

# The Multiverse of Folklore: An Insight into Spiritual Posthumanism

Dr. Emelia Noronha

Associate Professor, Prahladrai Dalmia Lions College of Commerce & Economics  
Mumbai, India

**Abstract:** This paper works on the foundation provided by Francesca Ferrando and Debashish Banerji's posthuman spirituality. Ferrando's spiritual and material continuity between humans, nonhumans, and the environment; and Banerji's interpretation of "Indic posthumanism" is crucial to this study. This study is an exploration of the various traditions imbued in Indian folklore that contain the "proto-posthumanist" ideas which are today being evoked by Indian cinema. The unexpected box-office success of *Kantara* (2022), *Kantara: A Legend Chapter-1* (2025), *Dashavatara* (2025), *Bhediya* (2022), *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* (2022), is a wake-up call for the "slow renaissance" taking shape in the Indian cinema with regards to a reverence towards deeply rooted indigenous narratives thereby prioritizing cultural authenticity over universal commercial appeal. These narratives, animistic and indigenous worldviews, critique the western anthropocentric worldview that commodifies land, centralises the male perspective and dismisses indigenous ecological knowledge as "primitive superstition". This paper analyses how rituals and traditions, particularly that of divine possession, are an integral part of spiritual posthumanism which is a possible path of realization in intra-related systems of individual, cosmic and even transcendental agencies. The *Rakhandar* of Konkan and the *Bhoota Kola* of coastal regions of Karnataka and northern Kerala challenge anthropocentric hierarchies. The hybridity and fluidity of the spirit, particularly nonhuman forms, that use the body as a site of potentiality – of power and agency and subjectivity, is worked out in this paper. Donna Haraway's "sympoiesis" and Jane Bennett's idea of "vibrant matter" helps to illuminate the animistic and ecological dimensions of folklore narratives, wherein nature, divinity, and humanity exist in an unbroken continuum.

**Keywords:** *folklore, hybridity, supernatural, spirituality*

**Introduction:** The posthuman world is relational. Rosi Braidotti critiques humanism's "universalist" and "anthropocentric" assumptions, which prioritize humanity over all other life, and calls for a rejection of hierarchies based on species, gender, or origin. Instead, she advocates for a "posthuman" perspective that embraces flexible, multiple identities and considers the complex relationship between humans, technology, and the environment. She argues for the need of "accurate cartographic accounts of new subject positions as transversal alliances between human and nonhuman agents, which may account for the ubiquity of technological mediation and the complexity of interspecies alliances, while foregrounding continuing patterns of exclusion and marginalization" (Braidotti 21).

Uexküll's "umweltian" approach teaches us that there is no single, shared world, but many overlapping worlds, each shaped by the life form that inhabits it. Braidotti proposes a "zoe-centric" ethics, which is a life-centered approach that includes all forms of life, not just human life. She believes in it as the "transversal force that cuts across and reconnects the previously segregated species, categories and domains" (Braidotti 16). Rosi Braidotti's argument in posthuman critical theory that the traditional concept of the human is no longer sufficient and the need for a new affirmative framework for understanding our place in the world is what

drives this project towards looking at the folklore of India to understand the interconnectedness of things.

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study is to examine indigenous Indian folklore, ritual practices, and contemporary cinema through the framework of posthuman spirituality, in order to challenge Western anthropocentric epistemologies and foreground relational human–nonhuman ontologies.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To analyse Indian folklore and ritual traditions using posthuman spiritual frameworks, drawing on Francesca Ferrando’s concept of spiritual–material continuity and Debashish Banerji’s formulation of Indic posthumanism.
- To examine the emergence of proto-posthumanist ontologies in contemporary Indian cinema, with specific reference to *Kantara*, *Bhediya*, *Dashavatara*, and *Lokah*.
- To critically interrogate Western anthropocentric worldviews by foregrounding animistic and indigenous narratives that reconfigure ecology, agency, and subjectivity.
- To interpret rituals of divine possession as sites of relational agency and hybridity, employing Donna Haraway’s concept of sympoiesis and Jane Bennett’s theory of vibrant matter.

