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Toppling the Tables:

Navigating from the Periphery to the Center through (Inter)sectional Subalternity in Regional South Asian Films

BY KIKEE DOMA BHUTIA* AND NIMESHIKA VENKATESAN**

EDITOR'S NOTE: *South Asians, although geographically distant from New Yorkers, are deeply connected to them. Many South Asians, as well as the diaspora in New York and elsewhere, have admired Hollywood films for decades. Notably, India is one of the prime markets that Hollywood is keen on penetrating. This dynamic engenders significant cultural challenges for regional traditions, especially with the mainstream film industry's pursuit of box office success. The dynamic also presents a threat of homogenization, which has occurred in mainstream films. However, the emergence of virtual Over-the-top platforms provides hope for preserving the region's cultural diversity amid formidable challenges from global and national media trends. This article sheds light on these intricate dynamics.*

For New York residents interested in watching regional Indian films, there are numerous online resources available. Streaming platforms, like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hotstar (now Disney+ Hotstar in the United States), SonyLIV, ZEE5, Mubi, Eros Now, and Hoichoi offer a diverse selection of Indian regional and independent films, across many languages, such as Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Bengali, and catering to a variety of cinematic tastes. Local cultural centers and film festivals also offer opportunities to explore Indian independent, regional, and noncommercial films. New York hosts the New York Indian Film Festival and the South Asian International Film, among others, showcasing diverse Indian cinema. Moreover, events hosted by the Consulate General of India, New York, and other Indian cultural organizations often feature screenings of films in different languages. Public libraries, including the New York Public Library, provide access to films through DVD collections or streaming services like Kanopy or Hoopla, often featuring independent and noncommercial films, including Indian content. Additionally, YouTube and free platforms like MX Player offer many Indian films, from blockbusters to independent and regional cinema. For those preferring the big screen experience, local cinemas and art houses, like Lincoln Center's Film Society and the Museum of Modern Art, frequently host screenings of Indian regional and noncommercial films.

New Yorkers can immerse themselves in the rich tapestry of Indian cinema, encompassing mainstream releases, independent gems, and regional masterpieces, thus, enriching their cinematic experiences.

Introduction

South Asian regional cinema has consistently served as a medium for exploring the multifaceted nature of identity and complex social structure. Currently, amid the newly emerging film genres, a subgenre of horror, featuring supernatural entities, illuminates the role of religious belief and narratives in shaping South Asian worldviews. The emergence of such films topples the East/West dichotomies, by bringing to the forefront the dynamics between the regional/vernacular and the dominant/mainstream within the Indian context. Therefore, this study proposes an appendage of *intersectionality* to *subalternity*, arriving at the framework of *intersectional subalternity*, manifesting at the level of ideas and ideologies to study the movement from the periphery to the center in the South Asian cinematic genre. It explores how regional films in the vernacular confront disadvantage and discrimination on the inside, challenging the commonly explored narrative tropes in mainstream films (1). Furthermore, a study of the narratives portrayed in the emerging niche of Indigenous storytelling in regional films uniquely reflects South Asian supernatural beliefs. Thus, through their diverse and authentic narratives, these films become windows into the ontological makeup of local communities. In the process, they disrupt the dominance of mainstream cinema. Thus, through the examination of select case studies from two representative films, namely, Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* (2020) in Bengali/Hindi (West Bengal, East India) and Nirmal Sahadev's *Kumari* (2022) in Malayalam (from the region of Kerala, South India), this study applies *intersectional subalternity* to examine stories inspired by supernatural narratives arising from distinct local belief systems. It explores the stories inspired by the stories related to two distinct, nonhuman entities, namely, the *Chudail* and *Chathan* in the films. These beings, whose connotations originally are demonic in the cinematic world, are deified—transforming into harbingers of justice, who aid the protagonists in attaining vengeance and retribution for the wrongs meted out, more specifically, to the marginalized women figures in the films. During the films, we find that these supernatural entities are reenvisioned as tools of social critique, manifesting

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as strong symbols of good and evil, and blurring the line between them.

