From Folktales to 'Digitales':

A Comparative Analysis of Folktales and Indian Animated Series in the 21st century

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*Abstract***:**

The rapid transformations taking place in the contemporary India have changed the lifestyles of people in such a manner that technology has become an integral part of our day-to-day activities. In this paper I study how animation series and films produced in India have become an important medium that help reconstruct the older cultural and narrative forms by assimilating their contents into a new register. I explore how recently produced animated series transmit, transform and reinvent ancient Indian mythological and folk stories and characters. Through an in depth analysis of televisual series such as *Chhota Bheem, Roll No. 21, Kisna* and others I argue that a steady movement towards more folkloristic forms of narration, plot structures and character types become discernible as the storylines develop and become more diverse to encompass contemporary concerns into the fold of animation. It may be claimed that owing to multiple lines of continuities that can be discerned between the two forms, modern day animations can be considered as modern avatars of folktales and may be termed as 'digitales.'

*Keywords***:** folktales, folklore, mythology, animation, digitales

Introduction:

The folk tradition in India has long been characterised by telling of tales. These stories would encompass the common beliefs of the community and each subgroup within the society had their own tales to narrate. In big households within a joint family set up, these tales would be orally transmitted from one generation to another usually by the figure of the grandmother or other domestic taletellers. With rapid urbanization, changes in social setup and the emergence of the nuclear family system, this practice got disrupted. The link between the past and the present was however not to be entirely lost. The void that had been created by these fading practices, I argue, was soon to be filled up, at least in some ways, by the ushering in of a new

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media. The rapid transformations in the contemporary socio-cultural milieu of India have changed the lifestyles of ordinary people in such a manner that technology has become an integral and crucial part of our day-to-day activities. With increased sophistication of technology and a steady movement towards the era of digitization, the virtual world has increasingly started to shape and condition the minds of today. In this paper I study how at this juncture, the animation series and films produced in India have become an important medium that help reconstruct the older cultural and narrative forms by assimilating their contents into a new register.

In the last two decades, the Indian animation industry has seen an unprecedented spurt of growth and development. Although animation is by no means new to India, it has now become an integral part of our popular culture and collective imagination. In this paper I explore how recently produced animated series transmit, transform and reinvent ancient Indian mythological and folk stories and characters. Through an in depth analysis of televisual series such as *Chhota Bheem, Roll No. 21, Kisna* and others I argue that one can observe in them a steady movement towards more folkloristic forms of narration, plot structures and character types as the storylines develop and become more divergent to encompass contemporary concerns into the fold of animation. It is my assertion that owing to the multiple lines of continuities that can be delineated between the two forms, modern day animations can be considered as modern avatar of folktales. Therefore, I believe it would be apposite to call this highly popular and entrancing culture of telling tales in digital form through animation for the contemporary times as 'digitales.' That such a negotiation should be possible and successful in a subcontinent like ours also has definite reasons. Deva elaborates upon the peculiar form of 'modernity' experienced by developing countries such as India where development has been so rapid that the "overlapping of different cultural-eras, has brought vigorous folk traditions in close proximity to modern forces;" (Deva 4). The recently produced animated series are possibly the finest expressions of the forms newly synthesised in such an environment.

As these animations draw heavily on mythologies that deal with the formative myths of the Indian culture, an interrogation of their adaptations into the modern times helps one understand the changes that have occurred in the fundamental beliefs of the community. A change in the people's conception of divine/heroic can be delineated in the new ways in

which they seek to portray their gods/legends during the present times. Moreover, not only are these animations an experiment in divergent ways of story making and storytelling but also an exercise in identity formation. As Indian animation industry seeks to create for itself a distinct identity in the global market, these narratives become a rich site for cultural exchanges between the past and the present, the local and the global and the old and new, and these intersections form another point of enquiry in this paper.

Folktales Then, Digitales Now:

Folktales are variously characterised as simple stories, often handed down orally, embodying the cultural beliefs of the community they are a part of. They form a large section of the traditional mass media alongside folk songs, riddles and proverbs that together reflect on the collective aspirations, anxieties and concerns of all sections of the community. Though the ancient epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, are the bedrock from which all of India's literature and art forms emerge, they can themselves be seen as a collection of tales coalesced together with an overarching framework. The multiple versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* attest to the fluidity and adaptability of these centuries old epics. The tales that form a part of the epics often in turn become sources of new legends and stories. "In all stages before and after the one in which it was given an epic form" the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* have "belonged to the folk tradition" after all, asserts Nanavati (Nanavati 7). Therefore, even though the influence of the epics can be clearly delineated in contemporary animations, they are also in constant dialogue with the folk traditions that have always surrounded/accompanied these epics. Moreover, "classical and folk,'" argues Ramanujan, should not be understood as "terms in simple opposition, but instead they should be seen as parts of a line, a continuum of forms, the endpoints of which may look like two terms in opposition" (Ramanujan 429). Keeping this in mind, in the following section I go on to explore how Indian animation looks back towards folktales as a source of inspiration for multiple aspects of its current form.

