From Chudail to Devi: Analysing Death, Evil, and Monstrous Femininity in *Bulbbul*

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Introduction

For all of history, humans have been fascinated with tales of monstrosity, particularly that of monstrous women. Monstrous women elicit wonder and fear not only through their phantasmagoric appearance and aberrant behaviour but also the threat they pose to the social order (Creed 2007). They are the epitome of malevolence, depravity, and evil (Creed 2007). One such figure that prominently features in the Indian folklore is that of the *chudail*.[1] A hostile, female spirit, the chudail is alleged to use its supernatural powers to bring death and misfortune onto unsuspecting humans, particularly men. However, contrary to popular belief, Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* (2020) is a movie that situates the chudail within a larger discourse of abuse and suffering. Through a close examination of *Bulbbul*, this paper explores how the construction of the chudail as the monstrous feminine is rooted in a patriarchal order aimed at controlling and disciplining women. By elucidating the binary of the divine and the monstrous, the paper argues that the figure of the chudail represents a culmination of the divine and the monstrous forces, wherein the supernatural becomes a tool of social criticism. It also suggests that by deconstructing the myth of the chudail, the movie challenges the socio-cultural notions pertaining to the divine and the monstrous, good and evil, order and chaos (Mubarki 2015; Mubarki 2016; Sen 2017).

Origin Story of the Chudail

The legend of the chudail is believed to have emerged in Persia, from where it made its way to north-western India. In Persian mythology, the chudail is described as the spirit of a woman who had died with unfulfilled desires, and one who would come back to haunt the

living (DeCaroli 2000). DeCaroli (2000) notes the earliest presence of similar tales in the Bhājā' reliefs of Maharashtra, India. To date, in several parts of India, chudail is a term used for a female spirit in search of vengeance (DeCaroli 2000). She is a woman who, having suffered a traumatic death, either at the hands of her in-laws or during pregnancy or childbirth, returns to seek revenge. William Crooke (1894, 69) describes the chudail as 'the ghost of the unpurified mother'. Often described as a woman with long, dark tresses, the chudail is a shapeshifter who lures unsuspecting men with her beauty to rob them of their virility and/or devour them (Fane 1975). A characteristic feature of the chudail is her twisted (backward facing) feet (Crooke 1894). According to legends, when travellers noticed the footprints of a chudail they would try to escape her by running in the opposite direction. However, the reversed footprints from the chudail's twisted feet would automatically lead the unknowing victims to her trap (DeCaroli 2000). The chudail is also presumed to kill off her prey in a vampirish style by sucking their blood (Crooke 1894).

The chudail, according to the Asur tribe of Jharkhand, also seeks to possess all those who cross her path in order to satisfy her carnal appetite, desires that had remained unfulfilled during her lifetime (Fane 1975). She is also believed to be capable of possessing young girls and inducing a trance during festive ceremonies and dances. In an attempt to control the chudail, different tribes in India have devised their own practices and belief-systems. For instance, among the Oraons, the chudail is slated to be the most fearful of spirits (Leshnik 1978). As a result, the people of the Oraon tribe take adequate measures to ensure that the chudail does not return to disturb the living. The Oraons sew up the eyes of the corpse while also breaking its hands and legs before laying the corpse face down in the grave (Leshnik 1978). Pins and thorns are inserted into the palms and soles of the feet to render any kind of movement impossible (Leshnik 1978). A spirit-doctor accompanies the corpse to the burial ground. As they walk towards the burial ground, the spirit-doctor chants spells and scatters

mustard seeds along the way to ensure that the spirit of the dead woman is contained. The Oraons believe that the spirit will not be able to reach back to her village unless it has collected all the scattered mustard seeds, a near impossible task (Leshnik 1978). Likewise, the Gonds of southern Mandla prevent the return of the chudail by tying down the corpse of a woman who has died in childbirth (Leshnik 1978).