The first film, *Bulbbul* (2020), directed by Anvita Dutt, and released in 2020, is set during the late 19th-century (West) Bengal Presidency. It seamlessly combines elements of folklore, particularly, the legend of the *Chudail* with feminist themes to unravel the life of a young bride, Bulbbul, who becomes a symbol of both victimhood and empowerment (2). The film delves into issues of patriarchy, gender-based violence, and social ostracism, vividly illustrating how traditional structures frequently marginalize women.

Similarly, the second film, *Kumari* (2022), released after the COVID lockdown in 2022, explores the life of a young woman navigating the complexities of caste, gender, and poverty in rural India. It explores black magic practices and reenvisions the legend of *Chathan* (3). Digital platforms, such as Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, Jio Cinema, ZEE5, and YouTube, have significantly transformed the landscape of Indian cinema, providing new opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard and seen (Thomas 2020, 34–52). Thus, by scrutinizing folkloristic storytelling, this study examines the evolution of a new genre of films that adapts folkloristic storytelling, made popular by Over-the-top (OTT) platforms that democratize and increase the visibility of independent directors, and further challenge mainstream cinema.

The Concept of *Intersectional Subalternity* as a Theoretical Framework

Introduced originally in Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's works, the notion of the "subaltern" was made emblematic of postcolonial studies by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an influential figure in postcolonial theory. In her groundbreaking work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* published in 1988, Spivak builds upon the ideas of Gramsci, who initially defined the subaltern class as marginalized social, political, and economic groups. Spivak expands it to direct the focus onto individuals who not only face oppression but also experience voicelessness, invisibility, and exclusion from mainstream discourse and representation. Therefore, her interpretation of the Gramscian notion of "subalternity" highlights the complexity of oppression. It emphasizes the need to listen to and understand the perspectives of those who are silenced or marginalized within dominant power structures. Furthermore, Spivak raises crucial questions about the possibility and limitations of speaking for or representing the experiences of marginalized groups without perpetuating domination and exploitation. Thus, the term *subaltern* encompasses not only economic subordination, but also intersectional marginalization related to factors, such as race, gender, ethnicity, caste, and colonial history (Spivak 1988, 271–313).

However, even such a substantial framework is limited in its scope, when considering the complex multilayered South Asian worldview. Recently, Spivak's term "subaltern" has been thrust into the spotlight in a flurry of events. It was alleged during Spivak's public lecture at Jawaharlal Nehru University in May 2024, that one of the audience members affiliated with the center for Brahmin Studies incorrectly pronounced the name of Haitian writer W.E.B. Du Bois, and Spivak was found repeatedly correcting him (Bose 2024). However, the person, who was a master's student, later identified himself as a Dalit, which became the main reason for the controversy (4). The linguistic chastising, by way of reprimanding the student for incorrect pronunciation—in this case, using the French pronunciation instead of the Haitian, was intended by Spivak as a conscious attempt to reiterate Du Bois's hyphenated identity as an act of non-elitism. However, the multilayered levels of systemic oppression meted toward economically marginalized communities, such as the Dalit, is crucial to understanding the ramifications of the sore wounds of systemic oppression that both lead the student to radically resist, and at the same time, misinterpret the logic behind Spivak's correction, owing to the accumulated history of privilege, as it applies to Spivak, an upper-class professor from elite academia (Bose 2024). Therefore, a multidimensional approach underscores the necessity and limitations of subalternity as a theoretical construct.

Intersectionality, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, in the context of women of color, is a theoretical framework that examines the interplay of variables, such as race, class, and gender, to uncover the complex layers of discrimination and subordination (Crenshaw 1991, 1241–99). By employing the framework of intersectionality, in addition to subalternity, we can better grasp the intricate levels of oppression and subjugation—which are often disguised at multiple levels and subject to degrees of subjugation within the subaltern context—seen manifesting in numerous ways. While initially developed to understand violence against women of color, this expansive framework also applies to comprehending the accumulation of power within certain groups and its exercise of subordination against others. In this study, we investigate the relationship between the center and the periphery within the realm of cinematic representation, specifically, South Asian cinema, and particularly, the interplay of the multilayered subjugation undergone by the women protagonists, as well as how the supernatural narratives influence the dynamic within the religio-cultural contexts. Moreover, this study has not focused on the dichotomy between West and East, nor on women and society, but rather, first, on the dynamics between the Indian mainland and regional cinema, and second, on the impact of beliefs of supernatural entities on perceiving South Asian patriarchy.

