Veritas: A Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

From Sacred Narrative to Cinematic Sign-System: Reconfiguring the Rāmāyaṇa in Contemporary Indian Cinema

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Abstract

The long-standing presence of the Rāmāyaṇa in modern Indian film suggests that myths are preserved through transformation, through ongoing acts of reinterpretation, mediation, and cultural re-signification. This study will explore how contemporary Indian films alter recognized elements of the Rāmāyaṇa from an identified mythic epic into a malleable cinematic sign system, capable of being employed in new genres and technologies while addressing different cultural contexts and ideologies. Using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, Roland Barthes' idea of myth, Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theories, Viktor Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization and Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse, this study compares the films *RRR (2022), Hanu-Man (2024), Sita Ramam (2022), Ram Setu (2022), Adipurush (2023), and Brahmāstra: Part One-Shiva (2022),* rather than viewing each as adaptations based on fidelity to one source, they are viewed here as different types of mythological transformations. *RRR* translates Rama-like heroic symbolism into anti-colonial nationalism; *Hanu-Man* transforms Hanuman devotion into superheroic embodiment; *Sita Ramam* relocates Rāmāyaṇa ethical structures into romantic melodrama; *Ram Setu* negotiates myth through archaeology, science, and civilizational memory; *Adipurush* reconstructs the epic through digitally intensified spectacle; and *Brahmāstra* incorporates mythological cosmology into a transnational fantasy grammar. The article argues that these developments show the Ramayana has continued to transform and has sparked conflict over what is culturally familiar, filmically innovative, sacredly remembered, or ideologically stated. As such, Indian cinema today does not preserve the epic alone, but rather continuously creates new contexts for the epic to be signified.

Keywords: *Rāmāyaṇa; Indian cinema; mythology; semiotics; adaptation; defamiliarization; spectacle; discourse; cultural identity; contemporary cinema*

Introduction

Contemporary Indian cinema's continued representation of the Ramayana presents a question far more complex than why an ancient epic persists in popularity. The question is instead how a tale spanning over a thousand years, built on certain moral codes and including countless thematic and symbolic elements, can continue to create new meanings across a vast array of forms of media. In contemporary Indian cinema, the ideas represented by Rama, Sita, Hanuman, Lanka, the bridge to Lanka, self-sacrifice for the good of others, duty (dharma), devotion to a superior being, and the battle between what is right and wrong are transmitted primarily through costume, gesture, character archetypes, visual symbolism, narrative structures, genre conventions, digital spectacle, and cultural memory. Such processes demonstrate how religious meanings continue to be mediated through the visual and narrative languages of Indian cinema (Dwyer). It is particularly important to recognize that there was no time when the Rāmāyaṇa did not exist as a totally fixed or entirely separate cultural narrative. A.K. Ramanujan's

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

influential statement, "Many Ramayanas," highlights the multiplicity through which the Rāmāyaṇa has been passed down through various languages, regions, performance traditions, and cultures throughout history (Ramanujan 22-23). Similarly, contemporary cinema carries on this multiplicity in visual/auditory culture. It is not enough for the Rāmāyaṇa to merely go from written word to moving picture. Rather, the elements of the Rāmāyaṇa the characters, the ethics, the structure of the narrative, the signs are selected and organized anew to fit the needs of new filmic spaces. This process of reorganization has come to light most clearly in recent Indian cinema. For instance, films like *RRR, Hanu-Man, Sita Ramam, Ram Setu, Adipurush, and Brahmāstra: Part One – Shiva* differ widely in their narratives, genres, languages, and aesthetic approaches to storytelling. Yet each contributes to a larger cultural movement that transforms mythological content into contemporary cinematic forms. Therefore, there is no one model of “mythological cinema,” but instead a range that includes everything from straight adaptation to invoking symbolism in order to convey allegories or devotional transformations or historical investigations or building fantasy worlds. The article approaches these transformations through semiotics, adaptation theory, defamiliarization, and discourse, using Peirce, Barthes, Hutcheon, Shklovsky, and Foucault to examine how inherited mythological signs acquire new meanings within contemporary cinematic contexts.

