for our ontological wounds; when it has emptied our material world, *maya* rushes into our newly created metaphysical vacuum and assures us of the truth, and simultaneously the beauty, of our felt but unseen worlds.⁵

But, as attested to previously, it was precisely the idea of these intuited worlds, realities ‘felt but unseen’, that appeared to be at odds with the ideal of rational thought as presented in the hegemony of modernity. It has been explained in Chapter 1 that *maya* as a concept had begun with Vedic notions of creation: that an inexplicable origin, neither being nor non-being, ushered forth all the materials of the universe and its unseen heavens and the gods. The creation itself, the act of creating, and the power of creating were all *maya*, the ‘magical’ division of the void, and its consequent appearance as form. But the manifestations of *maya* were not stable; they changed form, appeared and disappeared. In summary, *maya* was not the ultimate truth of existence, but only its sign and display.

As has been already established, *maya* had long held a primary role in Indian thought. The contemplatives of ancient India sought to understand their place in this universe, and knew that they must realise the secret of *maya*: that the appearance of things is not intrinsic reality. Many branches of Indian religious expression developed with the aim of attaining this realisation. *Maya* as concept was defined in varying terms, its interpretation leading to philosophical diversity over the nature of the world’s reality, and of the Absolute. Yet the consensus was that, whether in *bhakti* desire or Buddhist enlightenment, whether *maya* was gross materialism or God’s mysterious play, its nature must be recognised before truth could be realised. *Maya* was both truth and deceit: the means to the answers as well as the puzzle. It was, in other words, the principle of mediation, and has been described by philosopher T. R. V. Murti as:

⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

a device to reconcile God's transcendence with his immanence – what he is in himself and the manner in which he chooses to reveal himself ... The lower is neither identical with nor different from the higher, the absolute.⁶

The means to accomplish the goal of vanquishing *maya*'s 'false vision' and attaining liberation (*moksha* or *mukti*) were, as the thesis has demonstrated, incorporated into many teachings and aspects of life, and made material through the arts of architecture, sculpture, music, dance, theatre, decoration, storytelling – in fact, all human endeavour. It was of primary importance, for *jnana* and *vidya*, the Sanskrit terms for 'knowledge', meant nothing less than knowledge of the true self, of the Absolute, of the nature of reality.⁷ The arts carried the mythologies and the knowledge of the seers and storytellers throughout the land, absorbing and adapting to regional and incoming ideas. In this way, the idea of *maya* and all its implications became a part of the social fabric, the ever adapting and variant but still 'collective' consciousness of the subcontinental realm.

The intention of the thesis has been to explore how that understanding of *maya* has been perceived as an element of Indian cultural identity, and whether that perception has altered through the time of 'modernity'. A powerful influence for change in thought, industry, and social practice which marked the entrance of the current era arrived in the form of the British who, as traders, scholars, evangelists, and ultimately as imperialists, like 'new brooms' simultaneously swept the dust off the past and redirected India to a modern future. It is now well established that many scholars found Indian civilisation enthralling, but influential English reformers declared it heathen and benighted,⁸ the defining opposite of their own scientific, rational, and

⁶ T. R. V. Murti, 'The World and the Individual in Indian Thought' in Charles Moore (ed.), *The Indian Mind*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1967, p. 337.

⁷ See Klaus Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, 2nd edition, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994, pp. 599, 612.

⁸ Early Indologists such as Sir William Jones (1746 – 94), Thomas Colebrooke (1765 – 1837), Sanskritist Max Muller, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860), and Bengali Governor Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779 – 1859) were amongst those who promoted, to Europe, the value of Indian thought; the work of these early orientalist also fed the 'romanticist' view of India as a place of exoticism and mystery. British 'reformers' of India included Evangelicals such as William Wilberforce and East India Company Chairman Charles Grant, and Utilitarian reformers such as James Mill, author of the influential *History of British India*. See, for instance, Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India*, Hurst & Co.,

moral society. Through that disparaging lens the foreign economic and political hegemony in India was justified as a necessary civilising mission. India's elite was enlisted to an education in the mores of European knowledge, a central component of which was the idea of progress, of nation and individual alike. To be Westernised was to be 'advanced': a judgement in one word. That stipulation placed the Indian people in the confronting situation of having to change or reject many aspects of their own civilisation in order to aspire to the idea of advancement – to modernity.