In the cinematic landscape, discrimination especially, subjugation and social exclusions are intricately woven into caste politics, regionalism, gender disparity, and rural–urban discord, thereby bringing nuances to complexities on how *subalternity* can be perceived. Therefore, the proposed appendage of Crenshaw's "intersectionality" is necessary to study the intricacies of how regional

cinema emerges from the margins to the center, destabilizing multiple intersections of subjugation. The concept of *intersectional subalternity* in this study plays out by centering narratives around marginalized communities based on factors, like race, gender, caste, and ethnicity. *Intersectional subalternity* brings forth perspectives that have historically been disregarded or misrepresented in mainstream cinema. This emphasis on cultural authenticity not only enriches the cinematic landscape but also acts as a form of resistance against the dominance of Bollywood, making cinematic representation and production more accessible (Ganti 2013, 45–6). Innovative storytelling, fostered by insights from folklore genres, emerges as a viable tool that pushes the boundaries of traditional narrative structures, creating hybrid media genres. Thus, the cinematic medium through the portrayal of society ignites social change and activism. In the study, we argue that intersectional *subalternity* in South Asian cinema has the power to challenge stereotypes, raise awareness, and inspire audiences to critically engage with issues of social justice and equality, contributing to a more vibrant, inclusive, and reflective cinematic landscape.

Furthermore, the portrayal of folk knowledge, folk music, and ethnocultural ecologies of South Asian worldviews, particularly, is significant in the emerging milieu of independent cinema and web series. For instance, the viral popularity garnered by "Enjoy Enjaami," released in 2021 by the independent label Majja entertainment, and earning 450 million views within a year, globally set the ball rolling for a new genre of folkloristic expression—from music that also trickled to other media modalities and resulted in a crucial role in reshaping the landscape of South Asian cinema (5). Furthermore, the rise of digital transformations, like the OTT boom, has given platforms to independent directors and regional producers, allowing marginalized voices from the periphery to challenge the dominance of the mainland, as we have argued here (Thomas 2020, 34).

The Emergence of Over-the-top Platforms and Rise of the Supernatural Genre in Regional Cinema

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies due to forced social disconnect and travel restrictions. Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) have gained significant importance, providing immersive experiences that replace physical interactions. Furthermore, techniques like remote directing, the use of drones, and guerrilla filmmaking have become more common. Limited to local travel, restrictions imposed by the pandemic led to smaller casts and crews exploring intimate stories, fostering a sense of "localism" in filmmaking. Independent filmmakers often collaborate with their communities, utilizing local talent, locations, and resources, leading to reduced costs of production with a sustainable impact on the environment. In the world of cinema and web series, this transformative wave has had a profound impact on popular culture, with the rise of the OTT platforms becoming the primary medium for film distribution, owing to the closure or limited capacity of theaters.

These technologies have revolutionized storytelling and audience engagement, pushing the boundaries of traditional filmmaking by democratizing access to a global audience for independent filmmakers, allowing them to reach viewers independent of big studios and theater franchises. Moreover, the pandemic has thematically influenced film narratives now with stories featuring themes of dystopia, survival, and the predicament of human connection in the face of adversity. The reflection of the collective experiences of isolation, loss, and resilience resonated deeply with audiences who have lived through similar circumstances. The lull during the pandemic became a fertile ground for filmmakers to embrace innovative and resourceful techniques and to adopt experimental narrative techniques to depict unique cultural belief systems. Such an approach not only reduced production costs but also highlighted regional cultures and stories, which otherwise might have been overlooked.

One such outcome was the rise of the supernatural genre; however, its deeper implications are rooted in the cultural education of regional beliefs and outlook that transcends mere entertainment. It generated curiosity about South Asian ontological systems within the larger global digital communities.

