

CINEMATIC PORTRAYALS OF INDIAN FOLK CULTURE THROUGH FOLKLORE NARRATIVES: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SELECTED INDIAN FILMS (1949–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Indian cinema has drawn on folk tales, legends, ritual performances and supernatural beliefs since its earliest decades, yet the ways in which these oral and performative traditions are translated into audiovisual form remain under-theorised. This paper presents a content analysis of nine feature films released between 1949 and 2025 in four languages (Kannada, Hindi, Bengali and Assamese) whose narratives are explicitly rooted in identifiable folk sources: Nagakannika (1949), Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne (1969), Duvidha (1973), Paheli (2005), Kothanodi (2015), Tumbbad (2018), Bulbbul (2020), Kantara (2022) and Kantara: A Legend – Chapter 1 (2025). Each film is coded for folk source type, dominant narrative theme and mode of cinematic treatment, using Bascom's functional approach to folklore and adaptation theory as the interpretive framework. The findings show that (i) supernatural intrusion into everyday life is the most frequent device (7 of 9 films); (ii) gender and patriarchy form the second most common concern (4 of 9), especially in adaptations of Rajasthani, Assamese and Bengali material; (iii) genre hybridisation, rather than ethnographic fidelity, is the dominant strategy of translation; and (iv) the two most recent films in the sample convert ritual performance into pan-Indian spectacle with very large reported commercial returns. The paper discusses the resulting tensions between authenticity, authorship and commodification, and suggests policy directions for documentation and benefit-sharing with source communities.

Keywords: Indian cinema; folklore; folk culture; filmic folklore; adaptation; regional cinema; Bhoota Kola; cultural representation

INTRODUCTION

Folk culture is the living archive of a society's beliefs, values and everyday imagination. In India, where hundreds of languages and thousands of local communities sustain distinct oral traditions, folk narratives circulate as stories told at the hearth, as ritual performances, as songs and as local deity cults. Cinema, the dominant popular medium of the twentieth century, has been in continuous dialogue with these traditions. Early regional-language films retold snake-deity and saint legends; the parallel cinema of the 1970s turned to folk tales as a means

of formal experimentation; and in the last decade a new wave of mainstream films has marketed folklore as the principal attraction of the film.

This relationship raises a set of questions that are of interest to folklorists, film scholars and cultural economists alike. When a tale that has lived for generations in oral form is transferred to the screen, what is retained, what is invented and who decides? Does cinema preserve folk culture, or does it reshape it to suit the grammar of genre and the logic of the market? And what happens to the communities from which these narratives originate?

The paper addresses four research questions:

- **RQ1.** What kinds of folk sources (tale, legend, belief figure, ritual tradition) do Indian films draw upon, and from which regions and languages?
- **RQ2.** What narrative functions and themes do these folklore narratives perform on screen?
- **RQ3.** Through which cinematic strategies are oral and performative traditions translated into film?
- **RQ4.** What do these portrayals imply for debates on authenticity, authorship and the cultural economy of folklore?

The study contributes a compact, replicable coding framework and a purposive but diverse sample, covering both the art-house and the commercial traditions and spanning more than seven decades. It treats cinema not as a neutral mirror of folk life but, following the idea of 'filmic folklore', as a site where folklore is re-performed and hybridised.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Folklore and folk culture

Dundes (1980) defined the 'folk' as any group of people sharing at least one common linking factor, which frees the concept from its older association with illiterate peasant communities and allows urban, regional, occupational and religious groups to be treated as bearers of folklore. Bascom (1954) proposed four functions of folklore: amusement, the validation of culture (justifying rituals and institutions), education, and the maintenance of conformity to accepted patterns of behaviour. These functions provide a useful lens for film analysis, because a film may retain a tale's plot while altering its social function. Propp's (1968) morphology and Thompson's (1955–58) motif-index remain the standard tools for identifying recurring narrative

units, while Ramanujan (1991) shows the richness and regional variety of Indian oral tales.

