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The Power of the Milk Bond, Sacred and the Cinematic: Myth, Media, and Subaltern Realities

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Abstract: This article examines the concept of milk kinship, looking at how co-lactation and foster motherhood are portrayed across Indian mythology, history, and cinema. Moving beyond its basic biological role, milk kinship functions as a powerful narrative device to address issues of political power, social identity, and caste hierarchy. The study begins by tracing the sacred dimensions of foster motherhood in Hindu texts and regional films, where breast milk is often framed as a symbol of purity, sacrifice, and unconditional love—much like the traditional Yashoda-Krishna narrative. However, when looking at mainstream historical epics like *Jodhaa Akbar* and the *Baahubali* franchise, the focus shifts. In these narratives, milk kinship becomes deeply tied to political intrigue, surrogate authority, and patriarchal entitlement.

The paper also critically addresses the socio-economic reality of wet nursing in India, specifically the systemic exploitation of Dalit women. It highlights a stark paradox within the caste system: upper-caste families routinely relied on the reproductive labor and breast milk of marginalized women to sustain their own lineage, despite strictly enforcing notions of untouchability and ritual purity. Finally, through an analysis of Ranjith's Malayalam film *Njan*, the paper explores how regional cinema can deconstruct these class and caste hypocrisies, revealing how the romanticized image of the subaltern wet nurse is frequently used to cover up socially unacceptable biological realities. Ultimately, the paper argues that media representations of milk kinship expose some of the deepest historical and socio-political fault lines in Indian society.

Keywords: *Milk Kinship, Indian Cinema, Subaltern Exploitation, Caste Dynamics, Foster Motherhood, Socio-Cultural History*

Introduction

In broad terms, "milk kinship" refers to the relational bond forged between a child, a wet nurse, and their respective families when a woman breastfeeds an infant that is not biologically her own. Milk Kinship is a bio social mechanism which builds a biological, familial and sociological connection between individuals in the society.

A critical examination of the kinship networks developed through shared lactation reveals that this is not merely a biological function, but rather a deeply stratified biosocial process carrying profound socioeconomic and political implications.

Various societal discourses assimilate this practice, modifying it according to their unique cultural paradigms. Religions, mythologies, and legal frameworks continuously reconstruct its structural dynamics. Consequently, breast milk can be theorized as a potent, unifying fluid—one possessing the social efficacy to bind individuals, kinship groups, and entire communities together.

In contemporary discourse, modern media frequently frames milk kinship through a lens that aligns with corporate, class, and caste-based interests. However, robust legal frameworks within India actively resist the rampant commercialization of breast milk, thereby preserving the organic, lived reality of milk kinship.

A nuanced historiographical examination of its cinematic and historical representations across the Indian subcontinent exposes a multifaceted paradigm. Alongside the romanticization of lactation and the potential avenues for the upward social mobility of marginalized subjects, these narratives simultaneously lay bare intense power struggles, rigid hierarchies of ritual purity, deeply entrenched mechanisms of systemic exploitation, and the stark realities of communal and caste-based oppression.

Within the cultural archive of Kerala—ranging from Malayalam cinema to colloquial folk songs—a mother's breast milk is persistently elevated as the ultimate cinematic signifier of absolute sacrifice and uncorrupted maternal affection. Culturally resonant dialogues, such as "Ammayude mulappal kudichavar arenkilumundel vaada" (Let those who have suckled their mother's milk step forward) or assertions of guarding the honor of breast milk, invoke a profound sense of regional pride, moral obligation, and identity formation.

However, moving beyond this romanticized epistemology, monumental historical epics and subaltern dramas construct a far more intricate understanding of lactational kinship. A critical analysis of cinematic texts such as K. Asif's magnum opus *Mughal-e-Azam*, S.S. Rajamouli's

Baahubali franchise, and Ranjith's Malayalam historical drama *Njan* serve as a vital case study in this regard. In these narratives, milk kinship is stripped of its presumed innocence, transforming instead into a formidable biopolitical instrument. Here, the sovereign destiny of entire empires is frequently depicted as hinging entirely upon the calculated political allegiances of a wet nurse.