### **Posthuman Spirituality**

Modern humanism defines the human primarily through rational thinking (the Cognito or rational ego). Posthumanism challenges this idea by questioning the centrality and universality of rationality. Debashish Banerji points out “Anthropocentric exceptionalism as an aspect of modern humanism has its roots in the Abrahamic idea of God making man in his image and giving to man the creatures and entities of the earth for his existence and enjoyment. Indian spiritual systems include analogous ideas but also ideas which decentre this image” (Banerji 214)

Premodern Indian understandings of the self, shaped by multiple paths of becoming and diverse cosmologies, can be seen as an early form of posthuman epistemology. Unlike humanism, which creates fixed identities through logical inclusion and exclusion, these traditions allow plurality and fluidity. The posthuman is described as a constantly changing, in-between state rather than a fixed identity, similar to Nietzsche’s idea of the human as a bridge rather than an endpoint. In this sense, premodern Indian philosophical traditions can be understood as posthuman because they accepted multiple paths of becoming and liberation. Shared ideas of “plural oneness” encouraged tolerance for different spiritual goals, expressed in concepts such as the Vedic notion that truth is one but spoken in many ways, the Upanishadic idea of the one-and-many *Brahman*, the Jaina theory of multiple truths (*anekāntavāda*), and Ramakrishna’s belief in many paths and doctrines. While such ideas can be oversimplified into claims that all traditions say the same thing, in their cultural context they supported inclusivism without erasing differences, fostering an understanding of multiple, coexisting absolutes (Banerji 217).

Banerji refers to the “super-anthropocentric image of God as *Puruṣa*. The word *Puruṣa* itself presently means Man, a male gendered notion, though at the time of its composition, it more

possibly meant an ungendered Person” which later “displaced this image of the cosmic Being onto nonhumans, such as the Horse. Even later traditions gave us God images in a variety of forms, including zooanthropic (eg. Gaṇeśa, Narasiṃha) and animal (eg. Varāha, Hanumāna) forms, each of which can take the position of the absolute Godhead to its devotees” (Banerji 214).

Earlier Indian traditions allowed for many goals in life and many paths of spiritual growth. However, this plural way of thinking has gradually been challenged by a rational, modern logic that insists on exclusivity—only one truth, one correct path. Ideas that once accepted “many forms of one reality” slowly shifted toward emphasizing only one absolute truth. When people say “truth is one, but sages speak of it in many ways,” the earlier understanding respected all these differences. The newer mindset, however, tries to remove differences and reach a single, uniform truth, treating multiple interpretations as unnecessary or even wrong.

Earlier, different ways of understanding truth reflected the belief that human growth has endless possibilities and that the absolute itself is vast and limitless. The main problem today is that modern society tends to normalize one single culture and one single truth. This monocultural and monotheistic way of thinking makes other ways of living and understanding the world seem invalid or inferior. To resist this, we need a conscious critique of modernity and the creation of a new way of thinking about human growth and becoming. Philosophical posthumanism, as proposed by Francesca Ferrando and Debashish Banerji, offers such an alternative. It supports openness, relationality, and multiple ways of being rather than fixed identities. In Indian spirituality, this approach can be understood as a “plural oneness.” This means accepting that while there may be a sense of unity, it does not erase differences. Instead, it allows each perspective to lead toward a point of insight (called *bindu*) that opens the mind to levels of consciousness beyond strict either-or logic. Ramakrishna’s saying “*joto mot, toto poth*” (“as many views, so many paths”) is significant, it is necessary to understand it not as many different routes to the same single destination, but as a vast openness where paths and destinations themselves are multiple. Thus, to counter modern one-truth thinking, we need a philosophy that embraces infinite paths, infinite goals, and infinite ways of becoming, without forcing them into a single truth. As Banerji asserts, “A later figure of the Bengal Renaissance, Sri Aurobindo also built his path of *yoga darśan* around the plural approaches to this goal of becoming, that of *vijnāna* (2005, 120–29, 285–308), opening up an alternative trajectory of the posthuman, one which accepts multiple goals of becoming towards a vanishing point of perspectival reality leading to a new dimension or plane of immanence” (Banerji 220).

### **Indian Folklore and “Indic posthumanism”**

Traditions imbued in Indian folklore that contain the “proto-posthumanist” ideas are today being evoked by Indian cinema: the unexpected box-office success of *Kantara* (2022), *Kantara: A Legend Chapter-1* (2025), *Dashavatara* (2025), *Bhediya* (2022), *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* (2022), is a wake-up call for the “slow renaissance” taking shape in the Indian cinema with regards to a reverence towards deeply rooted indigenous narratives. These narratives critique the western anthropocentric worldview that commodifies land, centralises the male perspective and dismisses indigenous ecological knowledge as “primitive superstition”. The rituals and traditions, particularly that of divine possession, are an integral part of spiritual posthumanism which is a possible path of realization in intra-related systems of individual, cosmic and even transcendental agencies.

The *Rakhandar* of Konkan and the *Bhoota Kola* of coastal regions of Karnataka and northern Kerala challenge anthropocentric hierarchies. The hybridity and fluidity of the spirit, particularly nonhuman forms, that use the body as a site of potentiality of power and agency and subjectivity, is significant.