Filmic folklore

Scholars of Chinese cinema have used the term 'filmic folklore' to describe a folklore or folklore-like performance that is represented, created or hybridised within a fictional film (Zhang, 2005, p. 267, as cited in *Folklore in Cinema (study)*, n.d.). The concept is helpful for the Indian case because it directs attention to the fact that cinema does not merely record folklore; it generates new, hybrid forms that may in turn re-enter circulation as 'authentic' tradition. Bendix (1997) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have shown more generally that the idea of authentic tradition is itself historically constructed, a point that becomes critical when popular films are accepted as representations of living practice.

Folklore in Indian cinema

The mythological and devotional film was among the first commercially successful Indian genres, and Dwyer (2006) documents how religious imagery and devotion shaped film form. Within that broad field, folk and supernatural material occupies a distinct space. A secondary survey of the literature notes that the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 1999) lists over fifty films with 'naag' or related words in their titles, and that themes such as reincarnation, ghost stories, snake gods and magical realism recur across genres (*Folklore in Cinema (study)*, n.d.). Studies of popular Hindi cinema (Ganti, 2004; Vasudevan, 2010) and of the psychology of popular film (Nandy, 1998) provide the wider context in which such material is made, marketed and received.

Adaptation, authorship and authenticity

Hutcheon (2006) conceives adaptation as a process of both repetition and variation, in which the adapter's choices are as important as the source. The Indian case adds the problem of authorship: folk tales have no single author, but literary collectors and translators mediate them, and filmmakers then mediate the mediators. Merrill (2009) examines how

the Rajasthani writer Vijaydan Detha's retellings travel through translation, and a conference paper by Jiwrajka (2021) traces *Duvidha* from an oral version recorded in fieldwork to a short story and two Hindi films, noting both the potential for resistance by the female protagonist in each retelling and the inconsistent acknowledgement of Detha's folk sources.

Research gap

Existing work tends to examine single films or single regions. There is little cross-regional, cross-period comparison that codes films on a common scheme, and little attention to the cultural-economic dimension created by the recent pan-Indian success of regionally rooted folklore films. This paper attempts a first step toward filling that gap.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study uses qualitative content analysis supported by simple descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), following the general logic of Krippendorff (2018). Films are the unit of analysis. The aim is analytical generalisation about modes of representation, not statistical inference about all Indian cinema.

Sampling

A purposive sample was drawn using four criteria: (a) a feature-length film; (b) a narrative explicitly tied to an identifiable Indian folk tale, legend, belief figure or ritual tradition, as established by the film's credits, the director's statements or published scholarship; (c) diversity of language, region and period; and (d) sufficient published documentation

to permit verification. Pan-Indian epic and purely devotional mythologicals (Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranic stories) and animated films were excluded so that the focus remained on regionally specific folk material. Nine films met the criteria (Table 1). The sample is deliberately illustrative rather than exhaustive.

Coding scheme

Each film was coded on five variables: language, decade of release, folk source type (folktale/literary retelling; legend/deity myth; supernatural belief figure; ritual/performance tradition), narrative theme (six non-exclusive categories derived from Bascom's functions and from a first reading of the sample) and dominant mode of cinematic treatment (art cinema; mainstream musical or romance; genre hybrid; ritual spectacle/action epic; devotional). Themes were coded as present where they structure the main plot, not where they appear incidentally.

Data sources and limitations

Film attributes were verified from credits and from published encyclopaedic, press and scholarly sources listed in the references. Commercial figures are as reported in the press and have not been independently audited. Coding was carried out by a single researcher, so the thematic coding in Table 2 is interpretive; an inter-coder reliability check on an expanded sample is recommended before the scheme is used for inferential claims. The release year of *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* is taken as 1969 (some archival listings give 1968).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Profile of the sample