Similar stories are also prevalent in other parts of Southeast Asia, particularly Myanmar. F. K. Lehman in 'Burmans, Others, and the Community of Spirits' details that the Burmese distinguish between two kinds of spirits—the 'jin' and the 'dhanyang' (Lehman 2006: 18). The distinction is based on which category of spirits have 'a permanent abode'. Unlike the dhanyang that have a proper place over which they rule, the jins are wandering spirits. They are inherently angry. The Burmese believe that an ultimate case of such an angry ghost occurs when people have had a violent death, away from their families, and they did not have the chance to compose themselves before death or focus on their 'Pali kusala' (their existing store of merit) that determines their state of existence in the afterlife (Lehman 18). As a result, these spirits are extremely hostile, and they keep wandering in search of a closure. Lehman also notes that amongst these wandering spirits the most terrifying ones are the spirits of women who have died in childbirth (Shan phi ph[r])ai) or the chudail as they called in Hindi (Lehman 2006). These definitions of the chudail establish it as the epitome of evil. It is linked to death, destruction, and supernatural agency; its malevolence and vengefulness evident in its deliberate infliction of torment on innocent humans. In other words, the chudail is uniquely monstrous.

The Divine and the Monstrous

Contrary to the chudail stands the figure of the devi. 'Devi' is a generic Sanskrit term that means goddess. In Hinduism, the term has come to denote the Great Goddess who creates

and contains the world as well as the female deities such as Parvati, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and others of the Hindu pantheon. According to Saktism,[2] the Goddess as the personification of Female Energy not only creates and sustains the universe but it is from her eternal primeval energy that all beings emanate. Sakti is the 'highest divine principle,' reigning above all other gods and goddess. Saktism advocates that every woman is Sakti incarnate and hence, a devi. Interestingly, there prevails the widespread assumption that each of the individual female deities in some ways also derive their existence from the singular, Great Goddess; scholars agree that the individual female deities do manifest the varied attributes of sakti, the indomitable female force (Kinsley 1998; McDaniel 2004). Moreover, nearly all temples of native, demonic, female goddesses have also come to be considered 'devi' temples under the strong influence of *devinisation* that has come to encompass the autochthonous terrific deities (Handa 2001, 71).

In *Bulbbul*, devi or 'devi maa' (mother goddess) is a reference to goddess Kali. Commonly, depicted with a lolling tongue, a garland of human skulls around her neck, and a girdle of disembodied arms draped around her waist, Kali represents the primordial force of order, justice, and female sexual power (Kinsley 1988; Mohanty 2009). A succinct reminder of her dark skin and terrifying demeanour finds expression, as is often the case in Indian mythology, into the name Shyama by which Kali is also known.[3] Kali's form, writes Seema Mohanty (2009), is meant to evoke feelings of *bhaya* (fear) and *vibhitsa* (revulsion) in the observer, and it demands the observer to recognise and acknowledge the dark facets of the cosmos. Devoutly worshipped by many across India, particularly in West Bengal, Kali is widely acknowledged as an incarnation of goddess Parvati, the wife of Lord Shiva. According to various myths, the wild and fierce Kali is invoked when Parvati can no longer contain her wrath while battling demons. Kali, thus, emerges as the dark and frenzied Other of Parvati who fights evil; her frenzy is so intense that she loses herself in it.

Temples and shrines dedicated to her are generally found in desolate, forested tracts away from the human settlements (although today one can find them in the midst of rural and urban dwellings as well) and near graveyards and cremation grounds. She embodies the duality of death, destruction vis-à-vis growth and new birth. She punishes as well as protects. Brenda Beck (2014) in her analysis of the 'Legend of Ponnivala' describes the two forms of Kali: green Kali, also referred to as Batirakali and elsewhere known as Durga, who is the 'enforcer of correct moral behaviour;' and black Kali or Karukali who appears in the midst of death and destruction (Beck 2014, 46). Kali, thus, is associated with chaos, dissolution, end, and ultimate regeneration. David Kinsley (1988, 116) in *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* details Kali's association with disorder and destruction. He writes, '[s]he has long, sharp fangs, is often depicted as having clawlike hands with long nails, . . . she is a furious combatant who gets drunk on the hot blood of her victims'. Kinsley further observes,

> more often than not she becomes so frenzied on the battlefield, usually becoming drunk on the blood of her victims, that she herself begins to destroy the world that she is supposed to protect . . . In association with other goddesses, she appears to represent their embodied wrath and fury, a frightening, dangerous dimension of the divine feminine that is released when these goddesses become enraged or are summoned to take part in war and killing. (120)

Most iconographies portray Kali as standing or dancing on Shiva's body. While some interpretations view this as the taming of Kali by Shiva, others interpret this as the indicative of Kali's sexual dominion (Amazzone 2010, 149). Owing to her disruptive nature, Kali is perceived as the goddess of radical transformation.