The authoritative Sanskrit texts of the epics like Valmiki's *Ramayana* are marked by a certain rigidity of characterisation and codification of the narratives. In contrast the folktales that surround them are much more fluid in nature and ever growing in number. "The Indian epics, for instance, are known to most Indians not through Sanskrit originals but through

regional retellings and oral versions often sung and enacted by the lowest castes...with characters, incidents not found in the Sanskrit texts," points out Ramanujan (Ramanujan 465). With the need to produce fresh episodes for the televised series and find new stories to cater to an expanding audience, it is natural that a strict adherence to the Sanskrit texts would prove to be a limitation for the animators. Consequently a move towards folkloristic elements is much preferred as it affords space for adaptation and innovation, which is the hallmark of all folk narratives. Folk tales adapt and change with the changing ideas and conceptions of the community. Contemporaneity is an essential part of their makeup. I argue that Indian animation series could be regarded as a digital avatar of the traditional folktales. One can observe in them a constant criss-cross of characters, motifs and tropes, global and inter-medial references and allusions in order to remain relevant to the current generation. As a result, in them, Ganesha and Krishna can freely enter the narratives of Bheem and Hanuman and their adversaries can range from mythical Danavas/Rakshasas or wild beasts to evil scientists or aliens.

As most of the characters that we see in these animations are already invested with a host of popular narratives, cults and rituals, by borrowing these associations the representation of the characters in the animations remains folkloristic. The animations exploit the pre-existing narratives and create new meanings thereby modifying the manner in which the younger generation perceives these mythical heroes/characters. Kris from *Roll No 21*[2] though implicitly connected with lord Krishna borrows little else from him than a magical peacock feather, a blue skin tone and an adversary whose name is inspired by Kansa. Yet the image of the mischief-maker attached to Krishna is alluded to time and again in the characterisation of the new hero. *Chhota Bheem* [3] inspired by the Pandava prince in the

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[2] *Roll No 21* is animated television series produced by Cosmos Entertainment that aired on Cartoon Network in 2010. The show is available in English, Hindi, Telugu and Tamil. The series consists of 6 seasons with 142 episodes as well as some movies. The series centres on a little boy name Kris who lives in a modern day orphanage/boarding school named Mathura Anaath Ashram, which is headed by Kanishka, an Asura in disguise who plans to destroy the whole world with the help of his minions. Gifted with a magical flute and a feather blessed by Lord Krishna, Kris protects his classmates from the evil plans of Kanishka. The series is a modern take on the Krishna- Kansa rivalry.

[3] *Chhota Bheem* created by Green Gold Animations aired on Pogo TV in 2008. It is a series about an adventurous and fun-loving nine-year-old boy called Bheem, who is gifted with extraordinary strength. This power is a boon for Dholakpur, Bheem's village, which is constantly under threat. Bheem loves food and has a special weakness for laddoos, which in fact, give him a surge of energy and make him even stronger than he is. Along with his group of friends, Bheem always sets out on new adventures setting things right, helping the poor and punishing evildoers wherever he goes. Available in multiple Indian languages, it has risen to fame and become a pan Indian character.

Mahabharata, is also mighty like his precursor but has a distinct character of his own which is not hampered by the experiences of the prince from the epic.

As has been the case with the ever evolving folk tales "the signifiers, whether they are images or characters or episodes or even so called structures and archetypes, may be the same in different periods and regions, but the signification keeps on changing"(Ramanujan 493). Similarly, even though animations use the names and make allusions to the mythic heroes, the narratives they create around them project vastly different sets of beliefs from what the older variety of folktales wished to communicate. The folktales were comments upon a society very different from ours and were propagated through word of mouth. On the other hand, the animations under review are supposed to comment on modern society, and intervene in an understanding of the contemporary world. Moreover, since they are communicated via the Television, they interact with other popular visual mediums and are constantly influenced by them in return. Added to that are allusions to global trends that the medium of animation is saturated with, for instance, the trope of the superhero often has immense influence on the way the mythic heroes in Indian series are reconceptualised. The animated texts that I look at in this paper strive to create new stories and through their contemporising impulse they try to participate in the world of today. More importantly, they hope to create a distinct Indian identity on the global stage and compete against western cultural products with something they hope to identify as authentically Indian, even though one must point out that the formulation of this national identity is fraught with communal and religious bias.