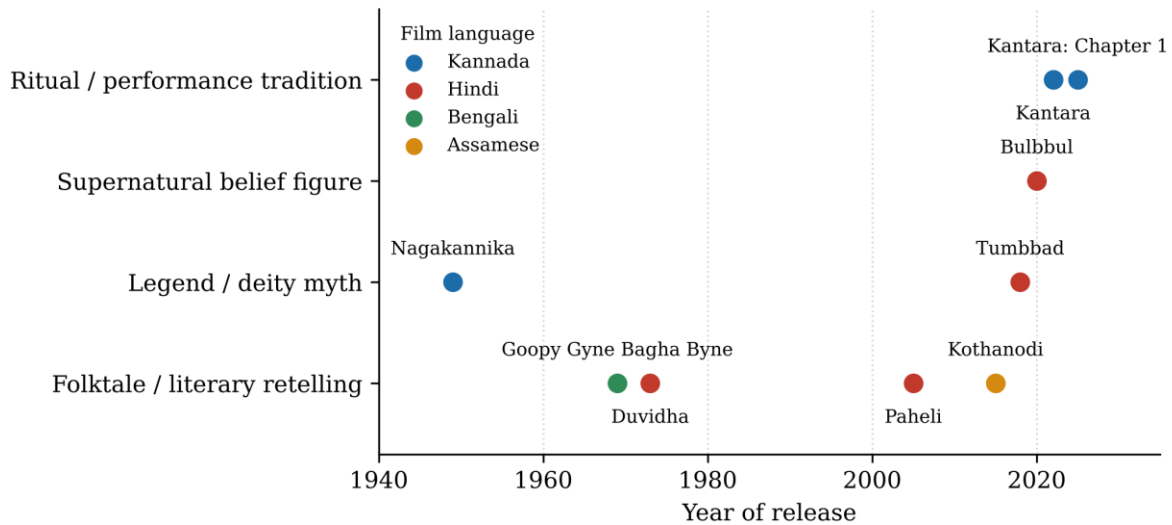
Table 1. Films in the sample and their folk sources

#	Film	Year	Language	Region / tradition	Folk source (as documented)
1	<i>Nagakannika</i>	1949	Kannada	Karnataka	Snake-deity (naga) legend; listed among films 'totally based on folklore' (<i>Folklore in Cinema (study)</i> , n.d.)
2	<i>Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne</i>	1969	Bengali	Bengal	Children's tale by Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury (<i>Sandesh</i> , 1915), described as part folk tale, part benign ghost story
3	<i>Duvidha</i>	1973	Hindi	Rajasthan	Rajasthani folktale of a ghost who impersonates a merchant's son, retold by Vijaydan Detha
4	<i>Paheli</i>	2005	Hindi	Rajasthan	Same Detha tale (<i>Duvidha</i>), re-adapted for mainstream audiences
5	<i>Kothanodi</i>	2015	Assamese	Assam	Four tales from the folk collection <i>Burhi Air Sadhu</i>
6	<i>Tumbbad</i>	2018	Hindi	Maharashtra	Local legend of the cursed deity Hastar; early part inspired by Marathi horror writer Narayan Dharap
7	<i>Bulbbul</i>	2020	Hindi	Bengal	Folk belief in the <i>chudail</i> (witch figure with twisted feet)
8	<i>Kantara</i>	2022	Kannada	Tulu Nadu (coastal Karnataka)	<i>Bhoota Kola</i> ritual and the Panjurli and Guliga <i>daiva</i> traditions
9	<i>Kantara: A Legend – Chapter 1</i>	2025	Kannada	Tulu Nadu / Kadamba-era Karnataka	Mythical origins of the Panjurli <i>daiva</i> legend (prequel)