From the mythological bedrock of ancient Hindu texts—where the *Dhathri* (wet nurse) nourishes the nascent divinity of the infant Krishna—to the sprawling, highly politicized royal courts of the Mughal Empire, where institutionalized "milk alliances" elevated generals to the throne, the mechanics of milk kinship operate across a remarkably diverse and complex sociopolitical spectrum.

By critically interrogating how literature and the cinematic apparatus mobilize this thematic construct, we uncover a profound mirror—one that reflects the enduring sociopolitical realities of the subcontinent, revealing dynamics that are occasionally emancipatory, yet frequently deeply unsettling.

The Politics of Kinship and Subaltern Mobility

While mythological narratives consistently idealize milk kinship as the divine paradigm of exalted relational bonds, its historical applications sharply diverge. Within the sprawling Mughal harems, it functioned as a strategic instrument—a crucial lever to navigate and ascend the intricate hierarchies of imperial power. Conversely, within the rigid structural frameworks of the Indian caste system, it manifested as the violent domination and absolute expropriation of the subaltern body. Furthermore, through the anxious lens of the colonial gaze, this biological transaction was perceived as an inevitable affliction—a necessary peril harboring the terrifying potential to dismantle the very foundations of racial purity.

Recent media interventions—ranging from widely discussed documentaries detailing the milk kinship between Maudu Maulavi and Cheeru, to popular vlogs and an upcoming cinematic production exploring the lactational bond between Sreedharan and Subaida of the Changaadam family—have garnered significant critical attention. These contemporary narratives vividly illustrate the complex, often inverted intersections of class, religion, and power within milk kinship.

In the narrative of Sreedharan, his wet nurse, Subaida, was an aristocratic Muslim woman. Conversely, in the case of Maudu Maulavi, the infant who received the nourishment belonged to the socio-religious elite, thereby underscoring the subaltern status of his wet nurse, Cheeru. Furthermore, these lived accounts demonstrate that while the formation of such lactational

kinship is occasionally the result of serendipitous or circumstantial events, it is frequently forged as an inevitable biopolitical necessity.

In *Mahabharatha* wet nurse or foster mother is called as “Dhathri”. Krishna was delivered by Devaki in jail under the threat of infanticide by his uncle Kamsa. He was saved, smuggled, raised and breast fed by Yashoda. It is mentioned in many hindu mythological texts like *Bhagavatha Purana*, *Harivamsa* (The appendix of *Mahabharatha*), *Vishnu Purana*, *Grhya Samhita*, *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* and *Prem Sagar*.

This shows the sacred status of milk kinship in Hinduism. ‘Yashoda’ is marked as an emotional mother rather than a mere caretaker in literature, poetry and classical artforms. The same aforesaid emotional connection is the central theme or deciding factor in many Bollywood movies. The intense emotional connection and selflessness needed to nurture another one’s child is shown as sign of sacrifice in most such Indian movies. “Poothana(Putana)” is a wet nurse who once breastfed Krishna (tried to poison infant at yashoda’s residence)

The myth of Pūtanā is significant not merely for the image it presents ... but for the intensity with which the image is depicted and the frequency with which the myth itself is told in India (*O’Flaherty*). *O’Flaherty* explains that Putana attempted to poison Krishna by breastfeeding him, but ultimately, Krishna killed her and granted her passage to heaven. Survival and nourishment of a child is taken care of by dhatri when the biological mother is absent, ill, or unable to lactate.

Indian cinema has identified the thematic potential of Milk Kinship. It addresses different implications of milk kinship through epic cinemas and drama and regional art films. It tries to conceptualize the themes of political power, loyalty, exploitation of the untouchables and also selflessness of mother.

