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**LET THE GHOST SPEAK:
A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN HORROR CINEMA**

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Abstract: Mainstream Indian cinema, with an eye on the box-office, more often than not fixates on the staple romance-cum-action journey of the heroic male protagonist/s. Horror films, in contrast, generate a set of alternative explorations that move beyond this male heroic project, creating willy-nilly a space wherein negotiations with the normative can take place. The present article examines how recent non-Hindi horror films espouse the cause of subalterns both within specific communities and in the larger framework of the entire nation. Examining the Tamil film *Kanchana: Muni 2* (Lawrence 2011), and the Telugu *Punnami Nagu* (Reddy 2009), this article looks at how these films give space to protagonists who fall outside the prescribed hierarchy of the sanctioned procreative (hetero)sexual order – the transgendered person in *Kanchana* and the *devadasi* (temple courtesan) in *Punnami Nagu*. These films diegetically produce horror through their depiction of the horrors of everyday processes of gendering. However, the paradox generated by the mainstream nature of these films also means that their articulation of a critique of such en-gendering cannot be explosively and entirely subversive either – there is a sweetening parallel containment of subversion through convenient diegetic resolutions that do not depart that much from pre-existing stereotypes about these very protagonists. Topics touched upon include the transperson – subjectivities and discourses; transphobia; medicalization; the creation of the social; women’s empowerment; animal poaching; caste- and sexual oppression, and the use of technology in the horror film.

Horror films have been an integral part of Indian cinema right from the path-breaking Hindi film *Mahal* (Amrohi 1949) to the more contemporary Malayalam *Dracula 2012 3D* (Vinayan 2013). Horror films, over a period of time, have generated a valuable archive of social, political, economic, gender and cultural formations of India that merits sustained critical exploration. Mainstream Indian cinema with an eye on the box-office more often than not fixates on the staple romance-cum-action journey of the heroic male protagonist/s. Horror films, in contrast, often generate a set of alternative explorations of masculinities and

femininities that can explicitly move beyond this male heroic project even as they carefully assimilate into their narratives a number of non-normative social issues that are given no voice by their more mainstream counterparts. Even so, barring a few pieces here and there, film scholarship on Indian cinema has yet to see sustained critical readings of the horror genre. Those occasional pieces that do get written on horror films limit themselves primarily to Hindi horror films (see Gopal 2012; Nair 2012; Sen 2011; Vitali 2011), and in the process, the face of Indian horror cinema has even come to be synonymous with that of the Hindi horror film. Of course, horror films are also produced in a number of Indian languages like Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Marathi and Bangla. The present article examines, with the help of two films to outline its argument, how recent non-Hindi horror films espouse the cause of subalterns both within specific communities and in the larger framework of the entire nation. Examining the Tamil film *Kanchana: Muni 2* (Lawrence 2011), and the Telugu *Punnami Nagu* (Reddy 2009), this article looks at how these films give space to protagonists who fall outside the prescribed hierarchy of the sanctioned procreative (hetero)sexual order – the transgendered person in *Kanchana* and the *devadasi*¹ in *Punnami Nagu*. These films thus diegetically produce horror through their depiction of the horrors of everyday processes of gendering. However, the paradox generated by the mainstream nature of these films also means that their articulation of a critique of such en-gendering cannot be explosively and entirely subversive either – there is a sweetening parallel containment of subversion through convenient diegetic resolutions that do not depart that much from pre-existing stereotypes about these very protagonists.

With the exception of Hindi horror films, and those too only to an extent, most horror films produced in different languages like Malayalam, Marathi and Bangla have largely involved non-mainstream filmmakers, producers and actors. They have been more popular among what was known as the B-grade audience in small towns. Hindi horror films, on the other hand, have often involved prominent mainstream actors though usually in casts of multiple stars, as in films like *Nagin* (Kohli 1976) and *Jaani Dushman* (Kohli 1979). Unlike Hollywood and most western cinematic traditions, horror films produced in India incorporate romance, song-and-dance, and other elements of the *masala* format. In this sense, they move beyond the generic expectations of a conventional Western horror film. A detailed study of horror films produced in all Indian languages is beyond the scope of this article which, in the main, focusses on Tamil and Telugu horror films. As with other film cultures in India, horror films are not self-evident categories in Tamil and Telugu cinemas. They do not have a long history in these film industries and are a relatively new phenomenon. Though early folkloric

films like *Vedala Ulagam* (Meiyappan 1948) can be considered to be precursors of the genre of horror, there were hardly any films till the late 1980s that could be classified as straight horror cinema. A few odd exceptions like *Nenjam Marappathillai* (Sridhar 1963) dealt with the theme of reincarnation, while films like *Neeya* (Durai 1979) were Tamil remakes of the Hindi films like *Nagin*. According to Theodore Baskaran (2012), the horror genre works best when fear, the dominant emotion in most horror films, is maintained till the very end without the digression into the song-and-dance tropes that so strongly characterise Tamil cinema right from its inception. This is one reason why the Tamil film fraternity has generally been sceptical of this genre and avoided it. Things changed in the late 1980s, 1990s and 2000s when certain films like *My Dear Lisa* (Baby 1987), *Uruvam* (Kumar 1991), *Sivi* (Nathan 2007) and *Eeram* (Venkatachalam 2009), more faithful to the genre, began addressing B-movie audiences. Some films were commercially very successful while others sank without a trace.