The Rāmāyaṇa as a Mobile Cultural Sign-System

Cultural durability exists within myths due to their ability to generate new meanings based on a variety of forms of expression. The Ramayana has been expressed in various ways including: textually, orally, visually (e.g., painting), performatively, devotionally, televisually, in printed media, animatedly, cinematically. In his work on the multiple telling of the Ramayana, Ramanujan illustrates how the Ramayana generates meaning(s) from various linguistic and regional backgrounds (22-23). Each way that we express the Ramayana alters how the viewer/reader interprets the story. As such, this process of movement can be interpreted through Semiotics (the study of signs and symbols) since cinematic meaning is created through the use of imagery/sound/formal aspects of film, all working together to create a system of signification (Metz). One of the primary tools for understanding the progression of mythological meaning into contemporary filmic representations comes from the theory developed by Charles Sander Peirce, who identified three types of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. An icon represents something directly (i.e., an image), an index indicates something indirectly (i.e., a bloodstain indicating death), while a symbol is a representation whose meaning is derived from convention or prior experience (Peirce, CP 2.247-2.249). For example, a movie representation of Rama may iconically represent him as wearing saffron colored clothing and carrying a bow and arrow. However, those representations would not have meaning until they are associated with certain values and concepts via cultural knowledge and associations (such as dharma, male virtues, righteousness, etc.). Therefore, the cinematic sign goes beyond simply the visual representation itself. Additionally, Roland Barthes' "myth" provides another layer of interpretation. According to Barthes, myth acts as a second-order semiological system where an already existing sign (signifier) transforms into a signifier for a wider set of cultural meanings. As a result, myth makes it possible to reinterpret historical productions of meaning into seemingly self-evident cultural truths (Barthes 115). This is particularly relevant when Rāmāyaṇa symbolism enters narratives of contemporary identity.

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

Film context brings to life specific interpretative possibilities out of the vast array of potential meanings inherent in a single mythical sign. According to Stuart Hall, representations are not merely a passive mirror for pre-existent meanings; rather, they produce and negotiate meanings throughout systems of representation (Hall). For example, Ram-like images could represent ethical heroism in one story, nationalistic sacrifice in a second, or cultural continuity in a third. Likewise, Hanuman could serve as both a devotional deity, protector, warrior and even superhero. Although it has remained culturally identifiable, the symbolic function of these signs has changed. Therefore, contemporary film participates in the same larger cultural processes of selective remembrance, transformation, and re-interpretation. Hence the Rāmāyaṇa serves less as a fixed source of textuality than as a type of cultural semiotic archive: a storehouse of figures, symbols, moral frameworks, narrative forms and visual references that can be drawn upon in new contexts.

Adaptation Beyond Fidelity

Discussions of adaptation have historically focused on issues related to fidelity: How closely does a particular film represent its original work? In this context, however, applying such models may be most limited with respect to the Rāmāyaṇa because multiple sources can be considered authoritative. In contrast, Linda Hutcheon's theoretical discussion of adaptation offers a different paradigmatic model. Specifically, Hutcheon defines adaptations as acts of interpretation/re-interpretation and of reaccentuation as opposed to mere representation or reproduction of the "original" (Hutcheon 8). Furthermore, Hutcheon states that adaptations are determined by their production environments, including medium/genre/technology/cultural condition, etc. Robert Stam has also challenged the efficacy of fidelity-based models by emphasising the intertextual relationships between various texts/media and cultural traditions (Stam 27). An emphasis that can be most beneficially applied to the study of contemporary Indian cinema, as many films do not replicate the story of the Rāmāyaṇa but instead utilize parts of its symbolic vocabulary.