Movies like K. Asif’s *Mughal-e-Azam*, S. S. Rajamouli’s historical epic *Baahubali franchise*, and Ranjith’s historic drama *Njan* revolve around how the destiny of a kingdom or individual is hooked up with a foster mother (Smith).

Maham Anga is the most powerful foster mother in Indian cinema. She was the foster mother of king Akbar. The story of Maham Anga was widely portrayed in bollywood films like *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (Zee Series). Maham Anga was addressed as the foster mother of Mughal Emperor Akbar. The story of the dismissal of Bairam Khan, Akbar’s strongest man in administration, by Maham Anga and replacing Adham Khan (Akbar’s foster brother and Maham Anga’s son) has been discussed widely in *Jodhaa Akbar*. The period was referred to as “petticoat regency”. The story has been echoed in television series like *Bharat Ka Veer Putra - Maharana Pratap* and *Akbar Rakht Se Takht Ka Safar*. In the first series She is depicted accurately as

Akbar's chief wet nurse and foster mother. Because Akbar ascended to the throne at a very young age, she acts as a highly influential power broker behind the scenes. The series highlights Maham Anga's immense political power, her manipulative nature, and her fierce protectiveness over Akbar. She is frequently shown scheming against her rivals in the harem (like Bairam Khan and Akbar's mother, Hamida Banu Begum) to maintain her grip on the young emperor and the empire's affairs. Which explicitly shows how Maham Anga a foster imposes power against real mother Hamida Banu Begum.

In the later series, Maham Anga is portrayed as the extremely ambitious head nurse of Akbar. She is portrayed as an extremely important political figure who serves as a sort of regent to Akbar in his formative years. Much of the plot revolves around her efforts to consolidate power within the harem and the royal court, actively maneuvering against rivals like Bairam Khan to ensure that her influence over the young emperor remains absolute.

In *Jodhaa Akbar*, Maham Anga transcends simplistic villainy, presenting a complex representation of a palace lady keenly aware that her influence solely stems from her milk bond with the emperor Akbar. Her intense resistance to the Hindu Rajput Queen Jodhaa is portrayed not just as religious intolerance but as a desperate effort to preserve her political importance and safeguard the independent domain she created through the surrogate maternal connection.

The feebleness in milk bonds in case of power can be seen in the tragic portrayal of Maham Anga and her son, Adham Khan. Akbar's foster brother Adham Khan has an idea that he has gained entitlement and power in the empire by co-lactation with Emperor Akbar. It leads to his destruction later. Adham Khan assassinates Ataga Khan, Akbar's favourite general. This led Akbar to order the execution of Adham Khan. *Jodhaa Akbar* also depicts the very emotional and cinematic scene of Maham Anga saying to Akbar "You Have Done Well"(By Killing My Son) ending my biological lineage (Ironically). This above-mentioned period from 1560 to 1562 is known as "Petticoat Regency".

Maham Anga tells the story of political ambition, but *Panna Dhai* is the symbol of absolute sacrifice. Panna Dhai was nursemaid to Udai Singh II, the fourth son of Maharana Sangram Singh (12 April 1484 - 17 March 1527). She had been given charge of young Udai Singh, breastfeeding him from his birth in 1522, along with her own son Chandan (also known as Moti), who was of similar age and Udai Singh's playmate. When Banvir, his uncle, entered the palace to kill the royal heir, Panna Dhai took an uncomfortable decision. She exchanged the babies and put her biological son into the royal bed. Banvir killed Chandan, thinking he was Udai Singh, and saved the actual heir by carrying him in a basket of fruits (Daryani).

Harams had many women and so a lot of conceptions took place in the harem with subsequent demand for midwives (Smith). The babies delivered by the harem's midwives grew up fiercely bonded to the outside families whose milk had raised them. This created a sprawling web of milk alliances that bound the empire's military and administrative elite directly to the Mughal throne.

This story of ultimate loyalty of a foster mother is echoed in Indian Cinema, Theatre Dramas and Text books. It portrays the sacred nature of breastfeeding.