Just as folklore is known to grow and change with the times, these animations keep alive the concern with contemporaneity and try to maintain their relevance by including into the narratives references, allusions and incidents that the modern audiences can relate to. These references range from discussions about current affairs (like the successful launch of the Mangalyaan), a dialogue with contemporary popular cinema or the all too real concern for environment conservation. The heroes in these tales do not only fight against supernatural demons of the past but also against the current crises of pollution and try to find solutions for the problems that the world faces today. Bheem, for instance, has malfunctioning technological inventions, aliens and wild beasts to combat with whereas Kris shows a brave front to evil scientists, wicked teachers, school bullies and kidnappers. Unlike western

popular animation films such as those produced by Disney and Pixar which chart out coming-of-age journeys of the main protagonists, wherein the characters grow and evolve; the characters to be found in Indian series are much more static in nature.[4] That however is not because of lack of imagination of the producers but because of the structure that these narratives follow. Propp comments how in folktales providing external motivations is completely, " non-obligatory" (Propp 15). The animated series replicate this principle of narration and avoid giving too many explanations for particular actions of the characters involved. Since all characters can be easily identified as black or white, good or evil, the need to offer comprehensive motivations for each action is done away with to serve the purpose of an action-oriented plot line.

In folk tales, as characterised by Propp, there is always "one character (that) is central, and around him and his actions are grouped other people, his opponents, helpers, or those whom he saves" (Propp 22). In children's tales especially, this principle becomes critical and can be seen at work in the fables and parables that make up collections like the Panchatantra, Jaataka and so on. The simplicity of the tale lets the creators focus on the theme/messages and moral values that they wish to instil their young readers/ listeners with. The creators of the contemporary series have been quick to understand the usefulness of such an emphasis and follow it reverentially in most of their productions. Singularity of emphasis and pronouncement of clear moral messages at the conclusion not only makes the stories easy for the children to understand but also makes it far easier to acquire parental approval and wider acceptance for the content being pitched which gets translated as infotainment rather than mere entertainment and therefore of greater value for the younger audiences. In contrast to the complex plot-structures of the epics or classical literature, therefore, most of the animated tales offer simple, but interesting storylines For instance, each episode of *Chhota Bheem* focuses on a single crisis and unfolds the hero's attempts to resolve it.

Propp further points out that characterised by an "exceptional dynamic quality of action" folktales only focus "on those persons who contribute to the development of the plot" (Propp 22). Following this custom, in *Roll No 21* we do not meet any of the other teachers of Mathura Anaath Ashram School apart from the two reincarnated demons Putana and

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[4] For instance, *Tangled* produced by Disney in 2010 is based on the story of Rapunzel published by Brothers Grimm. The film however adds to the simplistic tale new characters such as Flynn Rider and complicates the narrative by providing each character, whether old or new, with a well furnished backstory, fresh associations and idiosyncrasies and newer challenges that they have to face and overcome.

Tarkasur from Krishna legends who are constantly colluding with Kanishka to find new ways to trouble the children. Similarly, the only children we meet in Dholakpur are Bheem and his friends. Akin to folktales, then, these animated-texts do not "deal with personages who are introduced for the sake of a milieu or society" (Propp 22). In fact even the visual register attests to this paradigm, as whenever crowds have to be portrayed, they are only shown in the background painted in black and white, many with identical faces revealing their subordinate and superfluous status. Furthermore, the emphasis on action, time and space are also managed in these animations in the same way as prevalent and practiced in folktales. In folktales action dominates the plot, and the space where the hero functions and performs is important for the narrative. Propp observes that folktales follow a narrative pattern wherein "unity of space is inseparable from unity of time. Like space, time in folklore cannot admit interruptions. Pauses do not exist. If the hero's action is stopped, another personage swiftly takes it up. Once begun, the action will rapidly develop to its conclusion"(Propp 24-5). Taking cue from these principles, hardly are the animated tales ever divided into parts to be followed up in subsequent episodes. Although gods and the supernatural beings do intervene directly in the human affairs in the series like *New Adventures of Hanuman*[5] and *Roll No. 21*, the focus is completely on action, not on philosophical dictates abided by or cosmological significance of the personages in question. Moreover, akin to folktales that rarely speak of "lives before birth and after death", the opening episode of *Chhota Bheem* for instance does not provide an originary tale related to the birth of Bheem or any explanation for the attainment of his superhuman strength (Propp 14). He is just there, so also the space and time in which he exists as a given fact, to be accepted without questions.