RRR offers a striking example. *RRR* doesn't tell the story of the Rāmāyaṇa, but the Rāma-like images are used when making Alluri Sitarama Raju. This transfers the epic image from a religious or holy legend into a fictionalized version of history. So, it's neither just an adaptation of the Rāmāyaṇa nor just an odd coincidence that happens by chance. It is a type of symbolic adaptation where the culturally remembered symbolism (or memory) about Rama is utilized to create a new heroic cinematic identity. *Hanu-Man* utilizes Hanuman in a completely different way. Hanu-Man uses Hanuman in an obvious way; however, he is created and reformed using the tools of today's superhero conventions. Divine power, incredible physical abilities, origin stories, spectacular fighting scenes, and the line between normal life and superpower life have been reformatted using the same language used for many modern-day superheroes. Therefore, this shows how Hindu mythological figures could be translated into a global superhero format while maintaining their uniquely Indian symbolism. *Sita Ramam* works in an even less direct manner. Sita Ramam does not show Rama and Sita as characters within a mythological context. However, the title, characterizations, emotional structure, emphasis on devotion, separation, sacrifice, moral obligation, and perfect love create connections to the Rāmāyaṇa. In other words, the Rāmāyaṇa is referenced through thematic and symbolic connection (as opposed to referencing it through telling the Rāmāyaṇa). These three examples illustrate why we need to expand upon what constitutes the category

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

of “adaptation. Contemporary mythological cinema frequently operates through metonymic adaptation, in which a character, symbol, ethical structure, or narrative relationship stands in for a much larger epic tradition. The film does not need to reproduce the entire story for the epic to become structurally meaningful.

Defamiliarization: Making the Familiar New

Mythological Cinema and Defamiliarization. The challenge confronting contemporary mythological cinema is precisely the familiarity of its material. This is because both Rama and Hanuman are well-known characters. Both have been used in many different forms of media. They have been represented in television shows, movies, books, plays and performances. The question becomes, "How can we take something so familiar as to create a new experience for the audience?" Shklovsky defines defamiliarization. Art, for Shklovsky, disrupts automatized perception by making familiar objects appear strange or newly perceptible. The purpose is not simply novelty but the renewal of perception (Shklovsky 12). Indian mythological films use this same approach by taking the common mythological character(s) and putting them in some type of unexpected environment that relates to their mythology. *Hanu-Man* takes Hanuman's devotion and puts it in a setting typical of the superhero genre. The film employs conventions familiar from the superhero genre with regard to Hanuman's physical abilities and other aspects of his mythological story; however, it places him in a cinematic context. The visuals of Hanuman's actions, including action sequences and special effects, allow viewers to visualize the myths anew. *Brahmāstra: Part One – Shiva* uses a similar method concerning cosmology. The film takes traditional elements from Indian mythology and transposes them onto a modern day/ fantasy universe. In this way, *Brahmāstra* does not retell the Rāmāyaṇa, but rather contributes to the overall imaginative landscape of India's mythology through images of supernatural powers, holy weapons, elemental forces and cosmic battles. *RRR* also uses this method. The historical revolutionary, Alluri Sitarama Raju, does not represent exact Rama; however, the film represents Raju in a manner that allows viewers to read him in a similar light to Rama. Raju is exaggerated in ways similar to Rama to transform him into a larger-than-life figure. Contemporary mythological cinema operates through a productive tension: the mythological sign must remain sufficiently recognizable to activate cultural memory while becoming sufficiently unfamiliar to generate renewed perception. The source of the image must be sufficiently familiar to denote it as representing itself, yet it must be sufficiently unfamiliar so that it appears anew.