The reality of *maya* did not fit with the reality of modernity. The world as an 'unreal' illusion, the deceptive 'mystical' powers of 'charlatans' such as magicians (*mayavin*) or the miracle-making *sadhu*, the endless circular time of *samsara* which privileged mythology over the particulars of history, the 'fatalism' of *karma* and the perceived changelessness of *dharma*-bound society, the myriad names and forms (let alone the multiple arms and heads) of Indian gods; all these anathemas to modernity were associations of *maya* as a conceptual vision of reality. For the British, this perception equated to Indian treachery, unreliability, slothfulness, and non-rationality. It is little wonder that, as one scholar observes, '*Maya*, in spite of its metaphysical use, remains a mildly pejorative term'.⁹ For *maya* has been both exoticised and oversimplified by its translation as 'illusion', and endowed with an aura of a navel-gazing foolishness. Hence, the possibly controversial and, it could be said, *unfashionable* sense of *maya* in the pragmatic modern world distinguishes the idea by marginalising it. One expositor sums up this image and its history by stating that *maya* is:

... a terribly misunderstood word, and perhaps most responsible for the popular image of India in the West as being a country that is other-worldly. It is also a grim commentary on the power of colonial structures in determining the future image of subject cultures. Western scholars in the 19th century hastily translated the word as 'illusion' and now it will not shake off that connotation. Even worse, the English-educated section of

London, 2000, pp. 46 – 47 and passim; Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, Routledge, London, 1999, passim; E. Sreedharan, *A Textbook of Historiography*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 386 – 425.
⁹ Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition*, Rider and Co., London, 1975, p. 225.

Indians have internalised this word as ‘illusion’ because that is what the respected centres of learning of the west labelled it ...¹⁰

In recognition of that understanding, Indian philosopher Ruth Reyna had written her book on *maya* ‘especially ... to clarify the erroneous notion held by Western and by some Eastern writers that *maya* means “illusion” in the sense of “imagination”, or “hallucination.”’¹¹ Even the acclaimed Sanskritist M. Monier Williams has been noted as separating out the ‘earlier’ and ‘later’ interpretations of *maya* (in brief, to ‘magic’ and metaphysical ‘illusion’ respectively),¹² seemingly not recognising the possibility of their concurrence and therefore their larger field of meaning as a complete concept. Journalist Sasthi Brata complains of a similar misapprehension in translation. Commenting on a catalogue at an Indian art exhibition in London, he found that some key words, including *maya*, had been ‘inadequately translated’ into English; he concluded that the problem is ‘the lack of conceptual equivalents between the two different “perceptions” about the universe ...’¹³ These misapprehensions can imply that *maya* is no more than the *mohamaya* of delusion, the ‘unworldly’ outlook of a ‘mystical’ nation.

The thesis has demonstrated that *maya* is much more than that. Furthermore, as attested by its use in films, in exchanges of political accusations – and even as a title for theme parks – *maya* remains a meaningful term in civil parlance, despite any changing conventions of thought that have occurred in keeping with the era of secular modernity. Yet *maya*, although marked in the Western world and ‘fashionable’ India as part of a ‘religious’ ideology, should not be included as oppositional to the notion of ‘secular’ (which is defined as ‘not religious, sacred or spiritual’¹⁴). To do so is not only wrong because *maya* is an idea supported by logic and science as well as by intuition; it is also wrong because it would continue to relegate *maya* and other potent

¹⁰ Rohit Arya, ‘Maya’, *indiyogi.com*, <http://www.indiyogi.com/content/glossary/viewgloss.asp?id=32>, accessed 16.7.06.

¹¹ Ruth Reyna, *The Concept of Maya: From the Vedas to the Twentieth Century*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962, p. ix.

¹² J. Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, Mouton & Co., the Hague, 1965, p. 164.

¹³ Sasthi Brata, *India*, William Morrow and Company, New York, 1985, p. 168.