It is the character of mythologies to be "imbued with philosophies and metaphysics, while folktales present deep yet homely paradigms, psychological problems and resolutions, childhood fears and consolations"(Ramanujan xix). The animators keep this in mind when they weave simple stories wherein the children solve mysteries and catch thieves successfully at the conclusion, but deeper psychological questions that probe into the psyche of these evildoers are never raised or pondered upon. Things are kept simple and "action is always

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[5] *New Adventures of Hanuman* produced by Percept Pictures was released in 2010 on POGO. A spin off on their successful movie, *Hanuman Returns*, the series tells the story of a little boy called Maruti who lives in the village of Pawanpur. Lord Hanuman has gifted to Maruti a divine mace locket, which helps him turn into Bal Hanuman whenever the village is in danger. He has been charged with the duty of protecting the innocent against all kinds of evil forces by the gods themselves and performs his duty with utmost care.

performed physically, in space. Psychological novels based on the complexity of human interrelations, with dialogues, explanations, and so on, do not occur in folklore" or in the animated tales inspired by them (Propp 22). A change of heart is thus rarely observed as characters, reduced to types, fail to be introspective or self-reflexive in nature. "Folklore possesses not only artistic perfection but also a profound message" and the animations continue this tradition by swiftly drawing to a close with a moral to be handed down (Propp 14). Each episode is therefore imbued with poetic justice with the evil characters being rightly punished, humiliated and defeated. Lessons in ethical justice, civic responsibilities and moral dictates are clearly enunciated as the story ties up. Every time Bheem performs a noble task or exhibits a desired trait, the moral to be learnt from his behaviour is made explicit by way of a laudatory speech delivered by King Indraverma, (the reigning monarch of Dholakpur village) in front of the entire kingdom and Bheem is set up as an ideal to be admired and imitated. Similarly, Kisna's good deeds and exemplary behaviour is also recounted by choric figures at the end of each episode to drive home the moral lesson outlined in the tale. Explanations are offered to make things clearer wherever the need is felt. In *Ballu and Bhalu* episode of *Kisna*[6], for instance, the two brothers, Balram and Kisna, get into trouble with a wild bear. Instead of beating him away, Kisna tickles the bear and teases him, with help of Toto, his talking parrot, and redirects it to the part of the jungle that is full of beehives where he would survive. At the conclusion Toto curiously asks the significance of Kisna's efforts to take the bear away when he could have easily beaten it up. This becomes an opportunity for Kisna to gently explain to all his friends who play the role of the surrogate audience, about the importance of treating animals with care and the need for protecting our environment. The "emotional and ideological content" of the animations thus echoes the wisdom of folktales on which they are fashioned (Propp 14).

Unlike folktales, the characters in the animated tales like *Chhota Bheem* and *Kisna* do have proper names, yet they are not characters with psychological depth and ability for growth but depict types taken over from the folktales themselves. Raju is the trickster figure,

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[6] *Kisna*, an animation series that originally aired on Discovery Kids was launched in October 2014 and is produced by Ketan Mehta's Maya Movies Pvt. Ltd. It follows the story of a young boy Kisna who shares associations with Lord Krishna in terms of the way he is costumed and portrayed. Kisna is endowed with many super powers that help him fight against Raja Durjan, his arch rival and the wicked king of Anandhnagri, the rural village in which Kisna resides along with his parents, elder brother Balu (inspired by Balaram) and a host of friends with whom he shares several adventures and fights against evil forces and wrongdoers. In terms of its setting and language, the series tries to create a sense of antiquity

naughty and always winning more by virtue of his good luck than actual merit, Chutki and Radhika typify the weakling figures who makes do with her superior intellect when adversity strikes, Jaggu and Toto are anthropomorphised animals inspired by takes like the Panchatantra and Indumati is the archetypal beautiful princess enamoured by the hero, the damsel in distress, waiting to be rescued by Bheem in every episode.

Ramanujan observes that folk tales "do not always follow an opening formula like 'Once upon a time' yet special phrases found only in folktales, like '...in a certain town' (Tamil) often mark the opening of the tales. These turn the key for our entry into a tale-world and a tale-time, and let us cross a threshold into another kind of space" (Ramanujan 461). This function is carried out by the locale in which animations are set, which marks a conscious break from everyday reality and makes the transition into the fantasy world extremely palpable. For instance, each story of *Chhota Bheem* is set in the fictional other-world of Dholakpur. The environment of Dholakpur is flexible enough to flaunt a rural agrarian society headed by a monarch but lest we imagine it to be a pristine village, it also allows for contrasting figures of sadhus and scientists, daanavs and aliens to rub shoulders with each other within its radius. Ancient magical potions and futuristic gadgets vie with each other, and legendary weapons from the past reappear to compete with tools backed by futuristic science as boundaries between the past and the future, the local and the global and the urban and the rural are constantly renegotiated. Though Dholakpur is self-enclosed it is by no means isolated. The interaction between the local and global is extremely palpable and characters belonging to distant legends from foreign lands make frequent appearances in the narratives. Bheem often faces rivals such as Hercules in varied contests, and waves the Indian flag after winning against them. Such iterations highlight the strong affinities that the animators maintain with their national identity. Giving them added visibility, they wish to make the symbols of the Indian state recognizable features in the global animation industry. What is problematic however is that they tend to selectively supplant the Hindu identity as Indian and vice versa without making concessions for the multi religious and multi ethnic nature of the Indian populace.