Spectacle and the Technological Reconfiguration of Myth

The re-imagining of mythology is similarly inextricable from technological advancement. Much earlier, mythological film was reliant on theatrical staging, hand-painted backdrops, devotional icons, and a performance-oriented aesthetic. The modern film has developed to include extensive uses of CGI, computer-generated environments, motion-based effects, massive-scale action choreography, immersive sound, and visually spectacular presentation. While this evolution represents a paradigmatic change in the manner by which mythology appears in film, it equally represents a paradigmatic change in what signification takes place in those visualizations. Debord’s analysis of the spectacle offers a useful analytical framework for examining the increased significance of visual intensity in present-day media (Debord). Spectacle in mythological cinema should not be limited to simply representational visual

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

excess. Spectacle may function as well as a means through which mythology can become perceptually accessible to the current audience of mythological cinema. *Adipurush* presents an especially interesting case study as it foregrounds both the tension between technological spectacle and culturally familiar depictions of epic narratives. Through the utilization of digitally created environments, visual effects, stylistic characterizations and the production of large-scale action sequences, *Adipurush* presents the possibility for technologically mediated mythology. Yet at the same time, controversy over its depiction illustrates that technological transformation does not take place within a cultural vacuum. Thus, *Adipurush* illustrates a key characteristic of mythological adaptation: Innovation is evaluated against pre-existing visual memory. A digitally created Rama does not emerge into an interpretative void; instead, it emerges into a cultural memory bank filled with previous cultural associations related to the character. Previous visual depictions of Rama have emerged from various sources, including religious art, popular illustrations and television adaptations, thus creating an expectation regarding his physical characteristics such as costume, gestures and sacred atmosphere. Therefore, a new cinematic depiction of Rama exists in dialogue with accumulated cultural memory. As such, *Adipurush* is not just unique as a digital adaptation; it exemplifies the cultural negotiation that occurs when technological spectacle meets sacred familiarity. While Brahmastra takes a different approach to this challenge, the film does not adopt an adapted version of an individual epic story; instead, the film presents an entirely new mythological/ fantasy universe that combines supernatural powers/cosmology and contemporary franchise aesthetic. Therefore, Brahmastra represents the transition from the adaptation of mythology (or specifically, epic narratives) to creating mythological worlds. This is a significant distinction. Contemporary cinematic storytelling often utilizes mythology as the source for building cinematic universes versus simply recreating and retelling ancient stories. Thus, Brahmastra allows Indian mythologies to interact with global/fantasy/superhero film universes and still maintain culturally identifiable symbolic structures.

Myth, History, Science, and Civilizational Memory

Ram Setu exemplifies one other way Rāmāyaṇa has been transformed: from the realm of myth to a matter of the legitimacy of both history and science. As opposed to the film telling a story in its entirety based on the entire Rāmāyaṇa, it uses a specific part of the Rāmāyaṇa for the main theme of the film (the Ram Setu bridge), creating a new space in which the film allows for the meeting point of various forms of knowledge, including the use of mythology, archaeology, science, history and cultural memory. Thus, we see another example of how the Foucauldian aspect of mythological cinema works. According to Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, knowledge is created through systems which establish what can be accepted as truth, authority and legitimate knowledge (Foucault). Therefore, rather than simply questioning whether or not the Rāmāyaṇa is factual or mythical, *Ram Setu* shows how important it is to create cultural spaces where different systems of knowledge can meet and find common ground. Because the Ram Setu Bridge is used in the film as a geological formation, an archaeological artefact, a sacred site and a marker of a civilization's memory, the film can make an argument about the meaning of this bridge that extends beyond the simple empirical question of whether or not it exists. It is in this discursively-created space that the film's value is realized. The film transforms the Rāmāyaṇa from being told primarily as a sacred/mythical narrative into a secular/investigative narrative. The film takes the "sacred" past and translates it into a secular vocabulary of evidence-based research, historical inquiry and

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

scientific debate. Again, this represents yet another type of adaptation: the adaptation of epic memory into contemporary epistemic discourse. The film thus demonstrates that mythology can remain culturally powerful even when its narrative structures are displaced by modern genres. The Rāmāyaṇa survives not only through characters such as Rama and Hanuman but also through places, objects, memories, ethical frameworks, and civilizational narratives.