S.S.Rajamouli's epic films *Baahubali: The Beginning* (2015) and *Baahubali: The Conclusion* (2017) share one of the most structurally rich and popular examples of milk kinship, foster motherhood, in contemporary Indian cinema. Queen Sivagami, a very powerful matriarch who seizes control of the Mahishmati kingdom with her bravery, is at the center of the franchise's political and emotional unrest.

The act of nursing is complex and profoundly linked to Sivagami's historical entrance as a young regent. Sivagami becomes Mahishmati's ruler and defender after the king Vikramadeva passes away unexpectedly. Sivagami is depicted sitting on the royal throne and speaking to her council of patriarchal ministers while nursing two babies: her biological son, Bhallaladeva, and her orphaned nephew, Amarendra Baahubali, in a highly controversial and extensively discussed cinematic scene.

The scene is a radical subversion of traditional patriarchal statecraft. By showing the extremely private act of breastfeeding within the political domain of her royal court, the film brews the life-giving nature of breast and the sovereign authority of the crown. Sivagami declares at the same courtroom moment that both infants possess an equal right to the throne, explicitly utilizing the mechanism of simultaneous co-lactation to erase the biological hierarchy between her own son "Bhallaladeva" and her adopted son "Amarendra Baahubali". This kinship established upon the throne is a deliberate political decision intended to bind the boys in an egalitarian brotherhood and secure Mahishmati's future stability.

Sivagami makes a sincere effort to share her maternal love and milk equally, but her idealism is severely hindered by the court's socio-political realities. The franchise meticulously demonstrates how inherent psychological jealousy, biological entitlement, and patriarchal schemes are not suppressed by Milk Bond (Rajamouli, *Conclusion*).

Bhallaladeva, driven by the toxic mentoring of his father Bijjaladeva, builds dangerous, festering jealousy toward Amarendra Bahubali. Bijjaladeva brainwashes his biological son into believing that natural birth and biological birthright are supreme. Bijjaladeva was previously denied the crown because of his physical deformity and nasty, sadistic personality. His milk sibling

Amarendra Bahubali develops into the ideal, moral Kshatriya warrior who readily gains the deep love and allegiance of the kingdom's public, which is precisely why the hatred is heightened. Baahubali's more liberal and deviant personality is a recurring theme in the movie, which puts him at odds with the strict traditional customs that Sivagami and the royal guard Kattappa uphold.

The story dramatically demonstrates that although milk kinship can legally and socially bridge divides, it is unable to eradicate the deeply rooted patriarchal systems that place priority on the first-born biological male (Rajamouli). Critics have noted that Sivagami plays the role of a tragic hero in the traditional sense: an exceptionally talented person with a major defect that ultimately brings about her downfall. Her tragic weakness is confidence that she could command peace and control human nature with her sheer willpower, represented by her sharing breastmilk and declarative statements (Rajamouli). She was eventually manipulated by Bhallaladeva and Bijjaladeva to order the assassination of Amarendra Baahubali based on fabricated evidence, deconstructing her idea of building peace by milk kinship.

The famous, magnificent opening sequence of *Baahubali: The Beginning* is the culmination of the narrative arc of Sivagami's motherhood. The older Sivagami, mortally wounded by an arrow in her back and running from the assassins of the kingdom, falls into a river's roaring currents. She lifts the baby Mahendra Baahubali (Amarendra's son) high above the rough waters as she slowly drowns, offering her own life to the Hindu God Shiva in a profound, cosmic sacrifice in return for the child's survival (Rajamouli, *Beginning*).

This sacrifice is a cinematic masterpiece that visually corresponds with the foster mother's legendary determination. Sivagami uses physical martyrdom to secure the Mahendra's survival. Sivagami is firmly established in India's ultimate cinematic mother figures because of the visual of the child lifted aloft above the roaring currents, which evokes old mythical notions of salvation and heavenly protection.