¹⁴ *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 10th revised edition, Judy Pearsall (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 1295.

philosophical ideas to the marginal region of the 'private', 'mystical', and 'apolitical', which is itself a power play in the 'politics of knowledge'.¹⁵

The place of secularism in the 'politics of knowledge' is that it is an important aspect of the invention of a modern Indian self-image. The recognition of that fact is expressed by journalist Ruchir Joshi, writing of the 'brilliant insight' in Mukul Kesarvan's book *Secular Common Sense*, which is that:

... the urban middle class in India was never really 'secular', it only embraced 'secularism' because that was the fashionable and useful thing to do in freshly independent India. The idea of secularism and subcontinental multi-ethnicity were the garments in which the new Indian state could strut down the international ramp.¹⁶

Avid to be recognised as modern (and hence capable of maintaining a united nation state) in order to throw off the shackles of imperialism and to partake in the world's advances, many Indians both before and since the post-independence time of the avowedly secular Nehru have ascribed to that which political anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen has called an 'alleged hyper-rationalism'.¹⁷ Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty emphasises the same theme, writing that:

This strong spirit of hostility between the rational and the affective, or between reason and emotion, characteristic of our colonial hyperrationalism, has generally afflicted Indian Marxist historians' attempt to understand the place of the religious in Indian public and political life. What else is this but an unreflexive (re)statement of the struggle of the Enlightenment with superstition?¹⁸

¹⁵ See Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 1 and passim.

¹⁶ Ruchir Joshi, 'Cliches Come Free' in *OutlookIndia Magazine*, <http://www.outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20031124&fname=HRuchir+Joshi+...> accessed 19.7.2006.

¹⁷ Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999, p. 55.

¹⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002, p. 26.

The ‘never really secular’ of Rushir Joshi’s thought and the ‘allegedness’ (of hyper-rationalism) of Hansen’s are explained by fellow political scientist Partha Chatterjee, who has described the anticolonial resistance of the Indian middle classes as ‘creation of an “inner” spiritual, culturally sovereign realm closed off from the colonial state – while competing along western standards in the “outer” realm of politics and economy’.¹⁹ The romanticised, ‘orientalised’ version of India identified by post-colonial scholarship as responsible for the humiliating image of Indians in the regard of the ‘modern’ West, and often in Indians’ own regard, is too often used, now, in refutation of particulars of the national culture (especially in the views of ‘outsiders’) which it would be more advantageous to examine. That denial is typified on the one hand by a downplaying of India’s religious culture, and on the other hand by valorising its symbols as emblems of a unique national wealth. In a reversal – or perversion – of Said’s orientalism, it is now often a matter of suspicion when ‘outsiders’ broach India with cultural, social, or ‘spiritual’ inquiry or comment, as has been demonstrated in the claims on Indian identity made during the *Fire* debates.²⁰ Yet an understanding of ideas such as *maya*, as the thesis has shown, both validates the logic of Indian philosophy and clarifies the propaganda agenda of those, like the Sangh Parivar, who turn it to political ends.

For those reasons of clarification, for the broader historical context that an understanding of *maya* allows, throughout the thesis the idea has been observed, and has itself been used to analyse, different aspects of life, of culture, and of time. *Maya* can be seen to hold varied and valued applications and meanings, both obvious and subtle, which have been elucidated through India’s classical literature and expressed materially through art, including the contemporary art of cinema. As morality-marker, as allusion to the multi-layered, shifting, and deceptive nature of selfhood and of belief, and as motivation for the aesthetic component of narrative structures, emotional emphasis, and devotional imagery, *maya* and its worldview continue to be

¹⁹ Thomas Blom Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

²⁰ A recent article, written by an Australian of Indian descent in review of another Australian novelist’s book which was set in India, denounced it as a narrative ‘riddled with self-conscious pseudo-spiritual mumbo-jumbo’ which ‘perpetuates the Orientalist stereotype of India as an exotic land of piety and horror’. Sunil Badami, in ‘Spectrum’ p. 32, *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 8 – 9, 2006. Regardless of the truth of the review, it stands as an example of a style of criticism of non-Indians’ work about India, by those regarding themselves as speaking from a privileged ‘insider’ position.

a valued aspect of expression in films. The films are themselves emanations of their cultural contexts, ranging from India's newly independent years to its latest place on the 'globalised' world stage.