Thus, with the advent of digital transformation, via OTT platforms, the role of the digital medium has significantly amplified its impact on reception, increasing popularity and creation of virtual communities that shape global viewership of film and other media texts. The hugely popular notion of "netnography," coined by Kozinets (2009) in his book, *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, and his more recent work *Netnography: Redefined* (Kozinets 2015) is a favorable concept to describe the employment of a multidimensional methodological framework, which is used to explore the concept of *intersectional subalternity* in South Asian cinema. Ganti (2013, 45–6) emphasized the significance of comprehending the sociocultural context rooted in the local belief and ontological system through cinematic adaptations weaving supernatural entities to help understand their resistance or conformity to mainstream cinematic trends.

Therefore, by analyzing the narratives, production contexts, and receptions of films, like *Bulbbul* (2020) and *Kumari* (2022), we can examine how regional cinema, featuring supernatural horror, can be examined at multiple intersections, as the voice of the marginalized—not thematically, as has been the case with prior research in the horror genre, but rather now with the focus directed to the new "supernatural genre," founded on vernacular supernatural belief narratives. Thus, these conversations help to infer the challenges and opportunities faced by filmmakers in engaging with niche narratives, which are locally sourced in representing marginalized voices, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate the cinematic landscape. Through such analyses of the online public content, for example, word clouds enable us to arrive at impressions on how these films, hailing from this supernatural

genre, are perceived by various audiences and the extent to which they contribute to broader social and cultural discourses.

Case 1: Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* (2020)

Netflix Official Site. Accessed June 24, 2020. *https://www.netflix.com/in/title/81029150*

Bulbbul is a supernatural horror film that takes place in the 19th-century Bengal Presidency of colonial Bengal. The plot revolves around a child bride named Bulbbul, portrayed by actress Tripti Dimri, who is wedded to an older man named Indranil. Indranil resides in a grand mansion with his mentally challenged twin brother, Mahendra, and their younger sibling, Satya. The film follows Bulbbul's journey, as she navigates her complicated relationships with Indranil, Mahendra, and Satya. Bulbbul maintains a friendship with Satya from childhood, during which they share stories about a witch called *Chudail*. When Satya returns from London after completing his studies, he discovers that Bulbbul has transformed from a naive and innocent girl into a sensual and enigmatic woman. They join forces to uncover the mysteries surrounding a series of male deaths, including Mahendra's murder by a *Chudail*. Moreover, Bulbbul harnesses this supernatural prowess to ensure justice for the malevolent men in the village, seeking to avenge the suffering endured by the vulnerable women of the community.

Throughout the film, Bulbbul emerges as a vengeance deity who seeks justice for the mistreatment of women in the village. The village doctor, Sudeep, serves as a contrast to the abusive men in the women's lives and cares for Bulbbul. Patriarchy, gender dynamics, child marriage, sexual violence, and the fight against social injustices are explored in the film. Bulbbul's evolution from a naive child bride to a powerful and confident woman is central to the narrative. Her journey involves reclaiming her agency and challenging societal norms. Symbolically, her feet play a significant role, representing her growth and weaving folklore into the story. Flashbacks reveal that Bulbbul's feet were mutilated by Indranil out of jealousy, and she was also sexually violated by Mahendra, who accidentally killed her in the process. As the plot delves into the mystery behind the killings, Bulbbul emerges as a retribution figure, using her supernatural powers as a *Chudail* to right the wrongs committed against her. Bulbbul, despite facing various forms of abuse and exploitation within a patriarchal society, loses her agency due to inheritance rules forced upon widows. Additionally, domestic abuse and the mutilation of her feet take away her control over her own body. Finally, a horrific rape committed by a physically challenged man named Mahendra strips her agency in the mainstream world. This story world exists within a cinematic universe controlled by patriarchy.

Case 2: Nirmal Sahadev's *Kumari* (2022)

Netflix Official Site. Accessed June 6, 2024. *https://www.netflix.com/title/81644920*.