This Hinduisation of the Indian identity extends to all aspects of the animations as although the geographical specificities of Bheem's Dholakpur, Kisna's Anandnagri or Maruti's Pawanpur are not provided, there is no doubt about them being located somewhere

in India owing to how their inhabitants dress, eat, or speak; the festivals they observe and the games they engage in all borrow from Indian ethos generally and Hindu culture specifically. Bull races, horse races and kite flying competitions, people dressed in dhotis and sarees, prevalence of belief in concepts such as *tapasya, tantrikvidya* and *yoga* all stress the Indianness of the community portrayed in the series. The intense patriotic fervour demonstrated by the protagonists in face of any competition from the outside serves to converge and conjoin their religious and national identity erroneously making Indian synonymous with Hindu. While the folktales of yore were rich expressions of the regional character of where they were born, these animations by contrast seem to be engaged in the manufacturing of a national character, on definite ideological and political lines that highlights the cultures of specific communities over the others.

With the focus on the figure of the child in these animated stories, the reversal of hierarchies is only to be expected. Figures of power within the family and in society at large are shown to be gullible and dependent on the children in a carnivalesque manner. Authority figures, like the king of Dholakpur, seldom achieve success without the help of Bheem and his friends, just as the evil Principal Kanishk (Kans) is never able to match up to the strength and wisdom of Kris and his band. Children become the saviours at the end of each tale, bullies always get defeated and kidnappers always lose. Following the logic of folktales ``fears are faced and resolved, anxieties roused and relieved" (Ramaujan 469). The animations therefore continue the task of entertaining as well as teaching life lessons through the use of metaphors. But beneath simplistic life lessons regarding honesty, courage, and righteousness are also encoded the norms that control and regiment people's behaviour in the society at large. These include not only a selective understanding of religious and national identity as pointed out above, but also specific formulations about gender roles. Most of these series, for instance, have male protagonists at their centre often relegating the subordinate roles of helper or dependents to the female characters present, cementing the patriarchal notions regarding power and hierarchy in this fictional world as well.

Using the form of the folktale can prove to be a tricky business also because while the modern day tales for children are moralistic and aim to teach them lessons in ethics, folktales are known to be irreverent towards gods and other authority figures at the same time. "In India, for instance, every official idea, however philosophic, like karma or maya or the

sacredness of gurus, has its critique in oral satires. Gods, kings Brahmins -- doctors and officials, along with mothers-in-law, demons, robbers and other such terrifying beings, are all ridiculed" (Ramanujan 467). The balance between humour and moralistic tendencies required of children's literature and the irreverence embedded in folktales is established in a studied and precocious manner in the animation tales. The most intimate figure of authority for the child represented by the parents is undercut, as they are conspicuous by their absence in most of these series. The debate between listening to them and retaliating against them is evaded entirely by placing the child protagonists outside the structure of the family. At times parents are conveniently removed from the set up all together (*Roll No. 21*) or brought into the picture very rarely (*Chhota Bheem).* The absence of parental control enables the child protagonists to explore their surroundings fully and reach conclusions independently. But while the children are located in a self-enclosed imaginary realm, it does not free them from the burden of expectations or the influence of ideologies subscribed to by the adults belonging to the real world.

Influence of this reality is however reflected in a much more subtle and nuanced manner in their world of fiction. Ramanujan observes, "Folklore, contrary to romantic notions of its spontaneity or naturalness, is formal. It makes its forms visible. Identification and disidentification (of the listeners with the characters) have their triggers in the tales and happen at different stages of a tale" (Ramanujan 462). In the animation narratives the relatability of the audience and the child protagonists is similarly manipulated. The child is rewarded and punished according to the normative rules practiced by the society whereupon s/he is expected to follow the codes of conduct and moral dictates that are accepted by the majority.