Maya, for Gandhi, was worldliness without the intrinsic reality he sought. It was a distraction from the search for personal truth and that of the nation in its journey to independence. Yet Gandhi applied his own art of *maya*, through his creation of appearances to project a self continually renewed and to create a re-imagined selfhood for India. An interpretation of philosopher Margaret Chatterjee's account of Gandhi can reveal his innate affinity for *maya* teaching, for she claims he had a 'dislike [for] all forms of compartmentalisation, whether it be among the gifts and powers which men possess in their inner being, among the social, economic, political, and religious dimensions of life, or as indicated by any of the labels which mark off one man from another'.²¹

Similarly, compartmentalisation and constructions of self and difference were the ascendant theme, the *maya* of identity, throughout the film *Fire* and its aftermath. While both men's and women's roles – even the role of the servant as individual – were newly interrogated, political protests and cultural debates lit up the artifice of identity framing. Hindu nationalists had created their own *maya*, or appearance, of Indian identity by selecting and embellishing elements of Indian history and Hindu mythology (such as the muscular Hanuman and the martial Ram). But for all the nationalists' acclamations of Hinduism, they ignored the central tenet of *maya*, with its sense of inclusiveness so often hailed in praise of Indian tolerance.²² Multiplicity-within-unity did not seem to be the BJP's ideal for India, but rather a uniformity-within-unity. In that way they sought to enforce an image of India as a superior nation with a glorious past and an immanently glorious future.²³ *Maya* is the symbolic art

²¹ Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi's Religious Thought*, Macmillan, London, 1983, p. 121.

²² Journalist Pranay Gupte mentions this inclusive characteristic of Hinduism (also noted by British reformers and condemned as swamp-like stagnation) when writing of Sikh separatists. Gupte writes that the Khalistanis 'were aware of Hinduism's great *modus operandi* – triumph not by coercion but by co-option; Hinduism assimilated and absorbed, it did not convert by the sword as Islam did'. Pranay Gupte, *India: The Challenge of Change*, Methuen, London, 1989, p. 80.

²³ This vision of India's once and future glory has been heavily promoted through Indian nationalists, who had based their claims of past greatness, ironically, on the praise of English Orientalists such as William Jones, and later on the promotion of Indian thought by the admired arbitrator of East and West,

they rely upon to promote this message, and *maya* (deception) describes their lack of acknowledgement that their militant nationalism is in fact built upon ideas of history and nation inherited from foreign imperial powers. The sanction of power by democracy is one such idea, and as Sunil Khilnani has observed:

Democratic politics seems to require that identities and perceptions of interest be stable; but political identities and interests do not have a pre-political existence – they have to be created through politics. Thus, paradoxically, democratic politics must itself produce the very identities and interests which it presupposes in order to function in the first place. And this process of identity creation is a dangerous business, more akin to conflict than competition.²⁴

In *maya*-teaching, identity changes continually. It is always ‘becoming’, never fixed and final. It is interactive and interdependent, never separate. *Maya* is an essential concept to remember in the globalised world of the early twenty-first century, where personal identity has become tied to that of nation, and ideas of ‘otherness’ cause conflict *and* competition, even within each nation – just as M. K. Gandhi had warned. *Maya* as a concept applicable to the world has been under-rated, and largely unacknowledged apart from narrow definitions that are too easily dismissed. It is an instrument of perception which allows analysis of situation and subject alike. Worldviews can create realities as well as aiding in their assessment, and *maya* has been a determining characteristic of Indian understanding through many ages. It is a fully developed ontology which answers the postcolonial call for forms of knowledge which are not Euro/America-centric, and is a challenge to the accepted notions of ‘reality’ that were defined and made predominant throughout the modern era. The thesis has demonstrated that the continued use of this concept in present-day India has much to reveal of India’s own cultural challenge in that era, and is not an idea that can be bound to ideologies of ‘tradition’ or ‘modernity’.

Vivekananda. This glorification has occurred by nationalists of both pre- and post-Independence eras, a mythologising tendency that overlooks the difficult realities of daily life. It is humorously but cynically reflected in the 2006 ‘big hit’ film *Rang de Basanti*, as a disenchanted youth bemoans the corrupt state of Indian politics and business by saying, ‘With one foot in the past and the other in the future, it’s no wonder we’re pissing on the present’.

²⁴ Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, Hamish Hamilton Ltd., London, 1997, p. 49.

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