Kumari is a supernatural gothic horror film directed by Nirmal Sahadev, set in a fictitious remote village of Kanhirangad amid the forest of Illymala. The protagonist Kumari is a poor, orphaned woman, married into a seemingly wealthy aristocratic family, to a man named Dhruvan, who later reveals mental instability during the narrative. Kumari learns that the pleasant demeanor of the members in her *tharavadu* is merely a façade (6). The village is shrouded in the practice of nefarious ancient customs, particularly, the practice of dark magic and a curse that has afflicted the family for generations. The story is set against a prologue of the legend of two demi-gods, *Gari Devan* and *Chathan,* neither completely human nor divine, the two illegitimate children of a goddess and fathered by a mortal man. These children fought aggressively against each other, slowly destroying the planet, and so the goddess as a last measure, banished *Gari Devan* to below the land and Ilymala *Chathan* to the mountains. Consequently, humans, realizing the immense power of these demi-gods, began worshipping them to maximize their benefits by using their powers for the growth of humankind. As the years passed, a rigid upper caste Brahmin killed Chokkan, a lower caste boy, out of anger; hence, death, destruction, and decay befall the cursed village. Kumari is brought to Dhruvan, as bait for the sacrifice to *Gari Devan* (should she bear him a son). However, *Chathan* favors justice and aids Kumari in her quest for freedom by protecting her child. The film concludes with Kumari rising to power, symbolizing her journey from a disadvantaged position to a position of authority, as the property owner of the *tharavadu*.

Situating *Chudail* and *Chathan* as Supernatural Entities

Although the *Chudail* appears like the concept of the witch in South Asian belief systems, it is believed that the otherworldly being originated in Persia, before spreading to northwestern India. Female demons, with backward-facing feet, are depicted in cave inscriptions as *pichal pairi*, a type of demon. De Caroli (2004) identified these female apparitions as *Chudail*, based on their iconography. *Chudail* often represents marginalized groups, such as widows, childless women, or the spirits of women whose desires have gone unfulfilled (Kakar 1982, 78). By incorporating *Chudail* as a metaphor, contemporary narratives use Bulbbul's supernatural abilities to reveal her supernatural powers after death. Media texts that span South Asia often blur the boundaries of genre, presenting horror as ultimately beneficial. This approach aims to bring attention to Indigenous belief systems and folkloric themes, challenging the conventions of mainstream horror films and patriarchal norms. Such narratives shift power and control toward independent films and extravagant media platforms, as exemplified by the portrayal of *Chudail*. Symbolically, Indigenous belief systems and folkloric themes emphasize the existence of historically marginalized groups.

Kumari, too, demonstrates the existence of the supernatural through the exploration of the supernatural entity known as *Chathan*. This entity is featured in the anthology of oral legends and folktales in Malayalam, titled *Aithihyamala* and published in 1909, which was compiled by Koṭṭārattil Śaṅkuṇṇi (Śaṅkuṇṇi 2009). In the legend, *Chathan seva,* or worship, is often misunderstood as devil worship (7)*,* It is more accurately portrayed as the control of a pest by practitioners of dark magic, rather than a representation of negativity (Varma 2021, 61). The film's adaptation of the *Chathan* legend serves as a valuable example for examining how the supernatural entity catalyzes the movement from the periphery to the center. In addition to exposing the regressive practices and atrocities associated with caste-based ostracization, the film *Kumari* also highlights ancient customs and traditions that challenge the superficial nature of beliefs, by contextualizing them within the profound background of beliefs and legends intertwined within the community through the supernatural presence of *Chathan* and the practice of occult and black magic. In *Kumari*, *Chathan* empowers the protagonist to transcend her subordination and safeguard her child from being sacrificed by her husband. Furthermore, the film delves into the complexities of benevolence and malevolence, employing goddess tropes by representing Kumari in red to symbolize the Goddess *Kali*, as she breaks free from patriarchy by using a dagger, symbolizing the weapon used by the Goddess to kill Dhruvan (8). Thus, Kumari's journey and victory over *Gari Devan* are grounded in the universal concept of good triumphing over evil.