Like Tamil cinema, Telugu cinema does not boast of a long history of horror films though filmmakers like B. Vithalacharya and Yandamuri Veerendranath were dedicated to making fantasy, folkloric, mystical and horror films. In the 1960s and 1970s, Vithalacharya made films like *Lakshmi Kataksham* (1970) and *Jaganmohini* (1978) that were very popular especially with B-movie audiences, inaugurating a new trend in the Telugu film industry which up to that point had consistently churned out socials (Kanala 1986). In the 1980s and 1990s, Veerendranath wrote and directed films like *Kashmora* (1986) and *Tulasi Dalam* (1995) that revolved around the occult and the supernatural. These again were a hit with B-movie audiences, but it was the post-Varma and post-Mani-Rathnam² era that saw an increasing tendency in Telugu filmmakers to experiment with genre films, even though these “genres” showed their own variations from their counterparts in non-Indian industries (Srinivas 191). Horror films benefitted greatly from this trend. The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a flurry of commercially successful horror films like *A Film By Aravind* (Suri 2005), *Mantra* (Tulasiram 2007) and *Arundhati* (Ramakrishnan 2009).

At first glance, both *Kanchana* and *Punnami Nagu* appear quite different from each other. While *Kanchana* is an out and out horror-comedy, *Punnami Nagu* belongs to the horror sub-genre of animal-to-human transformation films. In the former, the possession takes place in a male body, whereas in the latter, the female body is the site of shape-shifting. *Kanchana* was very successful at the box-office (MOVIE BUZZ 2011: unpaginated), while *Punnami Nagu* proved to be commercially a failure (TollywoodHungama 2010-2011: unpaginated). On closer scrutiny, however, these non-Hindi films share several common features. First,

both these films expand on the generic tendencies of horror as understood in Indian film industries. For example, while comic plots have always existed as sub-plots in many horror films, such as those of the Ramsays, these comic sub-plots have always run as precisely sub-plots, subordinate to the horror narrative, with the result that those films were never promoted as “horror-comedies.” An odd exception would be *Bhoot Bungla* (Mehmood 1965) which has often been considered as India’s first horror comedy. But again, this film is more comedic than horrific within the rubric of horror-comedy. And there are no supernatural/ghostly occurrences within the film’s narrative. Raghava Lawrence, however, overtly promoted his films - like *Muni* (2007), *Kanchana* and the upcoming third part of his *Muni* franchise tentatively named *Muni 3: Ganga* - as horror-comedies. Similarly, even though there have been several mythological/folklore films in Telugu dealing with snake-myths, *Punnami Nagu*, just like the earlier *Punnami Naagu* (Sekhar 1980), explores snake-myths through the lens of horror. Second, both these films depict non-normative sexualities that lie quite low in the hierarchy of what Gayle S. Rubin (1992: 271) calls the “erotic pyramid” of societal heterosexual order. Though transgression of certain norms is a foundational aspect of the horror genre as a whole, the real difference lies in the fact that both these films make precisely such transgressions the pivotal points within their narratives, with the body in both these films becoming the site of struggle between normativity and its other vis-à-vis sexuality and desire. Third, Tamil Nadu as a setting plays a crucial role at the level of the narrative in both these films. Tamil Nadu is one of the very few Indian states that have legislated to safeguard the interests of transgendered persons³. *Kanchana*'s narrative in many ways acknowledges these contributions. *Punnami Nagu*, a Telugu film, places part of its narrative in Tamil Nadu – the estrangement between the Tamil and Andhra landscapes has the effect of making that part of the plot seem like it is happening in a neverland, far away from everyday reality, an evocation of a Tamil Nadu very far away from *Kanchana*'s then. Fourth, unlike most horror films where the ghost actively takes automatic possession of the bodies of their intended targets, in both these films the affected protagonist voluntarily hosts the vengeful spirit in his/her body in order to help it achieve its revenge. This significantly alters the more conventional generic “explanation” and typification of horror as (and resulting from) the struggle between the possessor and the possessed. This struggle has been variously explained as a desire to flout/re-inscribe social norms (See Wood 1986; Carroll 1990; Williams 1992; Clover 1992; Creed 1993)⁴. A new prototype of horror dynamics is generated here, with possessor and possessed unifying to achieve a common (very political) goal. Next, both these films exhibit a happy ending at the level of the narrative where not only the characters

“hosting” the spirits are relieved to come to the end of their onerous duties as hosts, but even the possessing spirit departs on a happy note. And last, as this article seeks to demonstrate, both these films represent non-normatively gendered or sexed subjectivities, subverting everyday norms of reality while at the same time containing their own subversions in manageable ways through the fiction of clean narrative resolutions.

Kanchana

Kanchana narrativises the predicament of the *aravanis*, the local transgender community of Tamil Nadu. While it is difficult to know the exact number of *aravanis* in Tamil Nadu since the census does not include members of the third gender, it is estimated that the state has about three lakh *aravanis* (Sekhar 2008: unpaginated). As is the case with most global cinematic cultures, there are very few representations of transgender communities in Indian cinema. In a handful of films, where they do make an appearance, they are either portrayed as villains as in *Sadak* (Bhatt 1991), or serve as comic relief as in *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* (Desai 1977). Even fewer are films like *Tamanna* (Bhatt 1997), *Shabnam Mausi* (Bharadwaj 2005), *Jogwa* (Patil 2009), and *Ardhanaari* (Souparnika 2012) where transgender people are the central protagonist/s. *Kanchana* is the first Indian horror film to deal with the becoming of a transgendered subjectivity. It is significant that *Kanchana* is a Tamil film, as Tamil Nadu has been at the forefront of transgender reforms, with an exclusive welfare board, ration-cards, and the facility for *aravanis* to get free sex-change operations at state government hospitals (Kannan 2009: unpaginated). Also, quite in keeping with the general tendencies of an average Tamil film, *Kanchana* addresses chiefly the Tamil milieu, thus highlighting a local flavour of Tamil-ness in its representation of issues (a difference evident if one juxtaposes this regionality with the more “national” story of a film like, say, *Tamanna*). I argue that while *Kanchana* moves beyond the rhetoric of the usual ghost-exorcism narrative by instead locating “horror” creatively within the en-gendering processes of the everyday through its engagement with contemporary transgender issues, it nevertheless oscillates between producing stereotypes about transgendered individuals even as it shows how these minority identities are not “other” to Tamil-ness but very much part of this Tamil-ness.