Just as the folk stories appear to be casual entertainment on the surface, the narratives of these animations are also simplistic in nature but on a deeper level extremely stratified and satiated with value judgements about defining and distinguishing the right from the wrong. The manner in which these judgements are pronounced range from plain humour (making fun of characters like Kalia-the bully) to strict punishments (villains being beaten up by the hero/Bheem). The larger structures of authority and networks of power, moreover, remain unquestioned. For instance, the king might be gullible and in constant need of Bheem's help,

yet Bheem and his friends who always step forward to correct king's mistakes never question the authority he exercises. Despite his obvious ineptitude no one dreams of disposing of him. Though at times making fun of the king adds humour to the tales, his position is never threatened nor does his incapability to rule the kingdom become an impediment to the love and respect that the character commands. The children never wonder why everyone should be at the beck and call of a single person, a monarch, especially one who is often mistaken in his judgements and leads them into life threatening situations. On the contrary, they replicate the social hierarchy in their own relationships as well. The differential manner in which they treat the young princess Indumati who is the same age as them and the humility she commands on their behalf is baffling as children are ideally meant to be free of social and class-consciousness. The status quo and power hierarchies relating to class structures are thus reproduced at multiple levels within the series.

Divinising the Human, Humanising the Divine:

Ramanujan comments that myths "by and large divinize the human " and folktales "humanize the divine " to bring the mythic characters closer to the audience. Animated tales with god-inspired heroes exhibit similar tendencies. Unlike Bheem and Arjun who are not graced with the status of gods in popular folklore, both Krishna and Hanuman are divine figures, and have a vast amount of literature and rituals surrounding them and are earnestly worshipped by their followers. The animations that turn them into modern day characters find a way out for balancing the divine and human aspects often by functioning on two levels simultaneously using the trope of forgotten identity. The gods leave behind their divine identities and all the memories associated with it as they step down to earth. Only in extreme moments of crisis can they revert to their divine selves but at all other times they are liable to make mistakes and be laughed at like all the other mortal characters that surround them.

The little blue boy in *Roll No 21* though ostensibly a reincarnation of Krishna never demands authority or reverence from his friends. Set in the contemporary times, Kris is pictured as a resident of the Mathura Anaath Ashram that is headed by an evil school Principal/Administrator Kanishk (a reincarnation of Kansa), an Asura in disguise who is always trying to bring the children to some harm. Kris has been sent to earth to protect these children but in his new avatar he is neither omniscient nor omnipresent like the deity and

needs help from other characters such as Sukhi (a reincarnation of Naarad), the caretaker to spy on Kanishk on his behalf. To the other children Kris is just another classmate. While some like him, others decidedly disregard him and even try to bully him. All his concerns are modern and contemporary as we watch him struggle with classes and homework like any regular kid. In the series therefore, Krishna, in the form of Kris, is humanised in order to make it easier for the audience to relate with him.

The tales about this boy who is sometimes identified as the eleventh avatar of Vishnu and goes on to combat aliens and undertakes time travel display innovations and creativity that only folktale narratives can afford.[7] While the universal battle between good and evil represented by Kris and Kanishk is extended from mythology, he harnesses the fantasies and fears of the modern audiences as well. The series therefore adds new threads to the *leela* of Krishna and the animated tales add to the repository of oral tales about the deity in turn affecting the viewer's perceptions about the god.

Significant is the way in which the concept of superhero intervenes in the very first episode of *Roll No. 21*. The first scene does not centre on the gods or their heavenly abode, but focuses on the immediate setting of the school where the children happen to be enjoying a TV show about a superhero called Agent Veer. Some of them are even dressed up like their favourite defender and all seem to enjoy imitating him. The episode begins with the children worshipping the superhero and ends with Kris helping out Agent Veer to save his friends who have been transposed inside the world of the television by evil Kanishka who wishes to trap them there for eternity. The superhero thanks Kris for all his assistance during the rescue and states, "you are a better superhero than I am." This shift does not come easily though. Since Kris has left the authoritative world of the epics behind his adversaries are no longer afraid of him. He gets beaten up and electrocuted by his rivals. If "in Hindu mythology the gods do not sweat or blink nor do their feet touch the ground," the animation narratives definitely side with the folk tales in which "the gods have bodies. They smell pee and shit" (Ramanujan). Kris is not unbeatable and all-powerful and gets tired at times, and occasionally expresses fear as well. But he eventually does bounce back to fight the villains

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[7] Lord Vishnu is generally understood to have taken on ten primary avatars or incarnations in which he has descended from the heaven to restore cosmic order according to the Puranas. Kris is here pitched as an extension of this tradition and a modern avatar of the deity.

with laser guns and other modern weapons rather than any identifiable superpowers. Only then does he receive the compliment of being a better superhero than Agent Veer. The show announces Kris as the new and a different kind of a hero, who is both divine and human, magical and common, ancient and contemporary, all at the same time. The attempt is to pitch this new character into the mould of the superhero with his mythic associations setting him apart from his western counterparts.