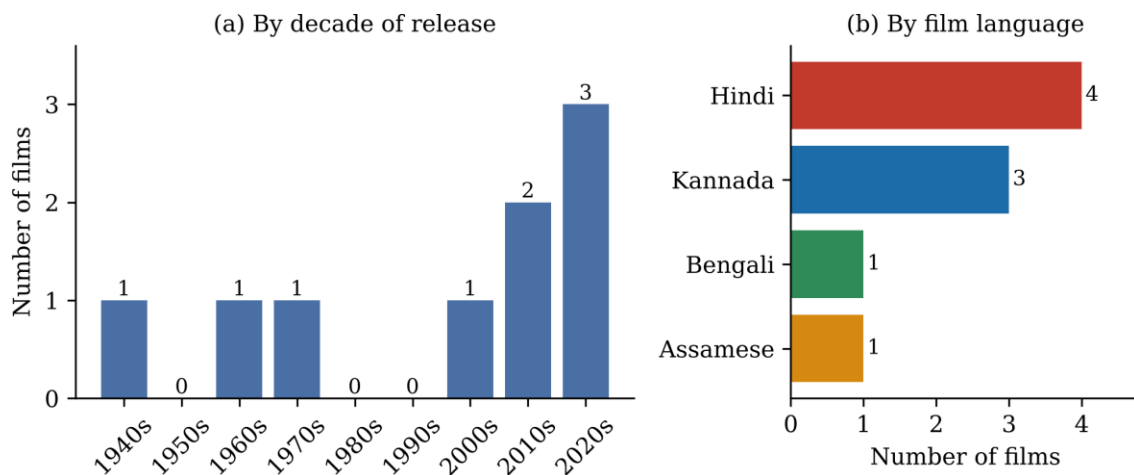
Sources: film credits and documentation cited in the text and listed in the references; classification by the author.

Four of the nine films (44%) are in Hindi, three (33%) in Kannada, and one each (11% each) in Bengali and Assamese. Hindi cinema, in other words, accounts for the largest share but not a majority, and three of the four non-Hindi languages in the sample are

regional. Five of the nine films (56%) were released in or after 2015, and three (33%) since 2020 (Figure 2), indicating a marked contemporary revival of interest, although the small sample cautions against reading this as a statistical trend.

Figure 1. Films in the sample by year, folk source type and language

Source: author's coding (N = 9).

Figure 2. Distribution of sampled films by decade and language

Source: author's coding (N = 9).

Folk source types (RQ1)

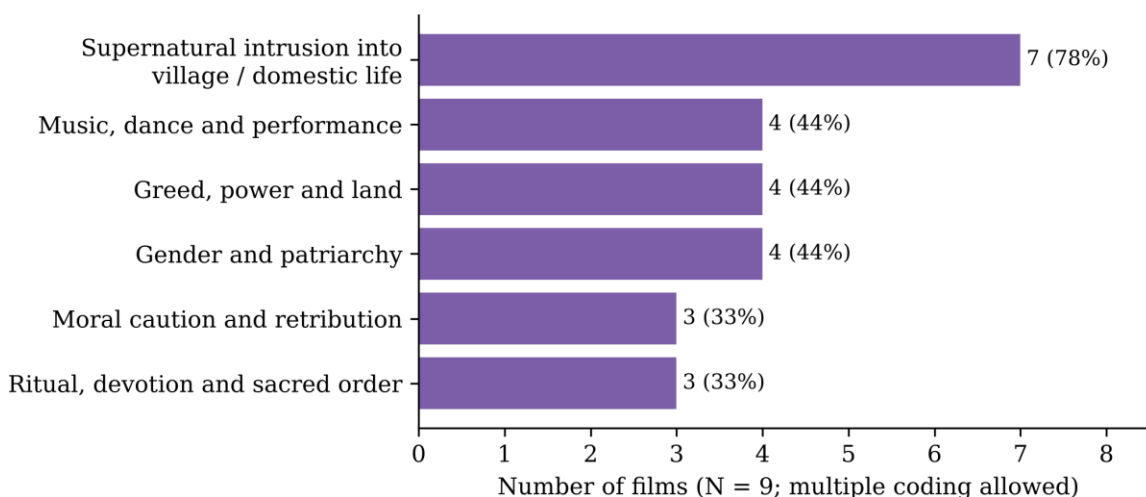
Four films (44%) are adaptations of folktales or literary retellings of folktales (Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne, Duvidha, Paheli and Kothanodi); two (22%) rest on legends of deities or demons (Nagakannika and Tumbbad); two (22%) derive from living ritual and performance traditions (Kantara and its prequel); and one (11%) is built on a pan-regional belief figure, the chudail (Bulbbul) (Figure 4a). Two

points deserve emphasis. First, the folktale-derived films are largely mediated by literary collectors: Detha for *Duvidha* and *Paheli*, Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury for *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, and the *Burhi Aair Sadhu* collection for *Kothanodi*. Second, the ritual-derived films are the only ones that bring a living performance, Bhoota Kola, directly into the frame, which raises the problem of representation discussed in Section 5.