The film centres on two main narratives: those of Raghava (Raghava Lawrence) and Kanchana (Sarath Kumar). Beginning with the portrayal of Raghava and his family, the film establishes Raghava as an unemployed young man whose primary activities are playing with his brother’s children, playing cricket with his friends, and rather incompetently wooing Priya (Lakshmi Rai), the sister of his sister-in-law. Though displaced within comedy, the film

presents his family's disappointment with both his joblessness and his irrationality: his fear of ghosts produces certain un-adult behaviour such as sleeping next to his mother at night, and having her accompany him to the bathroom at night. Raghava becomes possessed during the course of an aborted cricket session with his pals; trying to set up a cricket pitch in an abandoned plot leads to the weather suddenly, dramatically, turning violent, forcing the men to run away. Raghava brings home the cricket kit, now soiled with the blood of the corpse that lay buried in that abandoned field. Soon Raghava starts getting periodically possessed, and in these periods, displays behaviours that are societally coded as effeminate. Concerned at these departures from his otherwise normatively male-gendered behaviour, his family takes him to an exorcist who forces three spirits out of his body. The spirits then narrate their own stories through the voice of a dead *aravani* individual, Kanchana (Sarath Kumar), one of the three. This leads to the second narrative of the film, quite different in character from the first; Kanchana speaking through the body of Raghava narrates how s/he was thrown out of his/her house in his/her adolescence after his/her parents are angered by Kanchana's non-normatively gendered behaviour and desires. A kind Muslim man, Bhai (Baba Antony), who lives with his mentally challenged son, gives Kanchana shelter. Kanchana grows up, and in turn adopts an *aravani* child Geetha, whom s/he sends abroad to complete his/her medical studies. Meanwhile Kanchana buys a piece of land to build a hospital where Geetha (Priya) could practice medicine once s/he completes his/her medical education, but the local MLA Shankar eyes that piece of land for his own use and kills Kanchana, as well as Bhai and his son when they try to save Kanchana. The film ends with Raghava's willingness to allow the possession of his body to serve as the vehicle for the revenge these three seek – the deaths of Shankar and his associates. Raghava's willingness to allow his possession by these spirits can be metaphorically read as the building of a sensitive community that identifies, acknowledges and fights for the rights of non-normative sexualities – in this case the transgender community. Since Raghava himself behaves in a manner that can perhaps best be described as the total antithesis of the traditional Tamil heterosexual masculine subject, the plot can justify his bonding with the spirit of the dead Kanchana even as this bonding distorts the usual depiction of the Tamil hero as possessor of an aggressive, in-your-face masculinity.

At several levels, the film delivers a very sympathetic depiction of the traumas that the *aravani* people have had to face in Tamil Nadu (or even India). One such is the trauma associated with the politics of intelligibility. Kanchana is thrown out of his/her house because hs/he began to exhibit effeminate mannerisms. The young Kanchana, then marked as "he" by society, tries to argue in his defence to his father that he has read on the Internet that his

hormones cause his non-normative behaviour and desires, but as such are beyond his control. This argument is a familiar one, used both by those speaking for gay rights as much as by those who advocate “cures” for homosexuality; the dangers of such biological determinism are indeed very many, but rather than focussing on these very obvious dangers, I shall only focus here on how the film places technology vis-à-vis the transgendered individual: the transgendered person is not presented as technologically-challenged or antediluvian or as a denizen of the realm of superstition and hidebound tradition, but as one resourcefully looking to new technology for explanations. Nevertheless, whether the argument is strategic or essentialist in this case, it fails: Kanchana is banished from home. But in a way, though the explanation fails to satisfy his father, its failure leads to Kanchana's “coming out,” leading him/her out of “his” home where he would have had to fit into one “allowed” discourse of gender exclusively, to another space where s/he can be a s/he rather than a she or a he. In Raghava's case, in the earlier portion of the film, much of the comedy centers around how it was impossible not to disrespect a man (like Raghava) so little in possession of “masculine” traits like strength, resourcefulness and bravery. Later his family is even more censorious of his newly “possessed” womanly behaviour, such as his insistence on applying turmeric to his body before bathing, or his very public demonstration of decking himself out in a red sari in a sari shop, as these behaviours in a “man” collapse the socially recognised boundaries between maleness and femaleness, and as such, expose the family to the possibility of social dishonour and ostracism. Raghava's comic and loving household thus is revealed as a space that, like Kanchana's biological home, refuses in its own way to house someone who departs from gender normative scripts. The film thus ties the debate of transgender to the larger question of prescribed male masculinity. This universalising, rather than minoritising approach to the question is rather unusual in the contemplations it necessarily opens up for the interested viewer.