### ***Bhoota Kola***

The *Bhoota Kola* or *Bhuta-Kola*, are performance-based rituals known as *Bhoota Aradhane*, invoking spirits, ancestors, heroes, animal deities, forest deities, mountain deities, earth deities, and tribal guardian deities. It is native to the Tuluvas and Tulu culture in Dakshin Kannada and Udupi districts in Karnataka, and Kasaragod district in Kerala (Pradeep). The *Bhootas*, known as *Daivas*, are semi-divine spirits distinct from humans and gods. Dr. Purushottama Bilimale, a recipient of many honours including the Karnataka Folklore Academy award, notes that there are around 600 *Bhootas* in the Karavali stretch. Each of these *Bhootas* has a narrative known as *Pardannas/Paddanas*, which are epic folk songs that give details of the birth or origin of the *Bhoota* (Devadiga). Reiterating the difference between Gods and *Bhootas*, Dr. Bilimale states that, “One thing that distinguishes them from the Vedic Gods is these heroes are not a reincarnation of any Gods. The Vedic and Hindu Gods when born are incarnations of another existing God, which is why they are recognised when in their mothers’ wombs. Their birth is celebrated by other deities and *mangala vaadya* (music) is heard in the sky. They are achievers by birth because they are born to fulfil a certain prophecy.” Based on his research he further elaborates, that *Bhootas* are individuals who grew up in a society that was tough for them because of their birth in a backward community. Certain conflicts resulted in their early death or disappearance, which is not the case for Vedic Gods who attain moksha only after fulfilling their birth prophecy. Thus, the *Bhootas* are not born to fulfil any prophecy or achieve something, according to Bilimale, but are individuals who are revered as *Bhootas* only after their death (Devadiga). Each one of these *Bhootas* are distinct, and govern a particular aspect of life for which they are revered. Their shrines are found outside many local homes in the coastal stretch of Karavali. They exist in different forms and shapes. Some animal form *Bhootas* are: *Panjurli*, a boar; *Pilichamunda*, a tiger; *Nandigona*, a bull. *Bhootas* like *Annappa*, *Ali Bhoota*, *Kalkuda*, *Bobbarya Kod-dabbu*, *Kora*, *Koti-Channayya*, are male; while *Kallurti*, *Deyi Baidyati*, *Tannimaniga*, *Ummalti*, *Ullalti*, *Korati* and almost all names ending with *Taye* (Kannada word meaning ‘mother’) are female. Some are androgynous (*Ardhanareeswara*) with a male head and a female body, known as the *Jumadi Bhoota* (Devadiga).

While *Pilichandi*, the *Bhoota* in tiger form is worshipped to protect cattle from being lifted away by tigers, *Korage* protects the cattle from deadly diseases. Fishermen offer prayers to *Bobbarya* before leaving on an expedition, while Mariamma is believed to control epidemic diseases. *Panjurli*, also known as *Guliga*, seen in the movie *Kantara*, protects farms from wild boars. It is important to note that these *Bhootas* or *Daivas* transcend caste and religion, serving as practical protectors of livelihoods, forests, and communities.

One of the most captivating aspects of *Bhoota Kola* or *Bhoota Aradhane* is the reciting of the *Pardannas/Paddanas*, long Tulu verses recited before and during the ritual that recount the deeds of the deities and preserve community history. AC Burnell in *Indian Antiquary*, Volume XXIII, 1894, first recorded in 1871-72 these epic songs and the 600 names of the *Bhootas* along with the transliteration and translation of several Tulu *Paddanas*. *The Devil Worship of the Tuluvas* written by AC Burnell, the first English work on Tulu *Paddanas* is his translation of

*Bhoota Kola* of Tulu Nadu. The colonial, Christian-centric perspective that looked down upon indigenous religious practises of the East is evident in the term ‘Devil Worship’. Praveen Ammembala, a Tulu expert, called it a classic case of a language barrier during translation, “*Bhoota Kola* is a sacred art form, it has nothing to do with devil worship. *Bhoota* means the spirit here and it helps you understand the sincerity and the greatness of Tulu Nadu,” (Devadiga). Yet this work is important as it has archived the ritual of *Bhoota Aradhane*, ‘spirit possession’, that places the human body at the centre of meaning-making. The possessed performer, known as the *Daiva Patri* (the divine vessel) becomes the medium through which justice is articulated, grievances are heard, and ethical order is restored within the community. The *Daiva Patri* is always a person from the lowest strata of society, a Dalit. It is on the occasion of the *Bhoota Aradhane*, the affordances of the place, time and context of the ritual, brings people of all caste together for the worship, when the *Bhoota/Daiva* blesses the Brahmin landlord as well as the others from the lowly caste. Thus, the ritual is “a complex ideology. It is a mystery. But there is a message behind masks of bhutas... (it) signifies the fight against injustice and exploitation in society. It is a fight against denial of social justice by upper class to the suppressed class of society. The different actions of the bhuta impersonator in the performance situation like exaggerated shouts, swallowing fire, wounding himself with sword, walking on a heap of embers signify impatience against injustice and exploitation” says Prof. K. Chinnappa Gowda, a senior researcher on Tulu folklore and *Bhoota* worship (Shetty).