With the character of *Chhota Bheem* however, even this limited connection with the divine is decisively broken off. The creators of Bheem were well aware that with this character, they were marking a big shift in the narrative pertaining to the existing animated series. "Characters from mythology had enormous pull but they were available to everybody else" remarks Chilaka, the creator of Bheem. "I decided to pick the character and put him in a different set-up, era, time zone . . . with different friends, thereby making him more fun" (Khandekar). Unlike Kris, for whom allusions to divinity remain alive to some extent, Bheem uses only the name of the mythic character and no backstory is offered to explain away his superhuman strength. He enters the stage as a secular agency and continues to function in that capacity never being raised in stature to match up to the divine. The allusions to the epic are ample; Bheem is fond of eating, his favourite food being ladoos, his strength is comparable to the mythological prototype despite his being only a small child and his rival from the neighbouring village is called Kichak, drawing on the Kichak-vadh episode from the *Mahabharata*. Yet, in the fictional village of Dholakpur, along with a new set of friends, the status of Bheem is greatly altered. While in the *Mahabharata* he is just one of the Panadavas, secondary in importance to his other brothers, in the series he always emerges the sole saviour of Dholakpur. His tales are entirely new and he is a secular character devoid of any godly markings or royal lineage.

The episodes or films where the gods make their appearance such as *Chhota Bheem and Ganesha, Chhota Bheem and Hanuman and Chhota Bheem and Krishna* to name a few, are the most pertinent examples of folkloristic tendencies of *Chhota Bheem*. Gods are not imagined/treated as higher beings who command reverence, but fulfil the roles of allies or competitors. They participate in the struggles faced by Bheem and Bheem's agency is not diminished by their presence. They are brought down to the human scale by their engagement in activities that affect the mortals whereas Bheem is raised in status as he emerges as the

mortal who is capable of putting an end to all evil. He does not depend on Ganesha or Kahna or the host of other deities who appear to fight beside him and even in their presence he emerges as the sole hero. The power of the gods does not take away from the importance accorded to the secular character of Bheem who exercises equal freedom to act independently in these narratives. Bheem's behaviour towards the gods is not always reverential or even friendly and throwing them a challenge to test their mettle is neither out of the ordinary nor considered hubristic. For instance, when Kanha makes an appearance, he has a constant tussle with Bheem and has to repeatedly prove himself to be accepted and permitted to become a part of Bheem's adventures.

Since Hanuman, Krishna and Ganehsa appear as divinities in these telefilms and not simply as fictional characters that have associations with the gods, the particular narratives where Bheem interacts with them thus serve to add new stories to the already existing folklore surrounding these deities and enhance the child narratives surrounding them that occupy an important place in public culture. In this manner, these films create new myths while challenging, altering and moulding existing myths as well as reorient the young viewers' understanding about these divine figures.

While portraying the gods, folk narratives associated with them are continually invoked in these telefilms. For instance, in *Chhota Bheem and Kanha* everywhere Kanha travels with Bheem, the evil soldiers that pose a threat to the duo involuntarily fall into a stupor in keeping with the legend about the deity's birth that recounts a story about the guards losing consciousness in order to afford Kanha's father the opportunity to move him to safety away from his evil uncle. Similarly, the portrayal of Ganesha also takes us further into the world of folklore as his immense love for laddus is given prominence in the film in keeping with the folk beliefs and child narratives associated with the deity. The divide between the world of oral folklore and fictional digitale is thus blurred and made permeable making the former interact and comingle with the latter to create new folklore.

Lately a significant tendency which is taking shape is that more than just establishing these animated texts in the Indian popular domain, international locales are also being exploited as the heroes like Bheem and Kris travel to various countries all over the world in their narratives. Since Indian animation is trying to establish itself in the global market, to

widen the scope of the series and extend its engagement with folklore of origins other than India, multiple narratives surrounding Bheem's travels to different parts of the globe have been recounted especially in feature length episodes of the series. The adventures of Bheem take him to a myriad of destinations ranging from Japan, Africa, Egypt, Nepal, Bali, and Iran to name just a few. These international ventures undoubtedly help the creators connect and interact with a huge diasporic audience. These narratives become a pretext to experiment with not only a new visual register encoded in a distinctive architectural background or unique clothing styles that characterise these communities; but also to allow Bheem to dabble into the legendary pasts associated with these places. In keeping with his own timeline, Bheem does not explore these destinations as they exist in the modern day but only as they might have existed in the mythic past, and encounters many legendary heroes whose adventures he partakes of. For Indians living abroad, these series provide tales of hybridization wherein they can witness an interaction between the culture of the homeland and the culture that they now inhabit.