Continuities in Themes and Tropes: Tracing Intersectional Subalternity

Revenge and retribution: Both the female protagonists in *Bulbbul* and *Kumari* narratives undergo transformations, becoming formidable beings, seeking retribution against those who have wronged them—often, their husbands or close relatives. This transformation serves as a direct challenge to the *intersectional subalternity* experienced by these women, whose suffering is amplified by factors, such as caste, class, and marital status.

Female agency and empowerment: These stories underline the significance of female agency and empowerment, depicting women who rise above their subjugation to assert their power. This theme directly challenges traditional patriarchal structures while highlighting the resilience and strength of women. By foregrounding the experiences of women from marginalized backgrounds, these narratives tackle the multiple layers of oppression faced by these individuals.

Indigenous beliefs and folkloristic storytelling: These narratives extensively incorporate Indigenous belief systems and folklore, integrating elements like the *Chudail* and *Chathan*. The incorporation enriches the cultural context and depth of the stories, as these belief systems often intersect with the lived realities of the subaltern population. Additionally, they provide a platform for marginalized groups to affirm their identities and resist dominant cultural narratives.

Between deities and demons: The characters in these narratives often display traits that challenge the traditional distinctions between benevolence and malevolence. This multifaceted portrayal adds complexity to their personalities and mirrors the intricate nature of human emotions and behaviors. As a result, these narratives question binary oppositions and emphasize the fluidity of moral categories, a characteristic frequently found in subaltern storytelling.

Rebirth, reaggregation, and transformation: The examined narratives utilize symbols of rebirth and transformation, wherein the main characters undergo significant changes often accompanied by supernatural events. These transformations enable them to reach their ultimate potential and achieve their goals or seek justice (Kakar 1982, 78). This recurring motif resonates with the subaltern experience, in which transformation and resistance serve as vital strategies for survival and empowerment.

Shifting the Focus: From Horror Genre to Supernatural

The horror genre in films, both in mainstream and regional cinema, depicts stories with demons, ghosts, ghouls, and vampires. The distinguishing factor that sets the supernatural genre apart is the blurring of the boundaries between good and evil. The newly emerging supernatural genre entails narratives that blur the lines of good and evil and, in the process, also explore the caste, class, and gender propelling for *intersectional subalternity* as a framework. Some notable aspects that are common to both cases of *Bulbbul* and *Kumari* include the prevalence of female deities that can be observed throughout India, spanning various regions and communities. These goddesses are often depicted in ways that foster a sense of unity between the devotee and the divine figure. The personification of Goddess *Kali* in both films is notable. Other aspects of interest are how, in both films, the marginalized figures transition to central roles within the narratives and are symbolized by motifs such as the blood moon, which signifies their shift from the periphery (9). This transition occurs within the cinematic storyline, bridging the realms of cinema and the supernatural. The character of the virtuous wife, Bulbbul, embodies the agency of the *Chudail,* guided by the benevolent deity *Kali* and challenging various forms of subordination. Witches, who are typically marginalized figures, blur the boundaries between benevolence and malevolence in these narratives. The rituals of transformation and reaggregation after Bulbbul's death exemplify the power of Indigenous belief systems and the *Chudail* in challenging subordination and promoting agency within the narrative structure. The motif of reversed feet, which holds significance in folklore, often goes unnoticed in non-supernatural or mainstream colonial patriarchal settings. However, within Bakhtin's carnivalesque tradition, this motif gains importance, as it allows folklore and legends to challenge prevailing narratives in terms of genre, storytelling, and theme (Todorov 1984). Similarly,

in *Kumari*, the Goddess *Kali* also appears as a personified figure within the main protagonist, thus, supported by the supernatural entity *Chathan*. The victory of good over evil remains the central crux of both movies.

Analysis of the contexts and receptions of films like *Bulbbul* (2020) and *Kumari* (2022) illuminates how marginalized voices are represented and how they challenge dominant cinematic norms, emphasizing the significance of comprehending the sociocultural context of these narratives in understanding their resistance or conformity to mainstream cinematic trends (Ganti 2013, 45–6). Thus, these conversations offered an understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by filmmakers in representing marginalized voices, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate the cinematic landscape. Through such analyses of the online public content, a conclusion has been drawn regarding how these films are perceived by various audiences and the extent to which they contribute to broader social and cultural discourses. Digital communities created through social media spaces such as Reddit, among others, feature questions and queries about *Chudail* and *Chathan*. The word clouds generated in Figures 1 and 2 are indicative of how these films transcend entertainment, creating curiosity among global audiences.