Thus, one can deduce that *Bhoota Kola* reflects a relational worldview where humans, animals, spirits, ancestors, and elements of the natural world coexist within a shared moral and social universe. In *Bhoota Kola* rituals, animal deities, forest spirits, earth and mountain deities, and ancestral spirits are not treated merely as symbols or metaphors. Instead, they are understood as active life forces that directly intervene in human affairs. This challenges the anthropocentric tendency to project only human values onto animals or reduce them to myths. Instead, the ritual acknowledges non-human agencies as possessing power, voice, and authority. From a posthumanist perspective, *Bhoota Kola* can be seen as an example of Braidotti’s *zoe-centric* ethics, where life in all its forms, whether human, animal, ecological, and spiritual, is respected and interconnected. The *Daiva Patri*/performer through embodied performance, trance, and ritual speech, there is a process of co-individuation, where human and non-human identities temporarily merge. This creates a space for cross-species and cross-domain communication, something largely absent in modern human-animal relations.

While earlier myths and fables often “de-animalize” animals by turning them into moral symbols, *Bhoota Kola* moves closer to what posthumanism calls deep relationality. The ritual does not merely imagine animals and spirits through human categories but attempts to engage with their specific lifeworlds through embodied practice, oral narratives, and affective exchange. In this sense, *Bhoota Kola* functions as a form of posthuman “fictioning”, where ritual performance acts as a mode of translation between human and non-human worlds.

Thus, *Bhoota Kola* offers a culturally grounded example of how posthumanist ideas of relational subjectivity, non-human agency, and ethical coexistence which have been embedded in Indian indigenous ritual practices, long before they entered contemporary theory. This what Banerji calls, “cross-species hermeneutics of fictioning” (“New Theories and Reflections in Indian Literatures and Cultures”) which is made accessible to the general population through the movie *Kantara* and its prequel: *Kantara Chapter 1*. The movie captures the essence of the *Bhoota Aradhane* in all its spirituality and thus the iconic, guttural voicing out of “Whaoow,”

in *Kantara* is a reverberating, raw, and emotionally charged expression of divinity, a literal and metaphorical voice of the *Daiva* (spirit). The soul-stirring spectre is captivatingly rendered with great technical and emotional finesse thereby charging the atmosphere with an awe and wonder for indigenous spirituality, making audiences feel frozen and immersed. Thus, the movie gripped its audience all over the country with a reverence towards our deeply rooted indigenous narratives thereby prioritizing cultural authenticity over universal commercial appeal. The movie has managed to evoke a primal response, a transition “from fear to faith” in the audience with regards to our indigenous narratives that were hitherto dismissed as “primitive superstition”.

### **The *Rakhandar***

The feature film *Dashavatar* (2005), directed by Subhodh Khanolkar, a Marathi-language suspense thriller film produced by Ocean Film Company, and Ocean Art House has brought to the forefront the folklore of the Konkan region related to the protector residing in the forests called “*Rakhandar*”. The Konkan region comprises of India's western coast, stretching across parts of Maharashtra, Goa, and Karnataka and the term *Rakhandar* or its shortened version “*Rakhno*” is a Konkani word meaning “protector” or “guardian”. This term is a local variant of the ancient folk deity of Goa known as “*Vetala*” who is the “grama deva is the guardian of the village. According to the tradition he moves through out the village at night and keeps vigil on the property of the devotees. Hence his saddles get worn out. The devotees take vow and offer the saddles to *Vetala*” (Mitragotri 243). Today, we still have the local people of the Konkan region, especially of Goa believing in the legend of the *Rakhandar*, or *Rakhno*, “a benevolent spirit sent by God to protect the people of the village. This spirit is particularly venerated for its role in guiding and safeguarding those who are lost or in distress” (“The Guardian of Goa: The Legend of the *Rakhandar*”).

Numerous stories giving testimony of the manner in way lost travellers were guided their way back home by the *Rakhno* have kept the belief in this folk deity alive. Though in the movie *Dashavatar*, the film uses the “black leopard” to symbolise the spirit of the forest and divine protection of nature. “Its repeated appearances during key scenes highlight the film’s environmental theme, showing that nature itself fights back against greed and illegal mining in the Konkan region (Waghela). The concept of the spirit of the *Rakhandar* is evoked to fight against the capitalist urban greed that is causing deforestation, loss of biodiversity, land and habitat loss that the local rural people whose lives are bound to the soil are ceaselessly fighting against. “Sharply critical of large-scale mining in Goa, prominent ecologist and environmentalist, Madhav Gadgil argued that extractive development caused irreversible ecological damage while benefiting only a small elite” (Sayed ).

