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Deities & Devotees: Cinema, Religion, and Politics in South India

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Deities & Devotees: Cinema, Religion, and Politics in South India

Abstract

This is a book review of Uma Maheswari Bhrugubanda, *Deities & Devotees: Cinema, Religion, and Politics in South India* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

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Author Notes

Ms. Rebecca Peters is a PhD candidate in the Department of Religion at Florida State University. Her work focuses on women directors in Bollywood film and the resulting representation on their products. She is interested in and has published in the areas of film studies, gender studies, and religion in South Asia.

Bhrugubanda, Uma Maheswari, *Deities & Devotees: Cinema, Religion, and Politics in South India* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Uma Maheswari Bhrugubanda's *Deities & Devotees: Cinema, Religion, and Politics in South India* stands out as the first book that focuses on South Indian mythological and devotional films. Bhrugubanda clearly has read a great deal of the literature on this topic and she effectively interweaves religious scholars, film scholars, and South Asian historians to argue her claims. She has a firm understanding of religious theorists and uses them to advance her argument. Talal Asad, Partha Chatterjee, Madhava Prasad feature heavily in her book. It is especially useful that Bhrugubanda focuses on the ways that Indian scholars interact with the concepts of religion, politics, and film in South Asia.

Bhrugubanda raises some excellent points about the use of cinema in establishing specific types of citizens as ideal through its portrayal of characters and actors and how gender, class, and regional differences inform those expectations of the citizen. However, in her attempt to cover so much, the reader is left wanting a fuller development of such arguments. As such, this book serves as an excellent starting point for scholars who want to begin looking into questions of gender, class, and the medium of film.

This book is a good follow up to Rachel Dwyer's *Filming the Gods*, since Dwyer focuses on the Hindi mythological and Bhrugubanda looks at South Indian films, primarily Telegu. However, other than mentioning Dwyer, she doesn't really

draw her into conversation in any meaningful way. The book would have been strengthened by a clearer discussion about the ways in which the South Indian mythological differs, or how her argument differs from Dwyer's, which focuses on the religious "imagination" of India as shown by films in these genres.

Bhrugubanda's main argument revolves around the idea that cinema in general, and the mythological in particular, creates idealized representatives of the citizen for the audience to emulate. The mythological and devotional genres do so through presenting their gods and devotees in specific ideological ways; ways that reinforce ideas of nationalism, citizenship, and religious priorities. While surprisingly missing any direct discussion of political leadership by the film actors mentioned in the introduction, Bhrugubanda instead focuses her discussion on the idealized 'citizen.' In her one direct discussion of politics, she argues against stereotypical assumptions of cinema-goers as naive. Bhrugubanda problematizes the common assertion that audiences confuse actors for the gods they play, instead arguing that those actors who gain popularity in politics do so because they present themselves as ideal citizens. Actors who effectively embody the ideal citizen can use the aural, physical, and rhetorical tools from their films to garner support in the political realm.

Bhrugubanda breaks her book into two sections: "Genealogies of Telegu Mythological and Devotional Films," and "Anthropology of Film-Making and Viewing Practices." The introduction lays out the background of mythological

films in South India, with a strong focus on Telegu-language films made in Andhra Pradesh. She posits that “the overlaps between citizens, devotees, and film spectators over the decades need to be viewed not as non-modern or irrational aberrations that demand an explanation, but as an opportunity to revise our understanding of citizenship” (3). To accomplish this, Bhrugubanda uses Talad Asad’s ideas of *habitus*, and Partha Chatterjee’s conceptions of citizenship and caste. She argues that cinema and other media create “mass religious identities that are yoked together with other social and political identities” (13) to form what she terms the *citizen-devotee*. The citizen-devotee is an ideal subject for governance, but it also is both created by and for cinema. Bhrugubanda points out this distinction by demonstrating the ways that films, especially mythological and devotional films, have created different ideal citizens according to the changes in society and those in power through comparing post-independence 1940-50s films with those in the early 2000s. She ends the introduction with a clear layout of the different chapters. While the introduction does a great job of providing necessary background on the film industry, addressing previous scholarship on the mythological genre’s religious traditions, political positions of citizenship, and their contemporary relevance, she fails to address gender in this introduction, despite having an entire chapter later devoted to it. This missing connection creates confusion as to how her discussion on gender, caste, and goddess films fit closely with her overarching argument.