Alternative media and postcolonial literature offer a harsh critique of the practice as a primary site of subaltern exploitation, while mainstream historical epics like *Baahubali* and *Jodhaa Akbar* romanticize the wet nurse as a figure of high-stakes political intrigue, sovereign matriarchy, and noble sacrifice. The harsh, structural hierarchies of caste, class, and gender are intrinsically related to the socioeconomic reality of wet nursing in India.

In the past, women from the lowest castes were often the ones who had to bear the bodily burden of wet nursing. Dalit groups were routinely compelled to perform humiliating physical work since they were outside of the conventional four-tier Chatur Varna system and were considered

"untouchable" by Brahminical society (Goghari and Kusi). The biological reproductive work of Dalit women was included in this systemic oppression, which went beyond sweeping and tanning leather (Uppuleti). Upper-caste and land-owning families frequently exploited and forced women from communities like the Madigas in the southern Indian state of Telangana to work as wet nurses (Uppuleti).

The Indian caste system's deceptive ideas of purity and contamination are strongly rooted in the tragic paradox of this relationship. The biological fluids (breastmilk) of Dalit women were readily and regularly consumed by upper-caste families to sustain their offspring since they believed that physical contact with a Dalit woman was spiritually filthy. The Dalit woman is deprived of her humanity and turned to a simple biological resource, indicating a systemic monetization of the subaltern female body (Uppuleti).

Regional cinema often utilizes the theme of milk kinship to explore the complex, shifting social hierarchies of 20th-century India. Based on T. P. Rajeevan's critically acclaimed novel *KTN Kottoor: Ezhuthum Jeevithavum*, Ranjith's 2014 Malayalam film *Njan* tells a complex story that combines caste dynamics, forbidden connection, and personal memory with India's war for independence.

A contemporary theater troupe under the direction of Joy Mathew strives to recreate the life of the mysterious protagonist, KTN Kottoor, in this magical realist film set against the historical backdrop of a Kerala village. The story meticulously dismantles the inflexible gender, caste, and class equations that developed within Kerala's modernity. A significant discovery about milk kinship serves as the film's main emotional and intellectual turning point. The boy Kottoor grew up thinking his lower-class "milk brother" is actually his biological half-brother, and he sets out on a difficult and challenging journey to figure out this.

The discovery exposes the deep-seated hypocrisy of his allegedly sacred father, who had a long-term, covert sexual relationship with the milk brother's mother, a local prostitute. By stepping in to wet-nurse Kottoor and raising the boys together, the lower-class mother had kept the secret to save the honor of the upper-caste family. The movie successfully conceals a biological reality that society rejects by using the culturally accepted cliché of the subaltern milk mother (Ranjith).

The way milk kinship is portrayed in Indian media is a thorough, complicated, and highly subtle reflection of the historical, sociopolitical, and spiritual complexity of the subcontinent. Colactation is used as a flexible and potent narrative technique to examine the deepest fault lines of power, identity, and societal obligation, going well beyond the straightforward biological act of newborn nutrition.

Munshi Premchand's 1934 Hindi short story, "*Doodh Ka Daam*" (The Price of Milk), stands as a crucial text in this discussion. It strips away the cinematic gloss to reveal the raw, purely transactional reality of wet nursing.

The story centers around Bhungi, a woman from a marginalized, subaltern caste who is essentially forced to act as a wet nurse for the son of a powerful, upper-caste village landlord. Premchand's work serves as a biting sociopolitical critique of the hypocrisy deeply embedded in the caste-based Hindu social order. He points out a harsh historical reality: elite families often believed lower-caste women had "hardy" biological constitutions because of their outdoor labor and simple diets, especially when compared to the sheltered lives of upper-caste women. The landlord's decision to hire Bhungi isn't painted as some kind, benign domestic arrangement; rather, it's a cold, calculated extraction of her life force and vitality.

The real tragedy of the story lies in the violent imbalance of this relationship. While Bhungi is temporarily showered with good food and gifts just to ensure a rich supply of milk for the landlord's heir, her own newborn baby is severely neglected. Denied the basic nourishment needed to survive, her child is left to face stunted growth and extreme vulnerability right from the start.