The movie *Dashavatar* (2005) brings Konkan’s battles to the big screen; the move from village theatre to political struggle is crucial making ecological conflict part of Maharashtra’s cinematic history. It resonates the very famous protests of the tribal village of Cavrem in South Goa, since 2011, that have been fervently fighting against the mining firm that began excavating the Cavrem hill for iron ore and manganese; the villagers have staked claims over forest to manage it in entirety (“BMM garnering support for Cavrem tribals in battle against mining”).

The *Rakhandar* or the *Vetala/Betala* is both “feared and revered”, he “is raw and indigenous — a ferocious, naked protector of his people, often invoked in times of crisis or distress”

(“Nagdo Betal”) . The term “*Vetala/Betala*” needs to be translated not as a “demon God” as some of the early researchers, particularly those following the western colonial line of thought have done; but in the same vein as one would understand the “*Daivas*”, but with a difference. This spirit’s “presence resonates deeply with the community” as “. Many villagers offer prayers and rituals to appease him, acknowledging that while he is a guardian, he is also swift to punish those who disrespect the natural order or the traditions of the land. Thus, *betāla* stands as a complex figure, interwoven into the very fabric of Goan identity and spirituality, reminding the people of their roots and the importance of living in harmony with the world around them” (“Nagdo Betal”).

The documentary series “Rakhandar with Ghadi” 2024-2025, by Prudent Media, a Goa-based news channel, has explored this Goan traditional “Rakhandari system,” focusing on local guardian deities (*Kshetrapals/Rashtrolis*), village protectors, and their rituals, highlighting their relevance amidst modern land sales and identity concerns in Goa. This documentary series explores the renewed relevance of this system amidst contemporary concerns about land sales to outsiders and local identity crises in the region. Similarly, the documentary *Kola (Whispers of Divinity)* directed by Deepak R Hegde provides an in dept understanding of the sacred ritual of *Bhoota Aradhane* of Tulunadu region of Karnataka, it captures the spiritual essence of the practice giving detailed narration in Kannada and Tulu, while the English subtitles make it suitable for a broader audience.

### **The Yapum**

Amar Kaushik’s movie *Bhediya* (2022) brings alive the myth of the *Yapum/Epom*, the guardian of the jungles of Arunachal Pradesh. The werewolf of Arunachal Pradesh is rooted in local folklore and serves as a powerful symbol for environmental awareness and necessity to maintain ecological balance in the face of development. “Epom (spirit of the Jungle), believed to be residing in the Rotne (Banyan Tree). Their attribute is the habit of carrying human being alive. Sometime the Epom kill the human beings in the jungle when the person violates the code of behavior expected within the jungle” (Camdir).

Among the Idu Mishmi people in the Dibang valley of Arunachal Pradesh, as per the Idu Mishmi cosmology, nature is alive with *Uyu*, spiritual beings that inhabit rivers, trees, mountains, and animals that are respected, and before any tree is felled, soil dug, or animal hunted, rituals are performed to seek permission. Shamans, often women, act as mediators between the human and spirit world, ensuring that harmony is maintained. “*The forest protects us only when we respect its spirits,*” shared a shaman from Anini, as noted by anthropologist Dr. Rinchin Dorje (“Spirits of the Wild”).

The Idu Mishmi people believe in spirit-energies intimately tied to forests, rivers, animals, and ancestral forces. These spirits are neither abstract metaphysical entities nor symbolic projections of human consciousness. They are active agents shaping ecological balance, social ethics, illness, and healing. Their spirituality is mediated through ritual specialists and lived practices, “a system of magico-religious beliefs” (Barua 69). Their conception of the supreme god, the creator, is the upholder of “the moral order of creation” and along with him are “a host of both benevolent and malevolent spirits who, for all practical purposes, have a more direct influence on human lives” (Barua 69). They have an “anthropomorphic view of nature and natural happenings. They explain every occurrence as caused by an agent which, to the Idu mind, is a spirit, either benevolent or malicious. Nature is alive and activated by innumerable

spirits who hold powers of good and evil over human destiny” (Barua 77). These are the *Khinyus*, the spirits, the agents whose benevolence is sought for at every point of life by the Idus. They are present everywhere in everything and “get easily offended with human behaviour of omission and commission” thus propitiation of the *khinyus* through appropriate rituals is important.