Her first chapter looks at the specific actors N.T. Rama Rao (NTR), M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), and Raj Kumar who had success playing gods in films and then went on to become elected politicians, or (in the case of Raj Kumar) symbols of the ideal regional citizen. This chapter focuses on the physical and cinematic ways the actors were represented as ideal subjects. She refutes the claims that audience members see the actors as actual gods. Instead, she argues that the specific manner in which they present themselves and are presented in these films create the ideal symbolic subject. She points to the star lighting, aural cues, and frontality (or *darshan*) as cues to the audience of the characters' value. She discusses the specific benefit cinema brings to recreating familiar mythological stories: the ability for one actor to be in more than one location at a time, the doubling of actors to play multiple characters, and the special effects that allow objects and people to be moved, literally and figuratively, by the gods. Bhrugubanda also discusses the vocalization, physicality of the actors, the rhythmic style of speaking, and the choice of formal Telegu or Sanskrit to further sell the idea of their ability to play a god. She claims that by utilizing the same physicality, rhetorical style, and vocalization outside of cinema, these actors became representatives of South Indians.

The second chapter moves into discussions of the devotee-citizen and how the films create such a person. Bhrugubanda looks at mythologicals around national independence (1940s and 1950s) and those in contemporary times (early 2000s).

She argues that the differences between these films demonstrate the ways in which *citizen-devotees* are idealized. The main way that Bhugubanda achieves this distinction is through looking at the narrative use of minority characters in films on the same topic. She effectively demonstrates how minor changes in characters and plot create significantly different meanings. The films during independence were intent on establishing a singular nationality, presenting Muslims in complementary ways, even if still assuming the majority views of Hinduism. However, in contemporary times, with the increase in Hindutva and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) political thought, Muslim characters become reduced and even more stereotypical.

The third chapter focuses on goddess films, goddess possession during film screenings, and caste stereotypes as they relate to gender. In many ways this section is the richest section of the book. Bhugubanda demonstrates effectively how “the nationalist ideal of upper-caste womanhood in the Indian context was forged in opposition to the Western woman and the lower-caste woman – both of whom were figured as aggressive and sexually promiscuous” (118). She explains how goddess films often present the ideal wife (*sati*) as revered and goddesses (*shakti*) as needing reform. Goddess worship was regularly equated with village and lower-caste rituals, including meat-eating and aggression. The wife often becomes the target of the goddess and must suffer greatly in order to achieve power through her devotion to her husband. While on the outset this appears to simply reinforce hegemonic

patriarchal ideas of the woman, Bhrugubanda does a great job of showcasing how these films are also full of critiques of the system, especially those related to caste. As mentioned above, this section does the best job of pointing out the nuance involved in critically analyzing these films and gendered performance. Bhrugubanda is careful to avoid dismissing possession as a marketing tactic and to recognize the ways that women find agency to assert themselves and critique the system, even within hegemonically normative spaces.

The one area of improvement here would be to take more discussion of village goddess possession literature into account when thinking about the women in the movie theaters. She does not mention Kathleen Erndl at all and only references Philip Lutgendorf in passing, who have both written about goddess worship and possession in film and village contexts.

Bhrugubanda seems to dismiss all ideas of possession by casually stating that she could not find anyone who would confirm they had themselves been possessed (170), despite the fact that shortly before this statement she states that today possession is connected with lower-caste superstitions (164). She does not acknowledge how reticent people may be to share stories in this context. Had she engaged the works of Lutgendorf or Erndl, she may have been able to provide more significance to possession accounts without reinforcing those same ideas of superstition.

The second part of her book is the thinnest in terms of evidence and explanation. The fourth and fifth chapter include personal interviews and an analysis of theater viewership, including the marketing of films. While the personal stories she shares are interesting, overall, the chapters focus on discussions of theory and history, rather than practice, which one would expect from the section title, “Anthropology of Film-Making and Viewing Practices.” There are more in-depth ethnographies available, including the recent *House Full: Indian Cinema and the Active Audience* (2016) by Lakshmi Srinivas, which deals with South Indian theaters. However, the chapters do return to the argument of the films presenting the idealized citizen-devotee through mythological and devotional films. And the conclusion frames the book nicely to wrap up the arguments and point out those areas that need to be addressed in future works.

Overall, this book serves as an excellent genealogy of mythological and devotional films in South India, especially in the Telegu film industry. Bhrugubanda effectively presents her case for ways that the medium of cinema brings something new to mythological tales that transcend entertainment and moves into the realm of the religious. Film songs and clips continue to be used in religious festivals, and shrines get set up in movie theaters. However, she is careful to refute the stereotypical idea that it is ignorant masses who cannot distinguish what they see on the screen from reality. Instead through many examples, clear theoretical arguments, and comparisons across decades, Bhrugubanda demonstrates how

viewers find *representations* of themselves and their gods in these films. And it is these symbols of Telegu, Malayalam, and Tamil people with which they identify, even as those symbols change and adapt to new social cultures and ideologies.