The benefits of constructing a separate non-normative gender category intelligible to society is a much theorized topic in Western texts on the subject. A section of opinion, including queer-theorists like Judith Butler (2004: 3), fears that the creation of an oppositional dichotomy between the socially “intelligible” normative genders and the unintelligible ones will reinforce the hierarchical superiority of the former. Butler argues that instead, normative modes of intelligibility need to be dismantled from the inside to incorporate the more non-intelligible categories such as the transgender. At the same time, others like Judith Halberstam (2005: 153), while arguing against monolithic categorisations, emphasise that the outsider status of the non-intelligible genders helps them to realise their

oppositional potential in relation to the more confined boundaries of the normative gender order. Halberstam is of the view that the differences that transgendered people and other subcultures represent will be completely subsumed within liberal humanist politics if not allowed an independent position. While films seldom consistently pursue ideological or theoretical arguments, they nevertheless reveal/reflect upon the societal needs, concerns and issues of their time. It is here that films like *Kanchana* have a role to play in espousing the cause of society's subalterns. *Kanchana* can be seen as falling into this line of argument in its demand for a distinctly intelligible identity for the transgendered individual and community. *Kanchana*, giving a congratulatory speech for Geetha's coming first in the state level school-leaving exams, appreciates the efforts of Tamil Nadu state to create a separate category for people like them – this of course is a reflection of reality, as Tamil Nadu is the first Indian state to have officially recognised the transgender community in public documents such as ration-cards with a separate “third gender” category. In 2006, the state government passed a landmark order through its Department of Social Welfare that admission in schools and colleges should not be denied on the basis of sex-identification. Thus, while the generation of *Kanchana* could not fulfil their educational aspirations – the young *Kanchana* had wished to study medicine but discrimination sees to it that s/he cannot gain entry even to schools because of his/her transgender identity - Geetha is able to come top in the school exams. Thus, the film suggests that creating a publicly validated, legally recognised separate identity for the transgender community will indeed help destroy discrimination rooted within gender dimorphism.

At the same time, this battle against discrimination cannot be won so easily, as the film shows in its violent rendition of the land-ownership conflict that ensues between *Kanchana* and the MLA – that Shankar is a politician is very telling of the film's awareness of the many slips between the state's goodwill towards its citizens and functionaries' actual practices. The structural nature of the conflict between normative gendering versus non-normative challenges to this gendering is telescoped into the fight for possession of land originally bought for building a charity hospital: the harassment that transgendered people generally face in society at large include the pathologization of those who cannot be accommodated within gender dimorphism. To begin with, many in the medical profession treat transgendered individuals as default carriers of HIV/AIDS, often publically humiliating them by advising them not to indulge in “dirty” and “immoral activities” (Goel and Nayar 2012: 48). Further, on the one hand, even though legislation permits sex-change operations and other medical help to transgendered people in Tamil Nadu, the attitude of doctors is at

best indifferent, at worst extremely transphobic and dangerous, generally discouraging sex-change and mostly stigmatizing those who wish to change sex through surgery as mentally unstable. The film thus gestures to the limitations placed upon transgendered people even within a state where the discourse of “recognition” is already active and somewhat legally entrenched. On the other hand, is the film naive enough to suggest that all transgendered individuals need surgery? I argue that the film does not suggest any such thing, but instead orchestrates the turf war over a potential hospital to force reflection on the overwhelming power “science” and biological determinism have wielded over the trans-community, and shows this community as both aware of this power and as wanting a structural stake in this power. So Kanchana’s desire to make Geetha a doctor and to create a hospital where s/he can work can be Kanchana’s legacy of better medical facilities for the transgendered community: a transgendered medical specialist is more liable to be sensitive to the heterogeneous requirements of the communities. In addition, these professional aspirations underline another of the film’s valuable implicit contributions: the idea that transgendered people can do work other than sex-work if only they are enabled.

The cinematic medium is very fluid and dynamic at the levels of conception, projection and assimilation. Interpretive techniques assist a cinephile or/and film scholar to unpack codes of dissidence that lie within the narrative discourse. For example, Raghava’s making his mother accompany him to the bathroom at night forces reflection on how the social is created and embedded in the codes of who might accompany one to the toilet. While the more banal social proscription of incest is suggested in the vignette of a grown man accompanied by his mother, I suggest we extend our visual arc to that which the film does not show but throws up as a question surely: is the social not created in its investment in gender dimorphism in the question of who may use public toilets? One “should” be “either” male or female to use these, the correct social answer tells us. But what about transgendered people? Surely they exist? Surely they have bladders too? Of course the complex issue of accessibility to public toilets for/by transgendered people is not one that even the more “emancipated” West talks about much: the transperson who is not comfortable using the men’s toilet may find that, at the same time, women might not want to share the bathroom with them either. The Chennai Municipal Corporation in 2009 set aside 45 lakh rupees for a pilot project to build three lavatories for transgender people in the city (Sinha 2009: unpaginated). However, the small number of lavatories even in this successful flagship project is telling of the difficulties that lie in the way of a sustained campaign against gender dimorphism. The film’s jokes on Raghava’s fear of going to the bathroom alone are indeed comically gentle

reflections of how normative gender and sexual codes structure even something so “natural” and necessary as excretion.