Themes and narrative functions (RQ2)**Table 2. Thematic coding matrix (● = theme structures the main plot)**

Film (year)	Spirit intrusion	Gender & patriarchy	Greed, power & land	Music & dance	Ritual & sacred order	Moral caution	Total
<i>Nagakannika</i> (1949)	●	—	—	—	●	—	2
<i>Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne</i> (1969)	●	—	●	●	—	—	3
<i>Duvidha</i> (1973)	●	●	—	—	—	—	2
<i>Paheli</i> (2005)	●	●	—	●	—	—	3
<i>Kothanodi</i> (2015)	●	●	—	—	—	—	2
<i>Tumbbad</i> (2018)	●	—	●	—	—	●	3
<i>Bulbbul</i> (2020)	●	●	—	—	—	●	3
<i>Kantara</i> (2022)	—	—	●	●	●	●	4
<i>Kantara: Chapter 1</i> (2025)	—	—	●	●	●	—	3
Films (n)	7	4	4	4	3	3	25
Share of sample	78%	44%	44%	44%	33%	33%	—

Source: author's coding. Themes are non-exclusive; 'spirit intrusion' (supernatural intrusion into human settlements) denotes a ghost, demon, witch or spirit entering human settlements, while the divine presence in the *Kantara* films is coded under ritual and sacred order.

Figure 3. Frequency of narrative themes across the sample

Source: author's coding (N = 9; multiple coding allowed; total codes = 25).

Supernatural intrusion is the most frequent device, structuring seven of the nine films (78%). Read

through Bascom's functions, the intrusion typically serves education and the maintenance of conformity

in the older oral versions, since the ghost or demon is a warning, but in the cinematic versions it frequently becomes an instrument for social critique. In *Duvidha*, *Paheli*, *Kothanodi* and *Bulbbul* the supernatural is bound up with the position of women within the household, and gender and patriarchy appear in four films (44%). By contrast, the Kantara films relocate the supernatural from the domestic sphere to the forest and the village commons, where the deity acts as the guardian of a

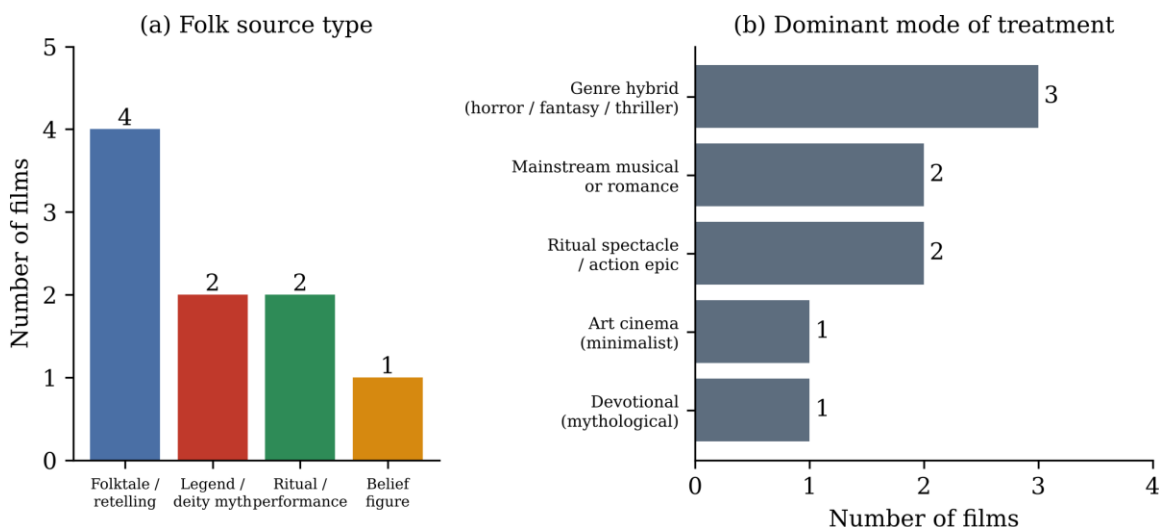
moral order concerned with land and power. Greed, power and land is coded in four films (44%), and moral caution and retribution in three (33%). Music, dance and performance structure four films (44%), though for different reasons: as a vehicle of magical power in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne*, as song-and-dance entertainment in *Paheli*, and as the ritual centre of the *Kantara* films.

