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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EXPLORING THE TANTRIC FIGURE IN *SANGHARSH*: A CINEMATIC INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

This article delves into the multifaceted depiction of the Tantric figure in the film *Sangharsh* (1999), focusing on its cultural, cinematic, and popular dimensions. It would primarily examine the presentation of the antagonist figure, Lajja Shankar Pandey who is portrayed as a Tantric practitioner engaging in human sacrifice to gain immortality and supernatural powers. By analysing the film's narrative and portrayal of character, this study scrutinizes the cultural significance of the Tantric cult, and its representation as a source of fear and fascination. Also, it tries to connect this figure to its Western counterpart—the blood-sucking vampire who represents the cultural conflicts of class, power, and gender. Exploring similar aspect, this article would also focus on how the film's depiction of Tantra aligns with broader cinematic trends in India, where mysticism and spirituality are often intertwined with moral and ethical dilemmas. Eventually, the article argues that *Sangharsh* presents a layered interpretation of the Tantric figure, blending cultural aspects and its cinematic dramatization to explore themes of power, mortality, and the supernatural.

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Introduction:-

Sangharsh (Chandra, 1999), is a crime thriller that blends elements of horror, mystery, and the supernatural. The film stars Preity Zinta as a CBI officer, Reet and Akshay Kumar as a psychologist who undertake to investigate the case of a serial killer, Lajja Shankar Pandey (played by the veteran actor, Ashutosh Rana), who has mysteriously murdered multiple children from different cities. It is revealed that Pandey is a fanatical Tantric engaging in occult practices like child sacrifice to achieve immortality. His activities are deeply rooted in the tantric cult whereby he tries to invoke supernatural power by engaging in brutal rituals. By presenting such a trope, the film maker attempts to create awareness regarding such cultural practices while using the trope of horror to generate the appeal of the audience. Simultaneously, this figure can be paralleled with the Western vampire figure, an immortal monster who does not fail to mirror the societal problems of power, and class conflict. An examination of this film becomes relevant in the cultural context since tantric rituals or occult practices although are declared illegal, have not vanished from the society completely. The past decade has witnessed around 103 cases of human sacrifices under the cult of tantrism (Deccan Herald, 2022). Such a figure points to the fact that this cult is hardly ignorable in society. It has commonly been observed that these practices are generally performed the fringes of the society by people looking forward to material and physical gains. Thus, it might be claimed that more than religious significance, this practice adheres to the cultural dynamics of class conflict and inequality in terms of status. Upholding this aspect, the film *Sangharsh*, presents Lajja Shankar Pandey as a marginalized man who looks forward to immense power through immortality.

The purpose of this study is to critically analyse and understand the cultural implications of the Tantric trope and its presentation in Bollywood cinema's horror genre. In Indian culture, the Tantric figure is often perceived with a blend of reverence and fear. People not only recognize the existence of Tantric practices but also attribute mystical powers to them. Most of them believe that such people and their practices can create a difference in their day to day lives. While the majority of them avoid tantrism, a subset of the population seeks their intervention even if they have to reach out to their marginalized realm. Understanding the psychological bend of Indian population, Bollywood masala films like *Sangharsh* present such figures with a blend of horror and mystical elements. Since they do not support the practice, Tantrics are presented as antagonist. However, they don't fail to ignite the interest of the audience by drawing upon mystical and fascinating elements presentation of like dark gloomy environment, queer background score (Nandy 145; Kumar 232).

Tantric Figure in the Broader Realm

Although the Tantric figure is peculiarly Indian, it bears the strange resemblance to its Western counterpart, the Vampire. Both of them delve in the realm of immortality, and otherworldliness. In their respective plots, these figures grapple the attention of the audience by exploring their deep-seated fears, desires, and societal tensions. An important attribute of them is immortality which the Tantric seeks through esoteric rituals rooted in spiritual power, whereas the vampire attains it through the curse of eternal existence. However, for both, it is achieved by feeding on the lives of human being. While it looks bizarre in the everyday scenario, it becomes symbolic of humanity's relentless effort to conquer death, albeit through morally ambiguous means. Another fascinating attribute of both figures is their otherworldliness. They are portrayed as secluded figures operating in liminal spaces, shrouded in mystery and dread. However, even though people avoid their realm, they somewhere feel fascinated by the mystery shrouding in those margins. Both Bollywood and Hollywood films exploit this fascination and create characters like Lajja Shankar or Dracula who should be avoided in real life but watched with curiosity in films (Zamora 152; Benshoff 87).