Mythological Ethics and Emotional Reconfiguration in *Sita Ramam*

If *Ram Setu* translates myth into a discourse of historical legitimacy, *Sita Ramam* transforms epic ethics into romantic melodrama. Not just the uniqueness in the portrayal of the Rāmāyana narrative, but also how those stories are used within the context of relationships (e.g., the connection between Ram and Sita), specifically about the concepts of devotion, separation, self-sacrifice, moral obligation, repression of emotion, and pure love. Such an emphasis on emotional and relational structures can be situated within the melodramatic mode of Indian popular cinema, where intimate affect and social or cultural meanings are articulated through cinematic narrative (Vasudevan). This transformation demonstrates that adaptation can occur through ethical structure rather than narrative content. Stam's intertextual approach, together with Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, allows *Sita Ramam* to be understood, where one work is influenced by the conventions of another genre. In this case, *Sita Ramam* is using the melodrama genre as a way to interpret the epic ethics of the Rāmāyana into the realm of private emotions.

As such, *Sita Ramam* exemplifies a movement from epic to small-scale. That is, instead of focusing on the broad epic issues of kingdoms, exiles, wars and dharma, Sita Ramam focuses on the individual concerns of love, faithfulness, separation and sacrifice. However, the language or terminology for these issues is still recognizable in terms of their association with the Rāma-Sītā legend. Therefore, *Sita Ramam* illustrates how the epic can be reinterpreted not through spectacle but through emotion. *Hanuman* made mythology spectacularly present in film. *Sita Ramam* makes the epic's emotional presence felt. The epic functions as a repertoire of meanings that can be activated differently according to genre.

Myth, Nationalism, and Heroic Reconfiguration in *RRR*

Among the selected films, *RRR* provides perhaps the clearest example of mythological symbolism being detached from direct epic narrative and reconstructed within nationalist historical fiction. The film's representation of Alluri Sitarama Raju incorporates visual and behavioural elements associated with Rama. Costume, weaponry, bodily posture, heroic framing, and the association with moral righteousness collectively contribute to a mythic coding of the historical character. The change from an actual revolutionary figure to a mythical one may be understood by examining the three levels of Peirce's semiotic model. First, there is iconic similarity where the hero looks like Rama. Second, at the indexical level, it is through the actions of the hero that we see associations made between his behaviour and those typically attributed to Rama. Third, these two forms of association demonstrate how popular Indian films can provide ideological meanings via both the structure of their stories and the way they represent them visually (Prasad). In terms of symbolic reference, this transformation enables the film to transform the historical figure into a cultural symbol; thus, he becomes greater than life as an archetypal cultural figure. In addition to demonstrating how mythological symbolism can alter the register in which history is

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

presented, the film further demonstrates how anti-colonial resistance becomes "epicized" in its use of spectacle. Spectacle is demonstrated throughout the film as a means of representing the historically based struggle, but in a mythic manner. It is through spectacle and other cinematic devices that the film creates a language for representing struggle in such a manner that it is capable of being interpreted as having mythic proportions. While the film allows us to understand how mythology can be utilized to develop heroic frameworks without needing to translate it directly into storyline or plot development, it also demonstrates how once mythological symbols become part of narratives regarding national identity, they will likely have some impact on current discussions surrounding cultural identity and historical memory (Anderson). The task of analysis is therefore not to assume a single ideological meaning but to examine how particular symbols are mobilized within specific narrative contexts.

From Adaptation to Reconfiguration

The comparative analysis of the six films reveals several distinct modes through which contemporary Indian cinema reconfigures the Rāmāyaṇa.

