

Films and Folklores: Revisiting *Sholay*

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Abstract: A country's folklore invariably consists of a certain number of fantastic characters, mythological stories and supernatural elements. They are deeply embedded in the culture and tradition of the region. Hence, these folkloric elements find their way into the region's film industry as well, and are accommodated in the storyline of the films. Bollywood has skilfully woven mythical plots and characters into its narratives frequently. This paper takes into consideration, the Indian classic *Sholay* and analyses it from a folkloric perspective while trying to unearth the mythical or mythological elements present in the film. It compares and contrasts the characters in the film to those found in myths while taking into consideration the setting, plot and motifs. It attempts to prove that *Sholay* is inspired from mythology and is a manifestation of contemporary folklore in itself.

Keywords: Cinema, Bollywood, visual-media, *Sholay*.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Folklores are informally learned knowledge about a community's surroundings, beliefs, customs and traditions which are communicated in a creative manner through words, actions, music and materials. "... the term *folk* in its initial meaning referred to European peasants and to them alone" (Dundes 4) and 'lore' was indigenously seen as stories and songs of the peasants, which however, now comprises of any kind of independent and creative expression. Thus, the word 'folklore' stands for 'the lore of the folk'. The study of folklores came to be termed as folkloristics, and the people studying them as folklorists. Awareness of the study of folklore started among the masses with the publication of German mythologies in 1812 by the Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm who employed the word *Volkskunde*, German for oral 'folk narratives'. However, the term 'folklore' was later coined by an Englishman, William John Thomas. Folklores include myths, jokes, riddles, chants, legends, drama, dance-forms, costumes, tattoos, hairstyles, medicines, symbols, epitaphs, food recipes, body piercings, gestures etc.

Supernatural elements, mythological stories and fantastic characters always find their way into a country's folklore and they remain embedded deeply in the region's culture and tradition. The traditional ideologies, beliefs, customs, and narratives of a community which have been passed mostly by word of mouth through various generations are called folklores. However, there are various elements of folklore which cannot be delivered orally thus they are expressed in the form of folk dance, folk crafts, folk arts, folk sculptures, folk paintings etc. Mazharul Islam in his book *Folklore, the Pulse of the People: In the Context of Indic Folklore* defines folklore as –

"... the outcome of the creative ideas of people expressed through verbal art as well as material forms – it may originate from a community or an individual – it is transmitted orally or through one written process from one generation to another – it exchanges its position between written and oral traditions." (Islam 6).

Therefore, folklores are a result of oral as well as some interactive and written tradition passed on from one generation to another. Even the world of movies has not stayed far behind when it comes to picturing folktales and folklores in popular cinema. Legends from French folklores, Irish folklores, Norse mythology, Asian folklores, Greek and Roman mythologies, American westerns, legends of Robin Hood, Arthurian legends have all been portrayed in films, even the brothers Grimm have been characterized in a film with their name as the title. India has its own folklores in the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Panchatantra and the Jataka tales and Indian films and tele series have taken inspiration from them time and again. Films like *Rani aur Lal Pari* (1975), *Ali Baba aur Chalis Chor* (1980), *Hatim Tai* (1990), *Anmol* (1993), *Aladin* (2009) are some fairy tales with magical elements in them. While films like *Hum Saath Saath Hai* (1999), *Ekalavya: The Royal Guard* (2007), *Drona* (2008), *Raajneeti* (2010) have taken inspiration from the ancient folktales like the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and have rendered the plots in a contemporary manner. Fascination in folklores in the film industry has been strong and varied since long and films as a popular medium for representing culture are themselves becoming a type of folklore. Folkloric inspirations have always been a staple part of Indian cinema; in modern times, however, they are mostly being produced as animated films that cater to children. On taking a closer look at one of our Bollywood cult classics, *Sholay*, one can determine the subtle folkloric elements present in the film.