Strategies of cinematic translation (RQ3)

Table 3. Typology of cinematic strategies in translating folk narratives

Strategy	Characteristic features	Illustrative films
Art-cinema minimalism	Stylised framing, non-linear narration, location shooting in the source community, folk music; the tale is treated as a formal and philosophical resource	<i>Duvidha</i> : shot in the author's village of Borunda; cinematography inspired by Kangra and Basohli miniature painting (Scroll.in)
Mainstream musical or romance	Star casting, songs, a clear narrative arc; the tale is simplified and often made more accessible	<i>Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne</i> ; <i>Paheli</i> (re-casting the heroine with greater agency)
Genre hybridisation	Folk motif embedded in horror, fantasy or thriller conventions; moral and social commentary delivered through genre	<i>Tumbbad</i> ; <i>Bulbbul</i> ; <i>Kothanodi</i>
Ritual spectacle and action epic	Living performance placed at the narrative centre; heavy use of sound, costume, fire and large-scale set pieces; multilingual release	<i>Kantara</i> ; <i>Kantara: Chapter 1</i>
Devotional / mythological	Deity or serpent-worship legend as the basis of a moral story addressed to a devout audience	<i>Nagakannika</i> (as classified in the secondary literature)

Source: author's analysis based on the cited film documentation and criticism.

Figure 4. Folk source types and dominant modes of treatment in the sample

Source: author's coding (N = 9).

Genre hybridisation is the most frequent mode of treatment (three films, 33%), followed in equal numbers by mainstream musical/romance (two) and ritual spectacle (two) (Figure 4b). Only one film (*Duvidha*) belongs to art cinema and one (*Nagakannika*) to the devotional type. The distribution suggests that fidelity to the oral form is the exception: the dominant strategy is to use the folk motif as a seed for genre storytelling. The director of *Tumbbad* himself has said that the film is not a horror film but a fantasy thriller with elements

of horror, and has acknowledged that only the first part refers to Dharap's stories while the rest is his own invention (*The Week*, 2019). In the same article a filmmaker observes that Indian folklore contains few outright horror narratives, since horror in folk tales is usually incidental to a moral or instructive story, so that filmmakers must 'work with the material' to shape horror from it. In other words, the 'folk horror' label is, to a considerable degree, a product of cinema's genre conventions.

Recognition and reception (RQ4)

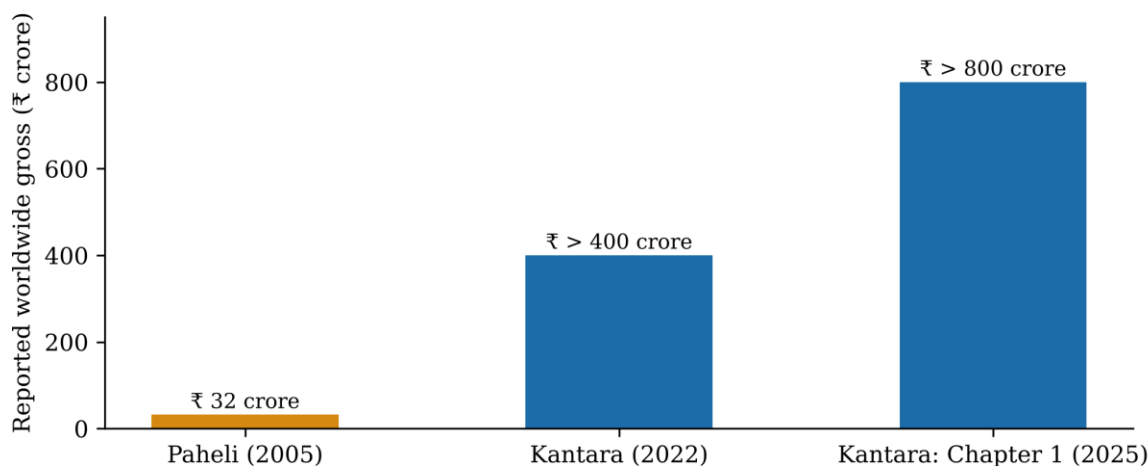
Table 4. Documented recognition and reception of selected films