These accounts go on to show that the social imaginary has clearly distinguished between the figures of Kali and the chudail. Although both these figures display a monstrous nature, the former is perceived as a figure of devotion while the latter represents an extreme form of abjection. The narrative of *Bulbbul*, however, subverts this distinction. *Bulbbul* is a story that traces the transformation of a woman into a chudail; at the same time, it is an

attempt to rationalise the myth of the chudail and undercut the monstrosity associated with such a figure. The movie underlines Barbara Creed's (2007) claim that the monstrosity of the 'monstrous-feminine' is intricately bound to gender. The monstrous, as Barbara Creed argues in *The Monstrous Feminine* (2007), is defined in terms of the border that it crosses or threatens to cross. This act of crossing over or the potential to inhabit a liminal territory without transitioning to the new realm makes the monster an abject figure. *Bulbbul*, however, absolves the monstrous of its abject status and instead, deifies it to critique the patriarchal order.

***Bulbbul*: The Context**

Set in the Bengal Presidency, in the year 1881, the movie opens with the premise that Bulbbul, a child bride is being married off to a *thakur*[4], much older than her. The story may be broadly divided into the following structure:

1. Bulbbul, the free-spirited little girl
2. Her marriage
3. Her rape and subsequent death
4. Her return as the chudail
5. Her vengeance
6. Bulbbul's transition from the chudail to a devi

The opening frame shows Bulbbul as a playful, mischievous little girl who loves to climb trees and play in the woods. She is free spirited just like the bird she is named after. In fact, the movie begins with a scene which focuses on the *alta*-smeared[5] feet of Bulbbul dangling from the branch of a mango tree. The larger narrative of the movie is implicit in this very scene. Bulbbul's feet is a recurrent motif in the plot. The naked feet become symbolic not only of Bulbbul's freedom but also her defiance of patriarchy. As *pishima*[6] readies Bulbbul

for her marriage she indicates that it is through the feet that a woman could be brought under the control of a man. Ultimately, as one will see, Bulbbul's feet will be the cause of her death and consequent transformation into the chudail.

The first time the chudail is mentioned in the movie is on Bulbbul's wedding night. As their *palki*[7] proceeds towards the house of her in-laws, Bulbbul is delighted in a tale of the chudail by her youngest brother-in-law, Satya. Satya's story at this point is a reiteration of the longstanding myth surrounding the chudail that describes it as a blood thirsty spirit with twisted feet lurking in the deep, dark woods. Soon after, the plot fast forwards twenty years when Satya, now a young man, is seen returning to his ancestral home. As they drive through the forests, the coachman informs Satya that the forest was not a safe territory. The forest, according to the coachman, was home to the chudail who had recently devoured a few of the village men. The London returned, educated Satya is quick to dismiss the coachman's fears. Unlike his younger self, Satya no longer believes in the chudail. He proudly claims that the chudail is only a mythic character and that the murders were committed by man-eating animal. However, as he falls asleep in the carriage, we are offered the first glance at the chudail. Hanging upside-down from a tree, she takes a close look at Satya as though she was sizing up her next victim. She continues to linger in the shadows following Satya to the *haveli*[8] and up to his room. As Satya learns of the murdered villagers, he begins a search party to hunt the perpetrator, adamant that the killer was a human, more precisely a man. When Bulbbul playfully enquires as to why it could not be a woman, he responds that a woman was incapable of killing a man with such brutality. Satya's response is a reflection of his own masculinist nature as well as of the society's which qualified violence and aggression as masculine traits. Aggressive and violent women not only challenged the cherished attributes of womanhood—the gentleness, the nurturing quality—but they also threatened to blur the gender lines that separate men and women. Much like his elder brother, Satya grows

up to see women as passive and conforming beings. The remainder of the narrative revolves around Satya's search for the chudail and his eventual realisation that the chudail is none other than Bulbbul.