II. ELEMENTS OF FOLKLORE IN SHOLAY:

Most of the folktales are set in imaginary places that do not exist on the world map and are described in vague terms or generally considered unimportant. They are make-believe places created only for the story. *Sholay* is no different in this aspect. Set in the

fictional place called Ramgarh where most of the action takes place, the film takes the audience through a series of high-drama action, romance and comedy sequences that keeps the viewer engrossed throughout the movie. Although the site for the film is located in Ramnagar (Karnataka) originally, it was named as Ramgarh for the purpose of shooting the film. But there are no witches or wizards, or magic spells, or talking animals in the film, like one commonly finds in folktales. The film is a subtle reminder of the fictitious world of Malgudi created by the famed Indian writer R.K Narayan in his work entitled *Malgudi Days*. Which was eventually made into a television series in 1987 with 39 episodes to its credit. Like *Sholay*, the series was also shot in a small district named Tumkaru in Karnataka and some parts in Bengaluru, but was called Malgudi for the purpose of the shoot. In folklores, the time, date or era when the action takes place is generally not mentioned and they almost always begin with - 'long ago in a far off land...' However, the folktales' settings do mirror the landscape and the culture of the country they are set in. In his work *Biblical Folklore*, Daniel Vincent opines -

"Folk literature help us to understand the confused relationships between the great traditions... one can understand the family relationships and rituals through the lullabies, then can find the social changes through folklore such as the shift in the family system from corporate family to individual family, from polygamy to monogamy" (Vincent 21)

Sholay which is set in a small village in India portrays the life and culture typical of Indian habits and surroundings. It has presented rocky terrains, huge boulders and dry land where there are no motor vehicles as yet, only horse drawn carriages. There is a dearth of food which has provoked some of the inhabitants to become bandits and loot the poor villagers who farm. Gabbar and his comrades terrorise the villagers on a regular basis for food and grains. If the villagers fail to provide the same, a member of their family is killed mercilessly by Gabbar. The characters in a folklore are mostly uncomplicated and very easy to understand, either they are entirely good or completely evil. Gabbar in *Sholay* is evil personified without any reason or any bitter experiences.

"Gabbar escapes, but he doesn't kill Thakur. He merely neutralises his ability to be violent as a message to feudal oppressors everywhere" (Joshi, 2016).

It is considered that rendering ones opponent helpless but alive is crueller than killing. Gabbar does that and he does not regret his misdeeds even at the face of death. Also the characters are motivated by one strong desire and are mostly stereotyped, like faithful friends, wicked stepmothers, or jealous siblings. *Sholay* has the stereotyped villain in Gabbar who personifies evil both in appearance and nature. There is no specific reason for his cruelty or the barbaric means of killing his opponents or dismembering them; nor is there any regret on his face when he is being killed himself. We have faithful friends in Jai and Veeru who can lay down their lives for each other, which Jai ultimately does by using the faulty coin to his advantage and saving his friend's life. Even the emotions of characters in a folktale can vary between greed, jealousy, hatred, love, fear, respect and pity. For instance, the wicked witch in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was intensely jealous of Snow White; the stepmother in *Hansel and Gretel* hated her husband's children; we find pure love in the father in *Hansel and Gretel* who loved his children immensely which, ultimately, brought them back to their father despite the various attempts of the step mother to turn them out. In *Sholay*, Jai and Veeru agree to help the Thakur due to their realisation of the Thakur's plight and their pity for him. It turned them from being petty thieves to soldiers who were ready to die for the villager's safety. The plots in folklores are very simple and short - the actions are mostly formulaic, usually about the protagonist's journey to self-discovery. The film can be summarised as the revenge of a Thakur who was a former police officer, with the help of two outlaws, after his family is murdered by a ruthless and notorious bandit. Jai who is a mercenary planning to run away with the Thakur's money, ends up falling in love with the Thakur's widowed daughter-in-law and giving up his life for the villagers. It is pertinent to note that the actions in folktales are mostly concentrated, without taking detours into lengthy descriptions and have mostly happy endings. Although *Sholay* has a happy ending for Veeru who gets to marry his love interest; and for the Thakur, who finally avenges his family's death, it wasn't happy for Jai who lost his life and, for Radha, whose world again descends into the forlorn darkness, that she was hoping to come out from, with the death of Jai.

Themes, although quite simple in folk literature, are but serious and powerful advocating virtues like generosity, humility and compassion over vices like selfishness, pride and greed. They espouse morals like - wisdom comes through suffering, nothing comes in life without strings attached, there are responsibilities to be met and promises to be kept. These virtues, when practised in a day to day basis make life simple and meaningful and if these habits are inculcated in youngsters from a very small age, they start practising it as their way of life. Kwame A. Insidoo in the introductory section of his work *Moral Lessons in African Folktales* states that -

"Through their folktales and their other traditions, the (African) elders were able to socialize and condition their youngsters to their society's beliefs, norms, values, habits and cultural attitudes. In time these ingrained cultural beliefs became the youngster's way of life, their perception of reality; indeed it constituted the bedrock of their consciousness of life" (Insaidoo xix)