Thus, we can find that digital platforms (OTT), such as Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, Jio Cinema, ZEE5, as well as YouTube, have significantly transformed the landscape of Indian cinema, providing new opportunities for marginalized voices to be heard and seen (Thomas 2020, 34–52). Furthermore, the reception of such films among the global audience spreads awareness about the rich cultural knowledge nestled within South Asian society.

Concluding Remarks: Mitigating Intersectional Subalternity through the New Genre of Supernatural Folklore in South Asian Cinema

The examination of films, such as *Bulbbul* and *Kumari,* underscores the notable impact of OTT platforms on the emergence of a distinct genre of vernacular supernatural cinema. These platforms have successfully employed vernacular knowledge systems, elevating Indigenous beliefs and folklore to the forefront of cinematic storytelling. This approach not only addresses the issue of *intersectional subalternity* within the thematic content but also integrates it seamlessly into the narrative structure, thereby challenging prevailing mainstream cinematic conventions. The OTT platforms have played a pivotal role in contextualizing South Asian ontological perspectives and belief systems for global audiences. They provide a platform for indigenous stories to flourish and reach an international viewership, thereby fostering a deeper appreciation of the region's rich cultural heritage. For instance, online platforms like Reddit feature countless discussions about the legends and tales depicted in these niche genres, illustrating the growing interest and admiration among international audiences. Moreover, the success of these films has led to the development of related web series, such as *Asur* (2021–2023), *Agent Rishi* (2024), and the recent release of the film *Bhramayugam* (2024), featuring the popular Malayalam actor Mammootty (10). These works exemplify a fundamental shift in the perception of vernacular beliefs, legends, and traditions, which have been nurtured by OTT platforms in the post-pandemic era. This movement achieves two significant objectives. First, it highlights the resilience and relevance of Indigenous belief systems in contemporary storytelling, thereby offering an alternative narrative to the dominant, often patriarchal, mainstream cinematic trends. Second, it provides a platform for subaltern individuals to assert their agency and challenge the various forms of intersectional oppression they encounter. Through these narratives, entertainment is not the sole aim, but also, education and empowerment, contributing to a more inclusive and diverse cinematic landscape. In conclusion, the resurgence of supernatural folklore in vernacular cinema, facilitated by OTT platforms, serves as a potent means of mitigating *intersectional subalternity*. It brings attention to the complex and multifaceted experiences of marginalized communities, granting them a voice and visibility on the global cinematic stage. This shift not only enriches the cultural fabric of cinema, but also fosters a more inclusive and equitable representation of diverse narratives.

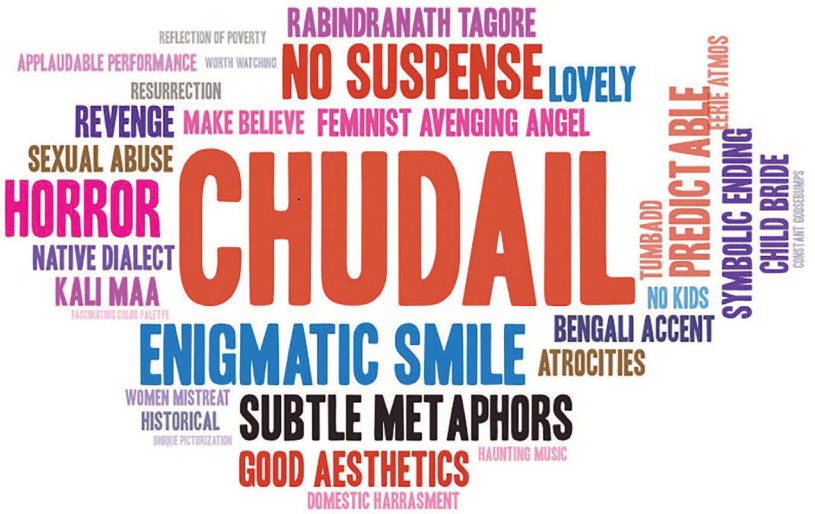

Figure 1. Word cloud generated from digital communities about *Bulbbul* (2020).