Rape and Rebirth: Emergence of the Sacred Feminine

Central to the movie is the segment on Bulbbul's death and resurrection. Bulbbul's death is a result of gross violation of her bodily integrity. First, it is her jealous husband, Indranil, who brutally assaults her with an iron poker, particularly attacking her feet and leaving them seriously damaged; second, her deranged brother-in-law Mahender, who rapes her to the point of death as she lies paralysed in bed. As in many Bollywood horror movies, particularly those by the Ramsay brothers where the event of rape set the narrative in motion (Sen 2017), rape is key to Dutt's plot. Bulbbul's rape and her subsequent demise opens what Meheli Sen (2017) deems to be the space for aberration to exist. Bulbbul is reborn as the monstrous feminine. The act of female defilement becomes the catalysing force that calls for rebellion. It awakens Kali whose fierceness turns the entire landscape blood red. This is a strangely dream-like sequence in the movie. A close examination of the movie reveals that while the frames of the night sky before Bulbbul's death made use of a grey-black-blue colour scheme, from the moment of her rebirth each of the nocturnal frames bear a distinctly reddish hue. This change in the colour-scheme is a marker of Bulbbul's transformation. As the spirit of Kali enters into her, Bulbbul comes back to life. She wakes up with a piercing scream that reverberates through the haveli. Her scream is symbolic of the divine power she has come to possess. As she sits up on her bed, she is briefly seen surrounded by *kash phool*,[9] the same kash phool that surround the temple of Kali in the forests. Her bedroom, thus, transforms from the site of violation into the seat of divinity.

Bulbbul's body is no longer hers; possessed by the sacral powers of Kali, she is able to defy the gendered constraints of patriarchal order. And while the trope of possession in the horror movies of the 1970s and 80s offered the female character an unprecedented degree of liberty and license with which she could avenge herself (Sen 2017), in *Bulbbul* the mere event of possession does not legitimize Bulbbul's monstrous behaviour. It is the nature of the force that possesses Bulbbul which distinguishes her from the monstrous-feminine characters of horror movies. Unlike the heroines in movies such as *Veerana* (1988), *Raat* (1992), Raaz (2002), *1920* (2008) where they are possessed by maleficent forces, the reborn Bulbbul is empowered by Kali. Her second birth is an inversion of the primal act of birthing. Although rooted in pain and trauma, it signifies a union with the mother rather than a severance. She is reborn as the archetypal mother, the devi maa. One could even consider it a re-enactment of the birth of Kali herself. Just as Kali was invoked by goddess Parvati to fight the demon, Raktabij,[10] so is Bulbbul raised from her death to avenge her death and fight societal evils. Her own sanctity being defiled, Bulbbul chooses to use her post mortal powers to protect other women who were being similarly ill-treated by the men in their households.

From the desecration of her body is born the sacred feminine, the vindictive mother who delights in destruction and chaos before restoring the cosmic balance. In her divinely monstrous form, Bulbbul typifies '[the] force that threatens to reincorporate what it once gave birth to' (Creed 2007, 28). Not only does she conquer death, but she is also awakened to this supernatural power within her that allows her to transform into the blood-sucking monstrous feminine. The scene in which Bulbbul saves a little girl from being molested by a paedophile clearly elicits opposing responses: the fear of the monstrous; and admiration for the divine. To protect the child, Bulbbul devours the man in a vampirish style by biting into his jugular vein and draining him of his blood. This display of aggression and violence, perceived as aberrant and monstrous by society, is but an act of retribution since the power to protect is

intertwined with the power to destruct. By killing the perpetrator, evil is punished, and justice rendered. Moments after she inflicts death on the man, we see Bulbbul clasping the child in a protective embrace. As the camera captures the embrace, one can barely distinguish between their bodies; the girl appearing to deceptively merge into the body of Bulbbul, to form a singular whole. The cinematic depiction at this moment, once again, suggests a metaphoric union with the figure of the mother. While for the child the confrontation with another's death threatens its own sense of the self, prompting it to return to the mother/maternal figure, for Bulbbul this is a display of her maternal entity. Bulbbul is representative of the archaic mother who, as Creed argues, is characterised not only by 'her total dedication to the generative, procreative principle' (Creed 2007, 27), but also by her power to be 'present as the blackness of extinction—death' (Creed 2007, 28).