While these tales create a cultural hybridity by bringing diverse sources together, "Nederveen Pieterse (1995: 57) observes, 'hybridity raises the question of the terms of mixture, the conditions of mixing and mélange'" (Storey 117-8). In *Chhota Bheem and the Throne of Bali,* the most ambitious venture of Green Gold animations till date, Bheem's vacation to Bali turns adventurous as Bali comes under attack by the evil spirit Rangra. The conflict between Rangra and Barong is one of the most popular legends of Bali. The film exploits the traditional symbols that are used to portray these characters and the plot enables Bheem to become a part of this mythic tale. While elements of the legend are deftly adapted to the animation mode with appropriate visual symbols, the prominence accorded to Bheem in the narrative framework invokes a subtle hierarchy placing the host communities in subordinate positions by highlighting their dependence on Bheem. The subtle implication of the superiority of Indian/Hindu culture and Indian hero is not lost to the Indian audience who are expected to root for Bheem and identify with him. In the guise of multicultural and eclectic explorations, the series thus tries to push forth in a thinly veiled manner, a particular cultural hegemony glorifying Hindu culture. These tales thus become "articulations of local cultures in global environment leading to invigoration of local cultures" (Ranganathan 18).

Another feature, which sets narratives like Bheem aside, is the manner in which they bring in modern day myths into the fold of the fictional worlds created in them. In one of the episodes, titled *Einstein Bheem* the story of Einstein's formulation of his famous equations becomes a fantasy of time travel as Einstein reaches Dholakpur by feeding the wrong equation into his watch. It is with the help of Bheem and his friends that he is able to protect the gadget from being misused by a rather greedy Kalia and go back to the future. Bheem and the children of Dholakpur thus share the credit of his discoveries. Even in the absence of such visits from the future, Dholakpur is not to be understood as divorced from scientific advancements. The figure of Professor Dhoom Ketoo, who is a brilliant scientist and invents fabulous gadgets, along with the visitations from the other worlds (in episodes like *Chhota Bheem vs Aliens*) take the series towards the realm of science fiction at times.

The relationship between the world of Dholakpur and science is however a little strained. Contrary to expectation, the scientist is not the innovator who explores fresh avenues and realizes new potential in the things that surround us. Dhoom Ketoo is a case in point. Though his inventions are astounding they often malfunction or get manipulated in the hands of the mischief makers till Bheem and his group intervene to make things right. Resultantly, a far cry from being the saviour, the scientist is not a visionary but a vulnerable and weak persona and the darker side of his scientific experimentation is never too far from sight. The initial charm and awe that scientifically invented gadgets generate in children is thus undercut by emphasising the dangerous and harmful uses that they can be put to. On the other hand, the Sadhoos and other religious heads, even kind witches and fairy godmothers are the figures whose advice are sought and often prove helpful. The children routinely seek help from characters such as Dhooni Baba, who assists them through his higher wisdom and supreme knowledge each time they are unable to solve a problem and find themselves ignorant about the past, the awareness of which usually holds the key to defeating their rivals. With each such encounter, mythopoesis is initiated and another legend is added to the annals of the fictional Dholakpur that eventually evolves as a place with an expansive history, umpteen legends and distinct geographical features. Gods from the Hindu pantheon mingle with fictional kings of Dholakpur in these stories of the past. Propp observes, "folklore is a living art that is "incongruous with new attitudes, tastes, and ideology." It enters "into contradiction with itself, and such contradictions are always present" (Propp 8).

The competing knowledge systems that are pronounced in the animation narratives are characteristic of this trait of folklore where contradictions and multiple versions are allowed to co-exist. Though a hierarchy between these alternate systems of knowledge is implied, a clash between the two paradigms is always avoided and Bheem is never asked to pick one over the other exclusively and overtly.

Conclusion:

The revival of folktale in its pristine form is neither possible nor desired. Handu argues, "Modernization, new technology and innovations are giving rise to new folklore and new traditions. Mass media was at first seen as destroying the purity of folklore and oral traditions but it soon turned out that mass media is in fact becoming a new carrier of folklore and the retellings of films, and soap operas, and other genres are changing the temporal boundaries of folklore rather than destroying its content or purity" (Handoo 7). Folklore is characterised by growth and the animations that have been analysed in this paper provide a niche for certain forms of folklore to prosper in a new environment. The animations are thus creating what Ramanujan calls "secondary orality" where oral presentations are possible "without face-to-face communication" (465). With 24 hour transmission on various channels through the television sets in every home, animation is successfully filling the gap that the modern set up had engendered by churning out new stories for the children. The kind of texts produced using the medium of animation imbibe the spirit of folktales and perform the function of humanizing machines in this period of increased mechanisation and it is for this reason it would be both pertinent and useful to refer to these animated tales as "digitales."

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