But the most devastating critique of this "milk bond" comes later in the story. Bhungi's son, who somehow survives his deprived infancy, grows up only to be mocked, shunned, and ultimately cast out by the village children. The most heartbreaking part? Among those cruel children is the very boy whose life was sustained and nourished by his mother's milk.

Through this heartbreaking arc, Premchand shows us that within this rigid hierarchy, the labor of a surrogate mother is purely transactional and ultimately disposable. The biological connection she creates through her milk never once translates into genuine social inclusion or equality, either for her or her child. "*Doodh Ka Daam*" stands as a crucial literary counterpoint to our cinematic analysis. It firmly asserts that, historically, the milk bond didn't act as a bridge to social equality, but rather as a ruthless mechanism of commodification (Premchand).

In the corridors of power during the British Raj, there was a quiet but pervasive fear that haunted European households: the fear of the Indian wet nurse, or the *dhaai*. The British were terrified that an English child drinking an Indian woman's breast milk would somehow be permanently tainted—that it would corrupt their character or dilute their racial purity. Domestic guidebooks from that era demanded that a *dhaai*'s diet be strictly controlled and her milk medically examined before she was even allowed near a British baby. Above all, the British were deeply unsettled by the idea of their children spending so much time with Indian servants, picking up

their language, habits, and culture. Mrs. Sherwood's 1823 story, *The History of Little Lucy and her Dhaye*, captures this emotional truth beautifully and heartbreakingly (Sherwood).

Leaving behind the strict anxieties of the British Empire, the story takes us straight into the heart and mind of a little English girl named Lucy. For Lucy, her biological mother is little more than a distant figure. Her entire world, her true mother in every sense that matters, is the Indian woman who raised her. The "cultural blending" that the colonial government was so terrified of had completely taken over Lucy's life. She didn't even know how to speak English; her primary language was Hindustani. She wore Indian clothes and grew up essentially as an Indian child.

The most gut-wrenching part of the story arrives when the inevitable happens: the decision is made to forcibly send Lucy back to England. The moment of their separation is absolutely shattering to read. It speaks to a profound truth that the colonial powers could never quite comprehend or control. The story beautifully reminds us that the miraculous bond forged through a mother's milk was strong enough to completely tear down the towering walls of race, class, and culture that the British Empire tried so desperately to build. Despite the government's worst fears, a child's heart simply knew no borders when it came to the woman who loved and nourished her.

Conclusion

The portrayal of milk kinship across Indian media, mythology, and history reveals it to be a profound biosocial mechanism that extends far beyond the simple act of infant nutrition. While it is frequently romanticized in regional cinema and Hindu texts as the ultimate symbol of maternal purity, innocence, and sacrifice—exemplified by figures like Yashoda and Panna Dhai—it simultaneously functions as a highly potent political instrument. Narratives from the Mughal era demonstrate how co-lactation was utilized to forge sprawling administrative alliances and consolidate imperial power, while modern cinematic epics like *Baahubali* depict the use of milk kinship as a tool to subvert patriarchal structures, even if it ultimately fails to overcome deep-rooted biological entitlements and jealousy.

Crucially, a deeper examination of this practice dismantles its sacred facade to expose a harsh socioeconomic reality. The systemic exploitation of marginalized Dalit women, who were forced to act as wet nurses for upper-caste families, highlights a tragic paradox of purity and pollution that commodified the subaltern female body. Furthermore, as seen in the film *Njan*, the culturally accepted trope of the noble foster mother was sometimes weaponized to conceal illicit relationships and upper-caste patriarchal hypocrisy. Ultimately, whether deployed to illustrate divine devotion, manoeuvre royal successions, or mask societal transgressions, the transaction of

breast milk remains a deeply complex and contested narrative device that mirrors the intricate fault lines of power, identity, and social obligation in the Indian subcontinent.

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