The Monstrous Feminine: Chudail and Social Agency

Bulbbul's first victim is her brother-in-law, Mahender, although the bloodstained, twisted footprints found on Mahender's bedroom floor do not immediately point towards her.[11] As stated earlier, one key attribute of the chudail is her backward turned feet. The physical grotesqueness is, therefore, central to the chudail's monstrosity. '[M]onstrous identity,' Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund (2013, 45) remark, 'is not constructed solely in terms of actions, but rather through the permanent nature of the body'. Indeed, the physical monstrosity is complementary to the deviant behaviour and it serves to align the monster as a physical and a cultural other (Edwards and Grauland 2013, 47). In the case of the chudail, deformity of the physical body definitively suggests the greater, unthinkable evil that the chudail is capable of. It is representative of something diabolical, and as such beyond the realm of the human. The movie, however, justifies such a physical peculiarity by ascribing it to brutal physical assault. Bulbbul's feet post the assault remain misaligned, allowing them to easily twist backward.

Her twisted feet are presented as a deformity or physical incongruity resulting from a lack of adequate medical care rather than a supernatural token. Even so, the social imaginary dismisses such a rationale. The narrative exposes how the embeddedness of the myth in the socio-cultural matrix allows Bulbbul to administer her folkloric justice without drawing any unwarranted suspicion. On the night of Kali *pujo,*[12] as the entire village is gathered at the temple in celebrations, she kills Mahender and obtains her unapologetic justice.

Moments before the revelation of Mahender's death Bulbbul is seen performing the aarti[13] for the goddess alongside her sister-in-law, Binodini. Unlike Binodini who seems invested in the festivities, Bulbbul comes across as enchanted. As the camera focuses on her eyes, one does notice a darkness about them. Immediately after, Mahender is found dead in his bed lying in a pool of blood. In a later scene, when Binodini raises the subject of Mahender's death anniversary, Bulbbul's face has a similar expression. She even states, '*kaise bhul sakti hun ye din hum dono ke liye kitna khaas hai*' (How can I forget that this day is indeed special for the both of us) (Bulbbul 2020, 1:14:37-1:14:51). The scene that follows is a ringer of the night of Mahender's death. With the village once again engrossed in the festivities at the Kali temple, Bulbbul goes out to hunt down yet another victim, this time a coachman who having remarried had thrown his first wife out of the house following which the woman had committed suicide. The choice of victims reflect that Bulbbul's fight is against gender-based violence. Each of her victims—Mahender, *master*[14] Dinkar, the paedophile, or the coachman—are perpetrators of physical and sexual abuse. Transformed into what the villagers claim to be a chudail, Bulbbul fights to demolish the patriarchal doctrines that regulate as well as exploit women. Unlike the chudail of the myths who is said to entice and kill innocent men, Bulbbul kills for justice. Her murders can ultimately be ascribed to the agency of the divine force. The murders committed by Bulbbul go beyond the desire for personal vengeance. They are retributions for crimes and violence against women.

As the devi/chudail she is liberated from the conventional roles ascribed to the woman. In her role as the *bari bahu*[15] of the haveli, Bulbbul had to abide by the rules of conduct that expected a married woman of her social standing to wear the *purdah*[16], avoid male company other than that of the husband's, or do as the husband pleased. The wife was expected to suffer in silence as is made explicit from Binodini's words, '*thakuron k yahan rishta hua hai, kaisa rona dhona . . . chup rehna*' (once married to a thakur, the woman should forget about her pain and misery. . . she must learn to remain quiet) (Bulbbul 2020, 1:10:58-1:11:05). In the absence of her husband and any other male figure of authority, she assumes control of the haveli and matters pertaining to the village. Part of her recognition of her strengths, therefore, involves combating the forces that challenge and question her authority. 'Bulbbul the devi/chudail' calls into question the image of 'Bulbbul the wife' who, eclipsed by the looming figures of her husband and sister-in-law, was incapable of articulating her thoughts and desires. It is through her rebirth that Bulbbul develops a sense of identity and agency. As the devi/chudail she is liberated from the conventional roles ascribed to the woman and other socially repressive norms.