If *Kanchana* raises consciousness about the need to be sensitive to the requirements of the *aravanis*, it also on several occasions reinforces stereotypes associated with them. One such occasion is towards the climax of the film when Kanchana sings and dances with a local *aravani* group. It goes without saying that songs are an integral part of most Indian films both with regard to the narrative as well as the film’s distribution. Songs, more often than not, constitute a part of most film promos and trailers. Songs in horror films are even more vital; as Neil Lerner (2010: ix) observes on the use of music within the genre: “Horror film’s repetitious drones, clashing dissonances, and stingers (those assaultive blasts that coincide with shock or revelation) affect us at a primal level, perhaps instinctually taking us back to a much earlier time when the ability to perceive a variety of sounds alerted us (as a species) to approaching predators or other threats.” A similar effect can be seen with the case of one very popular song from *Kanchana*, though song accompanied by lyrics is, strictly speaking, different from music as pure sound. This song builds up a narrative of its own which counteracts the more enlightened view that the overt diegesis of the film tries to establish: this is a narrative of the transgendered individual as embodiment of dread. The fear of the transgendered person that has traditionally been part of the popular imagination is reproduced in this aural narrative through its exoticisation of the *aravanis*, shown here in a ritualistic dance performance in the worship of a demonic god on a dark night on the seashore. The *mise-en-scène* created is that of a monster night beckoning the evil powers of the demon, the camera with the help of the background score preparing a foreboding tone. The gaze of the camera is repeatedly focussed on the virile monstrous make-up of the transgender group with their unkempt hair oscillating between hiding and exposing the cruel and bitter look in their eyes, emphasising their muscular shoulders and forearms, their whole bodies gyrating to the tune of some diabolical music. The lyrics quite literally abjectify *aravanis*: Kanchana is described as “a lethal man and woman combination” who will “peel and mangle you to extinction”, “Like a tempest she billows to exterminate/ crackling her knuckles she blows to mutilate”, “as you scream and shout your throat hoarse/she will close your chapter with no remorse”. Though this does not disable the film’s overall political commitment, it nevertheless points to disjunctions that are symptomatic of the inconsistencies of the society outside the film’s narrative as well as irreducible complexities generated by the medium of cinema itself.

Then, the collective possession of Raghava’s body by the three spirits can be read as the film’s attempt at equating the trauma of the *aravanis* with that of Muslims and the

mentally challenged. Historicising the depiction of Muslims in Hindi cinema is beyond the scope of this article. However because of the fact that the Muslim rulers of Indian states in the past have generously patronised *hijras* (Nanda 1999: 41)⁵, it can even be posited that the film is recreating a nostalgia of Muslim patronage in Bhai's adoption of Kanchana, but at the same time, one cannot ignore the cinematic meta-history of Indian films since at least the past decade or so, where Muslims are mostly represented in a negative light (Khan and Bokhari 2011: 2). Read in this light, the film's attempt to equate *aravanis* with Muslims suggests a perceived threat from the transgendered community to the dominant social order. Again, the film's attempt to equate the *aravanis* with mentally challenged people can be read as a direct assault on the existence of the category of the transgender itself, for it would imply that the transgendered person is somehow identical with the mentally challenged individual.

Finally, the film completely ignores the sexualities of the *aravanis*. Nothing is ever said in the film about either Kanchana's or Geetha's own sexual desires or capacities for pleasure, focussing instead on the desexualised parent-child dyad, with sacrificial and renunciatory overtones that within Indian traditions almost always imply sexual celibacy. One of the limitations of this film is that it gives in without reflection to the general stereotyping of the transgendered community as asexual when it is not rabidly hyper-sexual – this paradox of the asexual transgendered “heroic” individual is of course the other of the culturally proscribed transgendered person as sex-worker and sexually promiscuous. In other words, the placement of Kanchana and Geetha in the “good” spectrum of Gayle Rubin's pyramid alone renders them worthy of mainstream cinematic depiction. While it might be true that there are transgendered people who are ascetic in orientation, one must reflect on this film's propensity to make redundant any expression of sexual desire on the part of its *aravani* characters. The film is happy to place the *aravani* within the mould of the heroic other provided he is celibate, as the celibacy of the transperson makes it possible to ignore the various destabilisations of the heteronormative the rest of the film works very hard to consolidate. Ignoring all the counter-normative possibilities of transgendered desire underlines the film's own inability to generate a comprehensive critique of sexual dimorphism.

The depiction of the *aravani* community in *Kanchana* is closely allied to the codes and conventions of horror cinema. The possession by the spirits takes place in an average middle class family in an urban setting. The urban horror landscape signifies the existence and assimilation of the transgender communities in the urban world of Tamil Nadu. The narrative episodes meander through some classical horror film settings such as the abandoned

field, where the evil lurking in the form of spirit is hinted at for the first time in the film; and the dark night sea-shore where the transgender community celebrate the ritual worship of their gods. Torture and victimisation taking place in hospitals is a very popular theme in horror cinema. Though *Kanchana* does not depict abuse and torture inside the hospital, the construction of Kanchana's hospital and the ensuing killings lie at the very core of the film. *Kanchana* has the classical horror narrative structure of the victim rising from the dead to extract revenge. The spirit-possessed victim-hero, the Muslim exorcist, the abandoned adolescent, the mentally challenged child and the murderer politician are some of the archetypal horror film characters that propel the horror narrative forward. The visual iconography of *Kanchana* is dominated by dark colours like red and black. When Raghava comes back from the haunted field, he discovers that his cricketing gear is soiled with red blood. The numerous killings shown in the film are usually accompanied by the splattering of blood. Black is the overarching dark background in the film, especially when the possession takes place, such as towards the climax when the *aravanis* are rejoicing in the worship of their gods. The final revenge of Kanchana's spirit also takes place during the night. Like most horror films, the murderous knife and holy amulets are vital props in *Kanchana*. A long knife is used by the murderers to kill Kanchana, Bhai and his mentally challenged son. Raghava is given an amulet by the exorcist to prevent him from being possessed again. During the possession episodes, the film abounds in distorted diegetic sounds like that of the hurled tables and chairs and incidental non-diegetic sounds such as big bangs and sudden eerie sounds. The extensive use of high and low angle shots along with POV shots helps to build tension during the possession scenes. The transgendered body in *Kanchana* lies at the core of the film's narrative and exploratory horror aesthetics. Fear of the transgender in the popular imagination has been harnessed to articulate a dialectical representation of the transgender community in *Kanchana*.