Film	Documented recognition / reception
<i>Duvidha</i> (1973)	National Film Award for Best Direction (Mani Kaul); Critics Award for Best Film at the 1974 Filmfare Awards (Wikipedia, 'Duvidha')
<i>Paheli</i> (2005)	India's official entry to the 79th Academy Awards; reported worldwide gross of ₹32 crore (Wikipedia, 'Paheli')
<i>Kothanodi</i> (2015)	Best Feature Film in Assamese at the 63rd National Film Awards (Telecom Talk, 2022)
<i>Tumbbad</i> (2018)	First Indian film to open Venice Critics' Week; re-released theatrically after initial limited release (<i>Folklore in Cinema (study)</i> , n.d.; Strange Horizons, 2018; T2, 2024)
<i>Bulbbul</i> (2020)	Released directly on Netflix on 24 June 2020; produced by Clean Slate Filmz (Wikipedia, 'Bulbbul')

Film	Documented recognition / reception
<i>Kantara</i> (2022)	National Award for Popular Film Providing Wholesome Entertainment; Rishab Shetty won Best Actor at the 70th National Film Awards; reported budget ₹16 crore and worldwide earnings above ₹400 crore (Deccan Chronicle/PTI, 2024)
<i>Kantara: Chapter 1</i> (2025)	Released 2 October 2025 in seven languages including Kannada, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Bengali and English; reported gross above ₹800 crore (India.com, 2025)

Note: figures are as reported in the cited sources and have not been audited.

Figure 5. Reported worldwide gross of three folklore-based films (₹ crore)



Source: Wikipedia (Paheli); Deccan Chronicle/PTI (Kantara); India.com (Kantara: Chapter 1). Reported figures; “>” indicates ‘over’ the stated amount.

Two features of the reception data stand out. First, the older, more formally ambitious films were recognised primarily through critical and state recognition (National Film Awards, festival honours), whereas the two recent films in the Kannada language achieved extraordinary commercial returns through multilingual release. Second, *Kantara* was reportedly made on a budget of ₹16 crore and earned more than ₹400 crore worldwide, a ratio of roughly 25 to 1 on reported figures (Deccan Chronicle/PTI, 2024), and its prequel was reported to have exceeded ₹800 crore (India.com, 2025). From the standpoint of cultural economics, such returns indicate that locally rooted, ritual-centred narratives can command a national and even global audience, which strengthens the commercial incentive for filmmakers to draw on folk traditions.

DISCUSSION

The ghost as a vehicle of social critique

The most striking pattern in the sample is the convergence of the supernatural and the gendered. In Detha’s tale, a ghost falls in love with a merchant’s bride and impersonates her absent husband; the wife is left with a dilemma (*duvidha*) that the oral version barely frames as a choice at all. Mani Kaul’s 1973 film transforms this into a meditation on narration and attention, while *Paheli* diverges from its source and earlier adaptations by giving the heroine more feminist agency (Wikipedia, ‘Paheli’). Jiwrajka (2021) reads the successive retellings as increasing the potential for subversion and resistance by the female protagonist. *Bulbbul* follows the same logic with a different folk figure:

the chudail, long a symbol of fear, is reinterpreted so that the revelation of her identity casts her as an avenging power. Reviewers read the film as a fable about the culture of silence imposed on women (Rotten Tomatoes, 2020). In Bascom's terms, these films retain the function of 'validating culture' only to invert it: the folk motif that once warned women against transgression is made to indict the order that produced the warning.