Notes

1. Mainstream in the context of this paper is restricted to the box office performance with a whopping 645 crore collection, the visibility of the directors, and the star quotient of the cast. For instance, the recent

Figure 2. Word cloud generated from digital communities about *Kumari* (2022).

2024 sequel *Stree 2* from the Maddock production house, featuring Rajkumar Rao and Shraddha Kapoor is mainstream.

2. *Chudail*, or alternatively, *Churail* could be understood to be a vengeance deity, a woman spirit who takes a demonic form, owing to unsatisfied desires. In this essay, we will use *Chudail* as it is used in the film *Bulbbul*. For more, see Crooke (1894); Fane (1975); Kundu and Rajan (2014); DeCaroli (2000, 2004).

3. *Chathan*, a supernatural figure who features in folklore of Kerala, can be understood to exist within a master–servant equation, aiding the practitioners of black magic by doing their bidding. For more information, see Ayyar (1928) and Thaliath (1956), and. more recent work by Navaneeth (2018), Tarabout (2018), and Varma (2021).

4. Dalit refers to individuals of a community that has been socially, economically, and historically marginalized. For more information, see *Annihilation of Caste* by B. R. Ambedkar (1936).

5. "Enjoy Enjaami," a music video produced by Santhosh Narayana, features Dhee and Arivu, produced by the independent label Majja entertainment. The music video is the first non-film song, released on March 7, 2021, representing the plight of the tea plantation workers from Sri Lanka and showcasing the shared history of oppression shown through the ethnomusicological form of the *oppari*. The song fuses Hip Hop with the folk lament *oppari* in the global context of the African American rap music, as resistance of the marginalized. For more clarity, please see Thiruchadran (2016); Daniel Woreck (2021).

6. *Tharavadu* refers to the ancestral home of the aristocratic families living in Kerala, usually joint families, who have lived together for generations together; a patriarch or a matriarch oversees the affairs of the entire family. *Tharavadus* features *Nalukattu* as an ancient architectural form of the 18th–19th centuries, built on the principles of *Thachu sastra*, or the science of carpentry of the 18th–19th centuries. For more information on this vernacular architecture, see Sajitha (2021).

7. *Chathan seva* still continues to be prominent in the present day. For more about the belief, see John (2016).

8. *Kali Ma* is the form of Mother Goddess in which she appears angered and aroused to take on the torment of the world. She is usually depicted in the Hindu iconography as adorned with a garland made of *Kapāla* (skulls) and wielding either a sickle-shaped weapon (*Khadaga*), or a trident (*Trishula*). She is the consort of Lord Shiva and represents the feminine aspect of divinity. She is also associated with *Adi Shakti*, *Durga*, *Shakti*, *Mahakali*, *Chandi Paat*, *Mariamman*, and *Durga Saptashati* (700 verses to the Goddess *Durga*) in the *Markandeya Purana* in the 6th century text *Devi Mahatmyam*. For more information on Goddess *Kali*, see Kinsley (1997).

9. The blood moon holds symbolic value as a prevalent motif found across diverse cultures, tracing its origins back to Babylonian mythology, as well as being featured prominently in Viking and Japanese cultures. For further insights into the significance of the blood moon, see Pettit (2020).

10. *Chathan* lore has made its presence evident in cinema. To gain more clarity on the evolution of *Chathan* in the cinematic medium, see Prabhakaran (2024).

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Acknowledgments

This article is the result of our shared passion for films and cinema, which present captivating narratives that transcend conventional limits and barriers. To lend credibility to our work, we would like to express our gratitude to Ülo Valk for his generous support in advancing our collective undertaking in the field of folk studies. We had the privilege of presenting this paper at the 19th International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) Congress on Folk Narratives in the Changing World, held in Riga, Latvia. Thanks to Nastya Fiadotava and Malay Bera for their insightful feedback, which allowed us to identify gaps in our research and fill them.

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