Punnami Nagu

If *Kanchana* depicts horror in and through the spectacle of the transgendered body, *Punnami Nagu* identifies the female body as a micro-political site of resistance to patriarchy as expressed in anthropocentrism, as a site where the human feminine makes a political alliance with the ecological to overthrow gender oppression, at least in the course of the film. This film exemplifies a very popular sub-genre of the Indian horror film: the animal-to-human transformation film, where the revenge of the female snake plays a key role. Though snake-to-human transformation films have been an integral part of Indian mythological cinema (Dwyer 2009: 150), a select group of such films can also be classified as horror

cinema (Dhusiya 2012). Within the corpus of Hollywood films, Noel Carroll (1990: 16) has argued for a distinction between fantasy/fairy tales and horror films based on characters' belief in the plausibility of supernatural occurrences within the narrative. This article, while aware of the different histories and methodologies of Hollywood and Telugu cinema, finds merit in utilising Carroll's argument to classify *Punnami Nagu* as a horror film, the premise being that most characters in the film are rationally sceptical of the existence of supernatural beings within the narrative. Thus unlike fantasy/folklore films where everybody inside the narrative lives in a make-believe world of the supernatural and thus do not debate its existence, horror films almost always necessitate a believer/non believer polarity. This film articulates this polarity through two dominant narratives, that of the snake-woman and that of a young female city dweller originally from a village that considered her born to be a *devadasi*; both roles are played by the same actor, Mumaith Khan. The snake-woman narrative allegorises the celestial world of gods and goddesses: God Sarparaju, the chief of the Nagalokam, foresees an impending natural disaster fomented by man's constant exploitation of nature and he sends an *ichchadhari nag-nagin*⁶ couple to earth to pray to, please and thus intercede with Lord Shiva on behalf of the human race to prevent this apocalypse. When gang of snake-skin poachers kills the male snake, the female escapes and resolves to exact revenge. This revenge narrative has served as the basic template of snake-centric horror films like *Nagin* and *Nagina* (Malhotra 1986). The second narrative portrays Honey (Mumaith Khan) pursuing the killers of her police-officer father; it turns out that the killers are the same ones who killed the male snake in the earlier narrative, and that they are being helped by an evil sorceress, Mayadevi Bhairavi (Nalini), who has her own wicked agenda of trapping the female snake to get hold of the *naagmani*⁷. The snake-woman realises that to avenge her dead lover, she must use Honey's body. Honey's childhood back-story, set in Tamil Nadu, demonstrated her extraordinary curative powers over snakebites. However, the villagers had wanted her family to proclaim her a *devadasi* at puberty, a fate thwarted by her father, who, sensing danger to her welfare, rejected their suggestions as superstitious, bringing her away with him to the city instead. When the snake-woman tells Honey both her own story and that of Honey's childhood, Honey willingly loans her body for revenge, and the snake-woman's endeavour is finally successful. Transforming herself back into a snake, she returns to the divine world that she came from while Honey continues to live as a normal human being. While *Punnami Nagu* does depict the evils of the *devadasi* tradition, not too often seen in Indian cinema, it nevertheless cannot produce a sustained critique in its haste to fulfil the revenge plot.

Barring a handful of films such as the Hindi *Guide* (Anand: 1965), the Malayalam *Vaishali* (Nair 1988), or the Hindi *Pranali: The Tradition* (Kamble 2008), Indian cinema has not produced many depictions of the *devadasi* cult. *Punnami Nagu* is one of very few, and the first Telugu horror film to deal with the subject. Certainly not an ethnographical study, the *devadasi* aspect of the plot is central to the film, supplying a primary motor to the plot. The hardships faced by the *devadasi* are also central to the production of horror. Just as the *devadasi* can be seen as deprived of control over her body, similarly, the plausibility of the snake transformation this film shows is underwritten by strongly rooted folk-belief that the human body can lose control of itself under the spell of the supernatural. Placing young girls on a pedestal by marrying them to local deities and thus preventing them from marrying ordinarily is not unique to India but existed in many ancient cultures worldwide (Black 2009: 180). In precolonial India, especially southern India, this custom saw *devadasis* performing in temples, courts and private homes of patrons (Soneji 2004: 30-49). With the advent of modernity, these practices were gradually abolished in many countries. But in India, this practice is still prevalent in many rural areas even though the law officially declared it illegal back in 1988. While the census statistics are yet to accurately specify the number of *devadasis* in India (DHNS 2013: unpaginated), it is estimated that the Maharashtra-Karnataka border itself has about 2.5 lakh *devadasi* girls dedicated to Yellamma and Khandoba temples (The Hindu: 2006: unpaginated). This film shows sensitive awareness of the parasitic existence of institutionalised religion on the *devadasi* custom, focussing on the importance as well as the debilitating impact of temples and priests in the life of a *devadasi*: throughout the *devadasi* narrative, priests are shown trying to control Honey's life, and by extension Honey's sexuality. In her childhood, when everybody comes to know of Honey's mysterious powers in curing snakebites, it is the head priest of the village who approaches Honey's household requesting that they make her a *devadasi*. This ultimately leads to her severing ties with her ancestral home as her angry father takes her away to the city. Traditionally, the custom of *devadasis* leads to the displacement of the girl child from the family to the society, from the private to the public world. Similarly, in the context of the film, Honey is uprooted from her native space. Later in the film, it is revealed that the same head priest is performing a ritual in the village sixteen years later to appease the gods as Honey's horoscope, according to him, shows that she is going to die soon; he has also sketched a portrait of Honey based entirely on his own imagination and now involves the whole village in ritual worship with her portrait in the centre. Both these activities can be metaphorically read as his efforts to regulate Honey's life, and it is interesting to note that Honey is completely unaware of the