Both the Tantric and the Vampire represent a form of power that goes against the ethical and moral codes of mainstream society. Basically, they are 'outsiders' who are feared. People in the mainstream society want to control them but are scared of the immense power they uphold. Despite belonging to the fringes, they possess the power to disrupt the established hierarchical order in the society. In a way, they also reflect class conflict. For instance, be it Lajja Shankar Pandey from *Sangharsh* or the character Dracula from the novel with same name, both fight against powerful and influential people. While Lajja Shankar kidnaps the child of a powerful politician, Dracula stands against the capitalist forces in society. Such form of representation metaphorically presents the eternal struggle between the parasitic elite and the marginalized other. Hereby, both the Tantric and the Vampire figures broadly reflect the existential anxieties and dilemmas (Dika 34).

Depiction of Tantric Figure in *Sangharsh*

In *Sangharsh*, the theme of human sacrifice becomes the main source of conflict in the plot. This aspect drives forward the narrative while also questioning the ethical and personal choices made by the characters in the film. Here Lajja Shankar Pandey pursues the heinous act of human sacrifice whereby he kills pre-teen children in a gruesome manner. This choice of action is motivated by his self-created ethical principles as per which he believes that it is an offering made to God. While highlighting his distorted beliefs, it also reflects the broader societal perception surrounding rituals and superstitions while also providing a broad commentary on people's greed (McDermott 98). In sharp contrast to Lajja Shankar, the audiences also witness Reet's character who makes the ethical choice of joining the police force and saving the child's life as a means to come in terms with her scarred past. This sharp contradiction also helps in highlighting Shankar's immorality and selfishness- aspects reflecting the darker psyche of every person watching the film.

The ritualistic traits of Pandey highlight the desperation and the sense of exploitation felt by people belonging to the lower strata of society. As a means to topple the hierarchical stratification, they often resort to dangerous practices of which human sacrifices is just one. The film chooses to present the dangerous impediments of marginalisation through a menacing presentation of Pandey's characterisation. Operating from the fringes of the society, Lajja Shankar is a marginalised being who embodies malevolence, darkness, and fanaticism to take up the horrific means of challenging the societal hierarchy. By kidnapping the child of a powerful politician, he passes the message that nobody is safe. Also, this aspect reminds the audience that the marginalised spaces can be dark and dangerous that possess a threat to wellbeing of all. Doing so, Bollywood passes the message that such practices should be avoided as those are unsettling for societal peace and harmony (Padhy 204).

This image of the Tantric bears a strange resemblance to the Western vampire, since both of them sensationalise class conflict through otherworldly pursuits of power, immortality, and control. Both of them occupy liminal spaces from where they exploit societal vulnerabilities and herd on the fear of the oppressed. The mystical practices of the Tantric figure resonate with the deeply rooted divisions of the society whereas the vampires very often resemble the upper-class or aristocratic dominance in the Western narratives (Zamora 152; Benshoff 87). Together, they provide a criticism of moral issues associated with both the powerful and powerless in disseminating social inequalities. Further, they also dramatize and sensationalise moral dilemmas and other social issues making them appealing for the masses (Dika 34).

The Film's Role in Shaping Popular Culture

The film *Sangharsh* evokes the ominous figure of Lajja Shankar Pandey to bring in a cathartic effect in the mind of the audience who too suffer from moral dilemmas related to life and death, or class consciousness. Pandey is not only unsettling as Tantric practitioner but also a sheer embodiment of societal taboos and cultural fears. His obsessive inclination towards dark rituals and intense passion for committing human sacrifice for gaining immortality creates moral repulsion in the mind of the audience. In a controlled cinematic space, the audience get reflection of the most frightening aspect of human nature like greed, moral corruption, and obsession. As such they also get a scope to purge these emotions while watching the film (Nandy, 43; Rajendran, 57).