From art-house experiment to pan-Indian spectacle

The trajectory from *Duvidha* to the Kantara films is a trajectory from folklore as form to folklore as spectacle. Kaul shot in the village of the author, with Detha himself and the folklorist Komal Kothari among the skeletal crew (Scroll.in, n.d.), and used static frames and dissolves to reproduce the temporality of oral narration. By contrast, *Kantara* places the Bhoota Kola ritual at the beginning and end of the film and, as one critic observes, employs it for its spectacular and dramatic potential, with exotic value heightened by symmetrical framing and an immersive soundtrack (The Seventh Art, n.d.). Press coverage, equally, presents the film as a bridge between ancient art forms and modern storytelling that introduces global audiences to the living traditions of Tulu Nadu (Eastern Eye, n.d.). Both descriptions can be true at once: the film extends the reach of a regional tradition while shaping how that tradition is seen.

Authenticity and contestation

The *Kantara* case also illustrates how cinematic portrayals of folk culture become sites of political and cultural contestation. One critical account records that the film's use of Bhoota Kola, a ritual prevalent among indigenous or 'Adivasi' communities in coastal Karnataka, became a bone of contention in the culture wars, with supporters reading in it the expression of a pan-Indian Hindu identity, and others questioning whether the ritual had been assimilated 'upwards' into mainstream Hinduism (The Seventh Art, n.d.). Another account stresses that the mythology portrayed is not derived from classical Sanskrit texts or pan-Indian epic

traditions but from a local, living folk tradition in which spirit deities' act as enforcers of moral order when human institutions fail (Mythlok, n.d.). Scholarship on the Tulu spirit-cult traditions (Claus, 1975) reminds us that these practices are embedded in local systems of land, caste, kinship and performance, and cannot be reduced to a single religious label. This paper takes no position on the interpretive dispute, but it records the dispute itself as evidence of the central point: when folklore enters mass cinema, the question of who speaks for the tradition moves from the village to the national public sphere.

Authorship and acknowledgement

A second difficulty concerns authorship. The folk tale is communally owned, but each filmic retelling passes through named individuals. Jiwrajka (2021) points to the inconsistent acknowledgement of Detha's folk sources as a manifestation of the 'vexing question' of authorship in adapting the folk. Commentary on *Duvidha* also notes that Kaul could have been more forthright in acknowledging the contributions of Detha to the screenplay and of the painter Akbar Padamsee, who partly financed the film, to its production (Scroll.in, n.d.). Where the source is an entire living community, the problem is more difficult still, since there is no individual to credit and no established mechanism for benefit-sharing.

Policy and practice implications

Four practical implications follow from the analysis. First, filmmakers and producers could adopt a documentation protocol in which folk sources, informants and performing communities are credited in a consistent manner, and in which consultation with community custodians is recorded. Second, state film bodies, which financed art-house work such as *Duvidha* through the National Film Development Corporation, may consider supporting archival documentation of traditions that mainstream films bring into the public eye. Third, benefit-sharing arrangements, for example fixed contributions to community cultural funds, deserve exploration in light of the reported scale of returns

from recent folklore films. Fourth, educators and curriculum designers can use these films as entry points into regional folklore, provided that the distinction between the film's version and the living tradition is made explicit.

CONCLUSION

This paper has analysed nine Indian films that draw on folk tales, legends, belief figures and ritual traditions. The analysis shows that supernatural intrusion is the principal device through which folklore is dramatised on screen, that gender and patriarchy form a recurrent critical theme in adaptations from Rajasthan, Assam and Bengal, and that genre hybridisation rather than ethnographic fidelity is the leading strategy of translation. The two recent Kannada films take a different route, converting living ritual performance into spectacle with a very large reported commercial reach. Across these cases, cinema emerges as both a preserver and a transformer of folk culture: it carries regional traditions to a vast audience, but in the process it reshapes them to the grammar of genre and the logic of the market.

Limitations and future research. The sample is small and purposive, thematic coding was done by a single researcher, and commercial figures are press-reported. Future work could expand the sample to include Bhojpuri, Marathi, Malayalam, Odia, Telugu, Tamil and North-Eastern cinemas, introduce multiple coders and reliability statistics, incorporate audience-reception studies and fieldwork with source communities, and compare cinematic versions with recorded oral versions using Propp's and Thompson's tools.

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