priest's activities, just as she was ignorant of what *devadasis* were when the priest in her adolescence asked her parents to make her one. This attempted omniscient control of Honey's life can be interpreted as a metaphor to relate the tragic tales of several *devadasis* whose lives too are similarly controlled and regulated by priests. Temples historically have received tremendous socio-economic benefits through the *devadasi* institution. Patrons of *devadasis* were expected to donate money to temples for the welfare of *devadasis* and also as gratitude for facilitating such relationships. Thus, it is not surprising to observe that the total number of *devadasis* in most temples was directly proportional to the fame and material wealth of the temple (Chawla 2002: 10). It has also been seen that most of these temples generated labour through deploying for their own benefit the offspring begotten from the patron-*devadasi* unions (Srinivasan 1985: 1873).

Punnami Nagu sensitises viewers to the class backgrounds embedded within the *devadasi* tradition. Sustained as it traditionally was by rich and influential rural patrons, the priesthood that benefited from it came from the same ranks. The nexus between religion and feudal social structure ensures that the *devadasi* system continues to exploit women from lower-caste backgrounds even though changing Indian socio-political contexts have at least in the letter of the law impeded several feudal institutions. This continued exploitation would not be possible without the seamless transfer of power from the erstwhile feudal lords to the present-day hegemony: the film captures this changing dynamics of the contemporary exploitation of women at specific points when the two dominant narratives – snakewoman and *devadasi* – focalise. The pursuit of Honey by the politically and economically privileged animal poachers, who had also killed the male partner of the snakewoman, can be read in this light. They might be pursuing Honey to get hold of the *naagmani*, but they are also aware that Honey is believed to be a *devadasi* in her native village. Their pursuit of Honey then can be interpreted as a continued attempt to exploit *devadasi* women, albeit now the exploitation is carried on by a “modern” economic elite located within a mafia capitalism. Further, the head priest's disclosure of Honey's *devadasi* background to one of his hired goons can be seen as an extension into the present of the past alliance between the temple authorities and their affluent patrons: it is as if institutionalised religion even within this supposedly new India seeks affirmation of the *devadasi* tradition from the emerging upper classes.

But even as the film depicts the evils of the *devadasi* system, it also neglects issues that lie at the core of this custom, underplaying the issue of upper-caste exploitation of the *devadasi* girls. Almost all the girls who have been a part of this system come from the lower

castes of the society, easy victims to the exploitative upper-caste men who enslave them to exert their own masculine hegemony (Torri 2009: 32). But the film remains silent on how this masculine hegemony was also necessarily a masculine upper-caste hegemony, instead vilifying snake-charmers, themselves inevitably from the lower castes too, for killing snakes. Thus the head priest tells one of the goons that their village was suffering from a curse as some snake-charmers indulged in illegal snake-capture and skin-trade activities in the past. The modern Indian nation's laws do not provide any recognition for the snake-charmers as a community and their traditional labour may no longer be legally be carried out. The snake-charmer in a sense thus falls beyond the pale as he is not required except as “other” in this new national formation. The snake-charmers' alleged participation in the snakeskin trade only confirms the existence of equally illegal demands for exotic animal skins by those rich enough to afford them, but the film only explicitly focuses on the former, thus underplaying the question of caste hegemony vis-à-vis “correct” professions. This caste-oppression of lower caste men is accompanied by the caste-oppression of lower-caste women, wherein the oppression also includes sexual exploitation. *Punnami Nagu* also completely ignores the links between the *devadasi* cult and prostitution. This tradition has historically facilitated the sexual harassment of lower-caste women, especially those belonging to what are now called Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Shivasharanappa 2012: 1). However this film's narrative glorifies, with the sole exception of Honey's father's resistance, the *devadasi* tradition under the guise of the mystical snake transformation film. In one sense, the “humanitarian” gesture Honey makes in allowing her body to be used by the snake-woman to battle the killers of her male snake partner is a subversion of the forced appropriation of the body of the *devadasi* by the upper-caste hegemony. Honey, in one sense, has done exactly what *devadasis* have been doing throughout the ages: sacrificing control of their bodies to God and by extension to their patrons. Seen in this light, Honey appears to willingly conform to one aspect of the *devadasi* tradition, making her otherwise emancipated body once again a site of negotiation, but her own agency is involved in this cross-species appropriation for compassionate, not exploitative, reasons, which overturns in one (too easy?) stroke the entire premise of the *devadasi* cult. But throughout the narrative her body is a constant object of male curiosity and voyeurism. When she is born, the head priest “others” her by pointing to the snake-tattoo on her body. As a young woman, she becomes an object of male voyeurism when her father's killers try to identify her by locating the tattoo on her body. Then she keeps transforming into a large snake throughout the film which continues to other her from “normal” women, which becomes particularly evident towards the end of the film when she

transforms into a snake and first swallows and then spits out the Tantrika. The camera here through a mix of close-up shots and zoom combined with the reverberating background score creates a large snake in the Hollywood *Anaconda* tradition, whose hyperbolic, fantastic scale and nature, paradoxically, detract from the sympathy the species' more mortal specimens command in other Indian films, perhaps by virtue of not being digitally altered. Whatever emotional sensitivities that real snakes in *Nagin* or *Nagina* could evoke are completely missing in the digitally recreated monstrous snakes because they appear to be a complete pastiche of their older, more authentic counterparts. Further, unlike in Indian films, in much of Western cinema snakes are seen as an evil force. The use of technology that imitates Western cinematic imaging of snakes at this juncture in *Punnami Nagu* has an alienating impact, marring the potential sympathy and compassion that the more organic snakes (with their goodness and commensurate smallness perhaps) of earlier films used to instil in the spectators. This paradoxically leads to the complete "othering" of Honey's body through the fictional creation and presentation of a devilish snake even though the narrative has shown us how a cross-species, non-exploitative volitional partnership has created this fantastic creature.