While the intention behind the act of crushing her feet was to domesticate her and emphasize her powerlessness, her twisted feet become a marker of her newfound mobility. She finds herself free to traverse between the interior world of her household and the vast, wild exteriors of the forest. The forest becomes her home, a space where she is liberated. It replaces the constrictions of domesticity, enabling her to embody Kali's vision of restoring justice and balance. But a society that does not see the subjugation and oppression of its women as unjust finds it difficult to reckon with a female force that disregards, questions, and even challenges the patriarchal hegemony. And so, it tries to contain and/or silence it. Not only is the assault on Bulbbul one such instance in the movie when patriarchy tries to assert its hold on the female body, but the labelling of the feminine force that seeks

retribution as monstrous is a reiteration of the patriarchy's attempt to maintain its authority. In opposing the politics of patriarchal violence, the chudail threatens the socio-political order and therefore, must be relegated to the social periphery—the forests—and rallied against. This sort of a socio-cultural othering allows to maintain a clear dichotomy between the divine and the monstrous. The chudail haunting the forest is opposed to the devi maa housed in the temple. This splitting of the divine from the monstrous is a categorical denial of the ontological binary—protector and destroyer—that makes up the female. Ironically, in *Bulbbul*, the forest transforms into the space where the monstrous and the divine can integrate. It functions both as the haunt of the chudail and the sacred grove of the deity. Bulbbul's representation as the devi/chudail, thus, underlines the need to revisit the clichéd understanding of the monstrous feminine.

Conclusion: **Erasing the Divide**

Towards the end of the movie, when the forest is set aflame by Satya, we find Bulbbul sitting on a branch, as the fire rages around her, ready to meet death a second time.[17] Here, the destruction of the forest is symbolic of the death of the chudail, a necessary premise to guarantee and safeguard patriarchal status quo. Yet, in the very last frame we see Bulbbul reappearing from the ashes to claim her last victim, Indranil, her husband. A year after the events in the forest, we see a dejected Indranil return to the haveli, and although from the look of it one would assume that the haveli is deserted, the kash grass growing bountifully in the courtyard speak otherwise. Whereas the forest fire might have vanquished the chudail from the patriarchal social order, it could not destroy the devi. The blooming kash signify that the haveli is now home to Bulbbul, the divine-feminine. As Indranil walks towards the haveli, the kash grass sway and rustle the same way as they did on the night the spirit of Kali had entered into Bulbbul. This is the premonition of Bulbbul's final attack. It is indicative of the

invincibility of the divine force in her. The end of *Bulbbul*, thus, offers a new viewing of the chudail. It distils the chudail of her monstrous image, transforming her entirely into a goddess.

Despite the movie pivoting on the binary of the divine and monstrous femininity, Bulbbul's character embeds more complexity. What we see in Bulbbul is the coming together of polarities. She mediates between order/disorder, abjection/purity, and good/evil. She does not oscillate between the divine and the monstrous. Instead, her monstrosity stems from the divine, thereby blurring the line between the two. Her depiction raises the question whether the two facets are after all separate. Born a second time from the divine force, she stands outside of and beyond all forms of human jurisdiction. Hers is a body that is both profane and sacred. She is the monstrous feminine who is feared as well as worshipped. Bulbbul's rebirth represents the death of her childlike self—a journey from innocence to experience—and an awakening into the divine feminine power. Monstrosity in Bulbbul is, first and foremost, a medium of engaging with trauma, distress, and abuse. Second, it is a vehicle of disseminating justice. In retelling the myth of the chudail, the movie establishes the chudail as a figure of resistance against patriarchal oppression. Disguised in the fear of the chudail are patriarchal insecurities of power diminution through the reconstitution of conventional gender roles, as is made evident in the characterisations of Satya, Indranil, and Binodini. Through these characters the movie points out the ways in which the collective imagination is always directed at containing femininity and holding it captive to patriarchal norms of morality and behaviour. Hence, the identification of the chudail as inherently monstrous and evil turns out to be social construct. Additionally, the final erasure of the dyadic divide between the divine and the monstrous in the movie is an outright rejection of the patriarchal social order that primarily identifies women within the virgin/vamp, innocent/whore, good/bad binaries.

[1] The word is also variantly spelt as 'churel'.

[2] A women centric theology in Hinduism where Goddesses are believed to be the ultimate source of power, energy, and creation. Everything emerges and dissolves ultimately into the supreme goddess. It was a dominant form of worship during the upper paleolithic times and in the Indus valley civilisation. Subsequently, it was criticised for tantric practices and for neglecting male deities such as Shiva and Vishnu over their female counterparts. Over the years, its popularity dwindled with the growing Vaishnavism (the worship of Vishnu as the Supreme Lord) and Shaivism (traditions worshiping Lord Shiva) movements across India.