The film successfully heightens the psychological tension of the audiences by portraying Pandey as a horrifying personality challenging societal norms. Somewhere it successfully passes the message that the societal order should be maintained for one's sane existence. The usage of an eerie background score and presentation of a gloomy atmosphere helps in building dread and suspense. Along with this horror elements, the audience's deep rooted cultural beliefs about tantra somewhere make them confront their own anxieties about faith, mortality, and societal deviance. By the ending of the film, the audience experience relief and moral clarity as they see the defeat antagonist. This not only reinforces the boundaries between good and evil, but also entertains them. It provides an outlet for collective fear faced by people in society and offers them an emotional release reaffirming their beliefs in the societal ethics (McDermott, 112; Padhy, 204).

Comparison with Other Representations in Indian Media

The Tantric figure in *Sangharsh* presents mysticism in a vivid and exaggerated manner by associating the aspects of horror and societal fear. However, this representation is not the only presentation of a Tantric figure in Indian media. Different films and television shows have utilised this trope. Even the portrayal varies widely ranging from good spiritual character to a dark and dangerous mystic. However, most of the Bollywood films present the Tantric figures as dark and menacing. They basically mirror the societal anxiety related to the misuse of spiritual power leading to exploitation and manipulation of the weak and vulnerable. For example, film like *Jai Santoshi Maa* (1975) and *Manichitrathazhu* (1993) bring forward Tantrics who are fearsome as Lajja Shankar Pandey of *Sangharsh*. Since most of presentations showcase such practices as corruptive and dangerous, it can be claimed that the narratives rely on such figures mainly to evoke fear and drama (Rai 128). Sensationalisation of these practices showcase the wider societal fascination with things that are related to mystical and supernatural realm. This leads to the blurring of line in-between religious practices and superstitions (Kapur 83).

Alternatively, there are films and shows which present them in a more positive light emphasizing on their spiritual wisdom and meditative practices. Examples would include TV Series like *Devo Ke Dev Mahadev* (2011-14) and Patanjali yoga sutra which focus on the transformative and philosophical dimensions of Tantra distancing them from the fear-inducing horror tropes (Kumar 221). Such an alternative presentation of Tantra aligns it with its traditional roots in self-realizations.

Apart from this, the presentation of Tantric practices also challenges the conventional understanding of power and agency and highlights the intersection of gender dynamics (Gupta 39). These depictions become complex as it offers a vision of female power intertwined with the spiritual and supernatural. It simultaneously embodies both— their vulnerability as well as a sense of agency. In *Sangharsh*, Reet is a female inspector who fights Lajja Shankar with the help of Professor Aman Verma (played by Akshay Kumar). Her vulnerability is revealed by the fact that she is unable to fight Shankar alone. Also, the multiple instances in which she shown to become a victim of state corruptions present her weakness and sense of agency at the same time. However, her ability to rise above those and do things which are ethically correct also depict her inner strength. In many other films like *Nagina* (1986) and

Hawa (2003), women characters are brought in the form of enchantresses who combine elements of Tantra with the themes of revenge and mysticism.

Conclusion:-

In this study, the cinematic representation of fear, mysticism, and power has been utilised to understand the Tantric figure in the film *Sangharsh*. It has explored how the cinematic techniques of evoking dread and fascination helps explore the complicated theme related to human sacrifice. Also, the comparison of this Tantric figure with western vampire archetype reveals shared perceptions on immortality, otherworldliness, and marginalisation.

The film *Sangharsh* has been impactful in popularising a modern cinematic version of the Tantric figure. The presentation combines Indian spiritual tropes with the conventions of the global horror genre. The intersection of global supernatural themes with Indian traditional motifs helps in reinterpreting universal archetypes and makes it consumable for local audience. In this way *Sangharsh* also provides a cultural bridge that showcases Indian cinema's adaptability of global supernatural ideas while reflecting the concerns and imaginations of its own society.

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