The film *Bhediya* undermines the humanist grand narrative wherein the human lies at the centre of the universe, the importance given to the Epom/Yapum questions the centrality and sovereignty of the human subject. The elements of nature and its components hitherto accorded the position of the “other” are now centre stage and by destabilizing the binaries of human/animal, myth/modernity and development /conservation we find in the film a challenge posed to the humanist project. The *Epom/Yapum* is thus, using Bruno Latour's term an “actant” that elucidates its “efficacy” and “has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events” (Bennett viii), operating beyond anthropocentric moral frameworks. In posthumanist terms, the forest is not a passive resource but an actant, echoing theories of vibrant matter and distributed agency, where non-human forces exert material and ethical influence. The banyan tree (*Rotne*), as the dwelling of *Epom*, functions as a posthuman site where spiritual, material, and ecological agencies converge. Its actions enact a relational ethics where forests, animals, spirits, and humans exist within an interconnected ecological assemblage. To use the philosophical notions of Deleuze and Guattari put forth in concept of becoming-animal in *A Thousand Plateaus*, these folkloric entities are pertinent as they challenge the superiority of the human to other forms of life, they break down the fixed human identity, giving importance to relationality and opens subjectivity to collective, affective, and non-human modes of existence. It challenges the delirium under which humanism has thrived; Claire Colebrook in *Death of the PostHuman* elucidates that the “unified humanity that has become intoxicated with its sense of self-positing privilege can only exist through the delirium of Race, through the imagination of itself as a unified and eternal natural body” (145), which is defied by the north-eastern folkloric narrative that elevates the non-human *Epom/Yapum* and his code of conduct in a manner that privileges balance, restraint, and reciprocity over ownership and exploitation.

The narrative unsettles the anthropocene through non-human forces. The transformation of the protagonist into a werewolf indicates his entry into a liminal zone, neither human nor animal, thereby making him a conduit that asserts the agency of the forest that endeavours to bring about ecological balance. The Darwinian hierarchy is thus dismantled reinforcing the post humanist ethos of interspecies which gains importance in our present times, times “when the arts for living on a damaged planet demand sympoietic thinking and action” (Haraway 67).

### ***Neeli in Lokah***

*Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* reimagines *Kalliyankattu Neeli* of Kerala through a visually stylised speculative fantasy. The film follows Chandra a traumatised young woman, whose emerging supernatural abilities reveal her as Neeli's reincarnation. Rather than portraying Neeli as a feared *yakshi*, as she has been usually portrayed traditionally in Malayalam literary field, the film recasts her as an immortal, resilient figure, an agent of vigilante justice shaped by historical violence yet oriented toward protection and defiance. Thus, *Lokah* transforms folklore into a contemporary narrative addressing gendered trauma, marginalisation, and

spiritual resistance, repositioning Neeli as a symbol of female agency rather than a cautionary spectre (Sreekumar).

In *Lokah*, Chandra emerges as Neeli who does not follow a conventional arc of transformation or possession. Instead, her immortality and temporal dislocation resist anthropocentric notions of linear time and biological finitude, aligning with Braidotti's *zoe-centric* understanding of life as a force exceeding human meaning. Rosi Braidotti's concept of the posthuman subject, which critiques the Enlightenment ideal of autonomous individuality and redefines subjectivity as embodied, relational, and processual is pertinent here. Though the folkloric origin is subdued in the movie due to its structure of stylised fantasy, yet one cannot deny the potency of the myth upon which the film is premised. The subjectivity rendered to the *yakshi* resonates strongly with *Bhoota* possession practices, where spirits are not external invaders but relational presences activated through land, lineage, and ritual. In *Bhoota Kola*, the medium's body becomes an interface through which collective memory, ecological obligation, and non-human agency are articulated. Similarly, Chandra's body functions as a liminal site where suppressed histories and spectral forces materialise, reframing possession as a reconfiguration of agency rather than a loss of self.

*Neeli/Chandra's* power emerges through entanglements with place, violence, ritual space, and gendered memory transcending temporality. Donna Haraway's concept of "symptoiesis" further informs this relational framework by emphasising co-constitutive processes of becoming. It mirrors the spirit-ecological worldviews, in which deities and spirits are inseparable from specific environments, reinforcing a non-hierarchical distribution of agency between human and non-human actors. *Neeli/Chandra* gains subjectivity and agency as Haraway's "multispecies symbiosis" (98) that argues that life is fundamentally co-produced across species, dissolving the boundary between nature and culture.

The ritual sites, landscapes, and objects in *Lokah* function as active participants rather than passive settings. This material vitality aligns with *Bhoota* cosmologies, where stones, groves, and weapons are imbued with *shakti*, resisting metaphorical reduction and affirming spirit as materially efficacious. Jane Bennett's theory of vibrant matter, which foregrounds the agency of material forces is crucial to the present understanding. Together, these frameworks position *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* as a posthuman cinematic text that converges with South Indian spirit ecologies.