Film	**Mode of Reconfiguration**	**Dominant Cinematic Grammar**
RRR	Rama-like heroic symbolism	Historical action / nationalist spectacle
Hanu-Man	Hanumanic transformation	Superhero fantasy
Sita Ramam	Rāmāyaṇic ethical resonance	Romantic melodrama
Ram Setu	Epic memory and material inquiry	Archaeological adventure
Adipurush	Direct epic reconstruction	Digital mythological spectacle
Brahmāstra	Mythological cosmology	Fantasy/superhero world-building

This comparison illustrates that "adaptation" can be too vague to use as a single term. Not all the films have adapted the Rāmāyaṇa (in the same way). A few films are adapting individual character types; a few are reusing symbolic representations; a few are drawing from shared ethically oriented structures; a few are using the memory of space within the Rāmāyaṇa to inform their own film's representation of space; and others are adapting parts of the mythological cosmos. Thus, the larger conceptualization of reconfiguring provides the analyst with a more precise methodology. Reconfiguration represents a process by which a cultural group uses existing cultural memory and reorganizes it into new representational formats. The cultural memory being reconfigured will remain identifiable in terms of content, yet its role or function in the culture may change. For example, in *RRR*, Rama functions as a symbol for heroic nationalist ideals. In *Hanu-Man*, Hanuman has been adapted so as to make him consistent with modern forms of superheroism. In *Sita Ramam*, the epic ideals of romance were refigured

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

as romantic love. In *Ram Setu*, the myths are treated as subject matter suitable for both scientific and historical study. In *Adipurush*, the epic was transformed into a spectacular form of digital cinema. In *Brahmāstra*, the mythology serves as the basis for world-building within the realm of fantasy. These multiple examples illustrate how very flexible the Rāmāyaṇa archive is.

Conclusion

The contemporary cinematic afterlife of the Rāmāyaṇa cannot be adequately understood through the simple opposition between tradition and modernity. Each of the six films discussed above illustrates that mythology is able to survive the boundaries of this dichotomy. Indian film today does not simply retell the story of Rāmāyaṇa; it rearranges the signs of the epic (characters, structure, etc.), creates new spaces for those signs to inhabit and places them within new representational and generic contexts. Peirce's semiotic work on signs illustrates how iconic representations of epic events can have multiple interpretations depending upon where they are placed in a particular narrative. Barthes' work demonstrates that once these icons are created, they can be interpreted as having even greater cultural or ideological relevance. Hutcheon's adaptation theory allows us to view the adaptations of myths such as the Rāmāyaṇa through more than just the lens of fidelity. Shklovsky's defamiliarization theory explains how commonplaces, like mythologies, can be perceived anew. And finally, Foucault's theories about discourses allow us to see how these transformations occur in relation to larger struggles over what we consider valid knowledge, authentic selves, identities, and cultural legacies. Therefore, each of the six films represents a stage or strategy of transforming mythology. When taken together, the six films demonstrate that there is no longer a single source text called the Rāmāyaṇa; rather, it has transformed into a flexible mobile sign-system that continues to function within contemporary Indian film. This means that rather than being repeated and thus reinforcing cultural practices, the presence of the Rāmāyaṇa in contemporary Indian film reinforces our ability to produce culture. Because mythology can be removed from one context and put into another, it will always retain some kind of viable mythological meaning. This understanding also challenges the idea that cinematic modernization results in a complete break from tradition. Rather than replacing mythology with technology-based spectacle, superheroes, historical fiction, romance, archaeology, and fantasy, each of these genres provides new ways for filmmakers to organize mythology. Thus, the Rāmāyaṇa as it currently appears in Indian film today exists in a middle ground between remembered cultural heritage and filmmaking innovation. The signs used in contemporary versions of the Rāmāyaṇa retain their familiarity due to their previous use as signs in previous cultural contexts and at the same time retain their viability as signs for contemporary filmmakers who continue to create new and innovative ways to present them. Ultimately, the primary value of contemporary mythological cinema is found not in whether it is faithful to an original mythological story but in what is possible when an existing body of mythological texts is placed into a new way of representing reality. Thus, the cinematic reorganization of the Rāmāyaṇa demonstrates how that myth survives not through its consistency but through its continuous transformation into new forms that allow it to continue to signify**.**

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