[3] Some of the other deities who are also named similarly include Krishna, Durga, and Shiva. While Krishna is popularly called Shyam because of his dark complexion, Gauri (one of Durga's avatars) is named so because of her fair complexion. Similarly, Shiva acquired the name Neelkanth—neel meaning blue and kanth meaning throat—after he consumed halahal (poison) which turned his throat blue. According to myths, the poison was churned out from the bottom of the ocean during Samudra Manthan, a tug of war between the devas (gods) and the asuras (demons).

[4] The title, 'thakur', refers to a feudal landowning noble. It is also a dominant caste name in the northern parts of India. In West Bengal, *thakurmoshai* is a term used to address a Brahmin priest.

[5] Alta is a red dye that women use to paint the sides of their feet. The wearing of alta on the feet (and on the palms) is a common practice amongst the married women of Bengal. It is also customary for a newlywed bride to step on a dish filled with alta before entering the premises of her in-laws for the first time so that she leaves a trail of footprints behind her on her entry. This is believed to bring wealth and prosperity to the household as the bride is often compared to Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and fortune according to Hinduism. Lakshmi is also the wife of God Vishnu and together with Vishnu, she represents marital bliss and order.

[6] In Bengali, pishima refers to one's paternal aunt.

[7] A palanquin that was used primarily to transport women from one place to another. It often had a curtain or a veil for privacy and seclusion.

[8] A historical and architecturally significant townhouse or mansion, often owned by a wealthy landlord.

[9] Kash is a type of tall grass that is native to the Indian subcontinent. The blooming of the kash phool (phool meaning flower in Bengali) marks the onset of autumn. In West Bengal, it also ushers in the festive season of Durga puja.

[10] The origin tales of Kali is closely associated with the battlefield. She is believed to have been born out of Durga's forehead as Durga frowned in anger on being attacked by the demons Chanda and Munda. Kali appeared wearing a necklace of human skull, armed with a sword and a noose, draped in tiger skin, her skin dark blue, and her tongue lolling out. She began dancing atop the slain corpses of demons. In the ensuing battle with Chanda and Munda, Kali defeats both the demons; however, when the demon Raktabji enters the battle it was initially difficult to defeat him. Raktabij had received a boon that each time a drop of his blood would fall on the ground, a new demon (his clone) would be born. Therefore, as Raktabji got injured on the battlefield and his blood dropped on the ground, hundreds of Raktabij emerged. At this point, Kali began to suck the blood from Raktabij before it could hit the ground, ultimately devouring all the demon-clones.

[11] This is possibly because her husband had left the haveli soon after assaulting her. Before leaving, Indranil is seen claiming that he had nothing left there to live for. It is at the very end of the movie that we see him return only to be haunted by Bulbbul's spirit.

[12] Pujo/puja is a generic Bengali term for worship. It also refers to the 10-day long festivities that are undertaken to pay homage to Goddess Durga for her victory over the shape-shifting demon Mahishasura, who had received the boon that he would not be killed by a man. In *Bulbbul*, pujo refers particularly to the festivities surrounding the worship of Goddess Kali. Kali pujo is celebrated on amabasya (or the night of the new moon), that highlights the association of Kali with the dark. During Kali pujo, devotees are often seen engaged in prayers and meditation through the night until dawn.

[13] A ritual of worshipping the deity primarily using a lit lamp and/or incense.

[14] The word master is equivalent to guru, which roughly translates to teacher, spiritual guide, and expert.

[15]The eldest daughter-in-law in a joint household system. The domestic politics in such a family is often managed by the 'bari bahu'.

[16] Purdah refers to the traditional practice of being veiled in public spaces that was followed by upper caste women. It is primarily a veil to conceal the face. Married Hindu women in Northern parts of India observe purdah; some women wear a ghoonghat (the loose end of saree pulled over the head to act as purdah) in the presence of their older male relatives.

[17] This particular scene in the movie is reminiscent of a surviving tale amongst the Porumai of Nadiya who recount that the jungle mother—often identified as a little piece of rock or a rough black stone painted with red ochre placed under a banyan tree—had suffered from a forest fire lit by Raja Kasi Nath's men in an attempt to burn down the jungle (Crooke, 1894, p.72). Curiously enough, the jungle mother, also known as Banspati or Banaspati Ma, is at times identified as the chudail or a spirit/ghost of someone who had met with an untimely death in the forest (Crooke, 1894, p.72).

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