The use of dialogue in folklore to present a distinctive trait of a certain characters is very common. For instance, the statement 'mirror-mirror on the wall' in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* by the wicked stepmother or the lines or 'khul jaa sim sim' from *Alibaba and Chalis Chor*. Similarly, in *Sholay* we find that in the wicked character of Gabbar, his dialogue 'jo darr gaya samjho

mar gaya' has been used by him time and again in the film. It portrays the essence of his character, that of wickedness, cruelty and heartlessness. The technique of stylized intensification is used abundantly with the repetition of certain dialogues to exaggerate or intensify their dramatic effect on the audience. Therefore, the use of motifs or recurring thematic elements like that of folklores is quite pervasive in *Sholay* as well. Even some other motifs that we find in folklores like journeys through eerie forests, difficult tasks, shrewd deceits, helpful animals or mysterious creatures are present in *Sholay*. The rocky boulder laden mountains of the dacoits lair in Ramgarh have been shot in such a manner that they give the feeling of fear and impeding death, and can be considered equivalent to the eerie forests of folk tales; the difficult task comes in the form of the task that lies ahead of Jai and Veeru to kill or capture alive, the much feared dacoit Gabbar. Although there are no mysterious creatures in the film we do find a helpful animal in the form of Dhanno, the mare who runs hard to save the life of Basanti when she is being chased by Gabbar's men.

III. SHOLAY 'AS' A FOLKLORE:

The film, *Sholay*, has itself become a part of the Indian folklore, despite having folkloric elements in it. Even people who haven't watched the film, understand the references made to it. Dialogues from the film like 'kitney aadmi they'¹, 'ye haath mujhe de de Thakur'², 'tera kya hoga kaalia'³, 'tumhara naam kya hai Basanti'⁴, 'Jo darr gaya samjho mar gaya'⁵, 'Arre O saambha'⁶ etc... have become part of the colloquial language of the nation. They are considered as cult classics and are being mimicked by the masses and quoted like maxims. Even the mare Dhanno became popular after the film. Songs and dialogues have been included in films later with reference to *Sholay*. The 1991 Bollywood mystery thriller *100 Days* has a song on Gabbar Singh; another vigilante film entitled *Gabbar is Back* released in 2015; the 2017 film *Jia aur Jia* has a song titled "Naach basanti naach..." which again can be taken as a reference to *Sholay*'s character Basanti whom Gabbar challenges to dance in order to save her lover, Veeru's life; then there was a film by the famed Indian director Ram Gopal Verma loosely based on *Sholay* named *Aag* – and so on. Thus, there have been numerous films after *Sholay* heavily laden with motifs from the film. Even the mannerisms of Gabbar Singh have become legends. No other villain in the history of Indian cinema has received the same kind of cult status as Gabbar in Indian culture, mostly it is the good characters, the heroes who are remembered and revered, but Gabbar has created a niche of his own. Even the characters Saambha and Kaalia have been etched in history of Indian culture because of the constant reference to their names by Gabbar in the film, even though they don't have much dialogues to their credit in the film.

IV. CONCLUSION:

This paper looks at the convergences between film and folklore and shows how the vernacular culture, both traditional and popular, are conveyed by cinema. These stories have endured the test of time because they entertain while still embodying the culture's beliefs and traditions. The fundamental human truths that people have lived by for centuries are contained in them. A number of popular folktales, legends and myths have been adapted in Bollywood over the years, some so skilfully that it would be difficult to locate the origin of the tale. Thus the study of folklore and its intersection with films introduces students and scholars to various other fields like popular culture, history, anthropology and literature among them. The easily relatable characters, certain fantastic elements, their brevity and the happy endings of folklores appeal to the masses both children and adults equally. Even the powerful visual elements in folktales like – the glass slipper, a poisoned apple, a magic lamp, a spinning wheel - give the stories their persistence. They consist of visually dynamic images that one can instantly identify with, and when they are shown on a popular medium like cinema or television the effect is even more impactful. Folk literature also helps children to develop a keen sense of morality and differentiate between the good and the evil thus helping them in identifying with the good and being better human beings when they grow up.

V. NOTES:

¹ How many men were there?

² I will chop off your arms Thakur

³ What lies ahead for you Kaalia?

⁴ What is your name Basanti?

⁵ Fearful people are dead already

⁶ Hey Saambha

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