## Conclusion

The folkloric spirit ontologies in *Bhoota Aradhane*, *Idu* rituals, the *Epom/Yapum*, the *Rakhandar/Rakhno/Vetal*, the *yakshi Neeli*, all resist anthropocentric and androcentric bias of modern humanism. They testify the fact that agency does not belong exclusively to rational human subjects but is shared with spirits, animals, ancestors, and terrain. And the human body becomes a site of transmission and transformation, through rituals or transgression, thereby emphasising the fluidity of being. They posit a worldview in which 'being' is fluid, agency is distributed, and divinity is immanent, relational, and multiple. In *Bhoota Kola*, the ritual possession transforms the human body into a site of becoming-other, where identity dissolves into performative intensities of voice, movement, and affect. This aligns with the Deleuzian idea of "becoming-animal and becoming-imperceptible" (232), where subjectivity is constituted through movement and relation rather than representation. The spirit, here, is not symbolic but materially enacted through embodied practice. The people who get possessed by

the spirits are Deleuze and Guattari's "sorcerers" who "haunt the fringes. They are at the borderline of the village, or between villages" and "have always held the anomalous position, at the edge of the fields or woods. . . The important thing is their affinity with alliance, with the pact, which gives them a status opposed to that of filiation. The relation with the anomalous is one of alliance. The sorcerer has a relation of alliance with the demon as the power of the anomalous" (Deleuze and Guattari 246). The *Daiva Patris* seen in *Kantara* and *Kantara Chapter 1* are like the sorcerers who draw power not from family, law, or tradition, but from alliances with non-human, anomalous forces. These alliances allow transformation, challenge hierarchy, and open paths of becoming that society tries to suppress. Deleuze and Guattari's claim that "werewolves are produced not through resemblance or inheritance but through pacts, alliances, and feedback effects" (246) finds a striking cinematic articulation in *Bhediya* (2022). This alignment with a non-human power that destabilises human identity is not confined to the individual but operates as a relational and ecological contagion rather than a personal curse. Similarly, in *Lokah* Chandra's becoming-*Neeli* does not stem from genealogical inheritance or psychological identification but from an alliance with a transhistorical, mythic force that exceeds familial filiation.

The *Bhootas* and the spirits of the Idu Mishis are not subordinate to human interpretation but possess their own intentionality and worldview. This perspectival multiplicity resonates with the Indian philosopheme of plural oneness (*anekāntavāda*), suggesting a world composed of many truths rather than a single universal ontology. The spirit world is thus not an extension of human culture but a parallel domain of being that are inseparable from specific groves, lands, and village histories bound to forests, rivers, and ecological cycles. The Spirit agency is therefore ecological rather than transcendent, reinforcing a posthuman understanding of divinity as immanent and environmentally embedded. This multiplicity of spirit-world viewpoints destabilises the assumption of a single, universal ontology and instead affirms a pluri-versal reality, where many worlds coexist without collapsing into one dominant frame of meaning. Folklore thus becomes a site where posthuman spirituality is enacted, in a "multiverse", the coexistence of multiple ontological orders within lived cultural practice, wherein one recognises non-human intentionality, plural realities, and ecological entanglement as foundational rather than exceptional.

The unexpected box-office success of films such as *Kantara*, *Dashavatara*, *Bhediya*, and *Lokah* marks a significant turning point in contemporary Indian cinema, signalling what may be described as a "slow renaissance" rooted in a renewed engagement with indigenous narratives. These films foreground local cosmologies, folk rituals, and region-specific mythologies. They have prioritised cultural authenticity over universal appeal. In each case, indigenous belief systems are not treated as exotic backdrops but as organising epistemologies that shape its narrative logic, ethics, and aesthetics. This trend disrupts the dominant commercial logic of Indian cinema, which has often favoured homogenised narratives and star-studded spectacles. The success of these films suggests a growing audience receptivity to stories that are deeply local yet conceptually resonant, capable of engaging viewers through affect, ritual, and myth rather than through familiar narrative formulas.

This shift integrates folklore with contemporary genres that of fantasy, horror, ecological thriller, and speculative cinema thereby producing hybrid forms that are both rooted and innovative. Moreover, this renaissance carries significant cultural and political implications. By centring indigenous narratives, these films reclaim marginalised knowledge systems that

have historically been sidelined within mainstream cinematic discourse. Thus, the commercial and critical reception of *Kantara*, *Dashavatara*, *Bhediya*, and *Lokah* is an indication of a structural shift in Indian cinema. This “slow renaissance” reflects an emerging confidence in indigenous storytelling as both artistically compelling and economically viable, suggesting that the future of Indian cinema may lie not in the pursuit of universality, but in the depth, plurality, and ecological consciousness of its local worlds.