Like *Kanchana*, *Punnami Nagu* also draws on the aesthetics of horror cinema. The setting oscillates between rural and urban worlds. Like most non-urban-legend Indian horror films, the therianthropy and shape-shifting episodes lead the narrative to rural landscapes. The horror in the film stems from folklore and oral traditions that find their natural voice in the tribal/forest landscape. *Punnami Nagu* thrives on the classical horror narrative structure of the animal transforming into a human to avenge the killing of its partner. The theme of good versus evil is replayed here as the divine and supernatural intervene to "set things right in the human world." The avenging shape-shifting snake, the possessed young woman, an evil sorceress, and villainous human killers of snakes – the usual horror cinema suspects – inhabit the narrative space. The visual iconography of the film is dominated by religious icons: temples, priests, rituals, exorcists and of course, the *devadasi*. The cinematography stimulates horror through the use of high and low angle shots and POV shots. The use of hand-held camera enhances the visual impact of horror as well as the typical horror props of lemon, snake-charmer's flute and costumes. The audio in the film uses thunder, creaky doors and the constant high intensity snake-charmer's flute in the background to create a foreboding spectacle. The snake-woman transforming into an Anaconda-like monster is the dominant horror-inducing image in the film. *Punnami Nagu* is articulating a dialectical representation of the *devadasi* tradition through the merger of the *devadasi* and the snake-woman narratives. On the one hand, if the evils of the *devadasi* practice come to the fore through this

assimilation of the two narratives, on the other, the gesture of the loaning/possession of Honey's body follows the larger pattern of forcible consumption of the body of the *devadasi* by the upper caste maledom.

Long regarded as a niche cinema intended for B-movie, if not C-movie, audiences, the horror films produced in India have much to offer. For, as this article has shown, the ghost in contemporary horror cinema speaks with surprising sensitivity of many non-normative issues that hardly find articulation in more mainstream cinema. *Kanchana* explores the world of transgendered subjectivities, of identities, struggles for social, economic and political standing fought with a transphobic world. *Punnami Nagu* depicts the evils of the *devadasi* tradition that still exists in modern India in different forms. However, as this article shows, these films do not articulate an unproblematic unilateral assertion of the rights of the minorities they seek to represent; instead, they are complex negotiations where the body, as the site of supernatural transformations, is revealed to be that space where the social is created, encoded and struggled over. Both *Kanchana* and *Punnami Nagu* are about bodies that do not belong within normatively correct genderings, or are not recognisably human. The genre of horror becomes a medium through which salvos can be made on the normative; at the same time, the genre of horror also guarantees relative safety even within these tentative subversions of norms in its implicit assurance of a safe distance between what is "real" and what is "only" a film.

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Notes:

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- ¹ Devadasi is an ancient Hindu custom, where certain girls were chosen to be married to local deities and dedicate their entire lives to the temple of the deity. They were not allowed to marry but had to sexually submit themselves to their patrons who would pay for their upkeep. The government of Karnataka banned such practices in 1982.
- ² Ram Gopal Varma is a prominent Hindi and Telugu filmmaker, screen writer and producer. Mani Ratnam has directed films in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam and is considered to be the stalwart of Indian cinema. The late 1980s and the entire nineties are generally considered to be the heydays of these two.
- ³ Tamil Nadu has actively fought for the rights of the transgender communities in India. The government of Tamil Nadu established a transgender welfare board in 2008, the first of its kind anywhere in India. Separate food ration cards have been allotted to transgender people in the state. Efforts have also been made to promote and safeguard educational rights of the transgender people with the state government passing an order to this effect in 2008. The Tamil cable channel Vijay TV aired a talk show hosted by a transgender woman called Rose.
- ⁴ Robin Wood in his influential study *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986) locates this struggle in the context of horror films as a desire to flout the established ideological sexual norms in the form of bisexuality and homosexuality. Noel Carroll in *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) locates this desire as the part of cognitive psychology to fear and be fascinated by how the monster flouts our “conceptual categories.” Drawing on feminist theories of cinematic gaze, Linda Williams in *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess* (1992) argues that this struggle is a male desire to subjugate woman by “othering” them within the film narratives. Carol J. Clover in her valuable work *Men, Women and Chain Saws* (1992), posits that this struggle is a desire to subvert patriarchy through more masculine agencies provided to the lead female survivor. Using psychoanalysis, Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993), opines that this struggle is a ritualised masculine desire to “abjectify” woman in the film narratives.

⁵ Serena Nanda in a very influential study on the transgender communities of India states that traditionally, muslim rulers of Indian states had acted as generous patrons to the transgendered people. This helped these people to uplift their social and economic status.

⁶ In Indian mythology, certain snakes who lived for about a hundred years were endowed with magical powers to shape-shift according to their will. Usually, these snakes would take the form of human beings.

⁷ The shape-shifting snakes in Indian mythology, would be the proud possessors of gems in their hoods. These gems/pearls signified immortality.