### Works Cited

- Banerji, Debashish. “Posthumanism And Indian Spirituality.” In *Posthumanism and India: A Critical Cartography*, edited by Debashish Banerji, Md. Monirul Islam, and Samrat Sengupta. Bloomsbury India, 2024.
- Banerji, Debashish. “New Theories and Reflections in Indian Literatures and Cultures” in Posthumanism Network [website]. December 11, 2024.  
<https://posthumanism.in/articles/new-theories-and-reflections-in-indian-literatures-and-cultures-by-debashish-banerji/#:~:text=Such%20cross-species%20hermen>
- Barua, T.K. *The Idu Mishmis*, Itanagar: Directorate of Research. 1960.
- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press. 2010.
- Bhediya*. Directed by Amar Kaushik, Maddock Films, 2022.
- “BMM garnering support for Cavrem tribals in battle against mining”. *O Herald*, 30 March 2023. <https://www.heraldgoa.in/goa/bmm-garnering-support-for-cavrem-tribals-in-battle-against-mining/267731/>
- Braidotti, Rosi. “Posthuman critical theory.” *Critical posthumanism and planetary futures*. New Delhi: Springer India, 2016. 13-32.
- Camdir, Jimmy. “Spiritual beliefs and practices of Adis”. *Tok International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research*, Volume 11, Issue 6, 2025, 176-178.
- Colebrook, Claire. *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction, vol. 1*. Open Humanities Press, 2014.
- Dashavatar*. Directed by Subodh Khanolkar, Ocean Film Company / Ocean Art House, 2025.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Devadiga, Deeksha. “All you want to know about Bhoota Kola, the sacred art form of worshipping spirits seen in Kantara”. *South First*, Dec 21, 2022, Updated Sep 30, 2024. <https://thesouthfirst.com/karnataka/all-you-want-to-know-about-bhoota-kola-the-sacred-art-form-of-worshipping-spirits-seen-in-kantara/>
- Haraway, Donna. “Symptoiesis: Symbiogenesis and the lively arts of staying with the trouble”. In *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Kantara*. Directed by Rishab Shetty, Hombale Films, 2022.

- Kantara: A Legend – Chapter 1*. Directed by Rishab Shetty, Hombale Films, 2025.
- Lokah: Chapter 1: Chandra*. Directed by Dominic Arun, Wayfarer Films, 2025.
- Mitragotri, V. R. *A Socio-cultural History of Goa from the Bhojas to the Vijayanagar*  
Department of History University of Goa, PhD dissertation, 1992 .  
[https://irgu.unigoa.ac.in/drs/bitstream/handle/unigoa/3890/mitragotri\\_v\\_r\\_1992.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://irgu.unigoa.ac.in/drs/bitstream/handle/unigoa/3890/mitragotri_v_r_1992.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- “Nagdo Betal: The Mysterious Naked Guardian of Goa’s Folklore”. *GSBKatte*, August 7, 2020. <https://www.gsbkatte.com/do-you-know-about-nagdo-betal/#:~:text=Betal/Vetaal%20of%20Goa,sort%20of%20like%20a%20demigod>
- Pradeep K. S. “Dance of the Spirits: Bhuta-Kola of Dakshin Kannada”. *Sahapedia*, 2024.  
<https://www.sahapedia.org/dance-spirits-bhuta-kola-dakshin-kannada>
- Sayed, Nida. “From Mining to Rlys, Gadgil defiantly fought them all”. *Times of India*, Jan 9, 2026. [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/126421732.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/126421732.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)
- Shetty, Yogitha. “Ritualistic World of Tuluva: a study of Tuluva Women and the Siri Possession Cult.” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities Special Issue on Performance Studies* (2013): 132.
- “Spirits of the Wild: Animism and Ecological Harmony in the Idu Mishmi Tribe”. *ChaloHoppo*. <https://chalohoppo.com/spirits-of-the-wild-animism-and-ecological-harmony-in-the-idu-mishmi-tribe/>
- Sreekumar. T.T. “Neeli from ballads to posthuman ‘Lokah’: A betrayed wife’s journey through myth and memory”. *South First*, Sep 08, 2025, Updated Sep 10, 2025.  
<https://thesouthfirst.com/opinion/neeli-from-ballads-to-posthuman-lokah-a-betrayed-wifes-journey-through-myth-and-memory/>
- “The Guardian of Goa: The Legend of the Rakhandar” *ItsGoa*, 2005. [https://itsgoa.com/the-guardian-of-go-the-legend-of-the-rakhandar#google\\_vignette](https://itsgoa.com/the-guardian-of-go-the-legend-of-the-rakhandar#google_vignette)
- Waghela, Vishal. “Dashavatar Ending Explained: What Really Happened, Why It Matters, And Will There Be A Sequel?” *ALT Bollywood*. Sep 16, 2025.  
<https://www.altbollywood.com/post/dashavatar-e>