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A Posthuman *Dharma*: *Enthiran 2.0*

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Abstract: S. Shankar's 2018 Tamil language science fiction film *2.0*, the stand-alone sequel to his 2010 blockbuster *Enthiran*, presents a bleak vision of a near-present time when obsession with technology has led to deteriorating human relationships as well as destruction of the natural world. The film articulates a posthuman *dharma* founded on the understanding that humans have an ethical obligation towards all living things, not merely other humans. The film posits the individual as fractured and unstable but valorizes the interconnectivity of humans and non-humans, which is underscored by the film's innovative evocation of the *rasas* of classical Indian aesthetics in the context of non-human agents. This essay argues that *2.0* presents a Hindu-inflected ecological posthumanism as the only viable alternative to a dystopian future.

Keywords: *Enthiran*; Tamil cinema; robots; Indian cinema; posthumanism; Hinduism



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1. Introduction

S. Shankar's 2018 Tamil language science fiction film *2.0* is a stand-alone sequel to his 2010 blockbuster film *Enthiran* ("Robot") (Shankar 2010). The main character of *Enthiran*, the scientist Vaseegaran, creates an android double of himself, Chitti, in order to assist the Indian army. Trouble ensues when Chitti falls in love with Vaseegaran's neglected girlfriend, Sana, and when Vaseegaran's mentor, Professor Bohra, tries to co-opt the robot and sell him to a terrorist group. At one point in the film, the villain Professor Bohra installs a "red chip" in Chitti that transforms him into an evil double of himself. This evil Chitti kidnaps Sana, his maker's girlfriend, and tries to murder his own creator before Vaseegaran finally manages to remove the "red chip". At the end of *Enthiran*, Chitti dismantles himself at his maker's command in a moment filled with great pathos.

Eight years after the release of *Enthiran*, Vaseegaran and Chitti return to the screen in *2.0* (Shankar 2018). As in the first film, both the scientist and his robot doppelgänger are played by the same actor, the superstar Rajinikanth, who is so immensely popular that some of his fans refer to him as a god, rather than a man (Lakshmi 2016). While Shankar's films blend action, suspense, and comedy, the majority of his work deals with contemporary social issues, such as political corruption and poverty. While the social themes are more muted in *Enthiran*, Shankar brings the issue of environmental destruction to the forefront in *2.0*. The script of *2.0* was co-written by Shankar, the fantasy novelist Bahuleyan Jeyamohan, and the lyricist and software engineer Madhan Karky. The film's score, like that of *Enthiran*, was composed by the award-winning film composer A. R. Rahman, whose scores weave together Carnatic, classical Hindustani, and Western music. *2.0* is the second most expensive Indian film made to date (after the 2022 Telugu action-drama *RRR*), and the first Indian film to be shot natively in 3D. Although the original language of the film is Tamil, it was released simultaneously in dubbed versions in Hindi and Telugu. The film was well received by audiences and critics alike and became one of the highest grossing Indian films to date (Box Office India 2018).

One of the opening sequences of *2.0* shows a strange phenomenon occurring in the South Indian city of Chennai: smart phones tear themselves away from their owners and fly away into the sky. These flying phones assemble in a bird formation and proceed

to kill several people connected with the cell phone industry. With the help of Chitti, Dr. Vaseegaran discovers that the apparently sentient “bird” formed from run-away cell phones is possessed by the ghost of a recently deceased ornithologist, the significantly named Pakshirajan (“The Bird King”). In despair over the damage that cell phone signals were causing the birds he loved, Dr. Pakshirajan hanged himself from a cell phone tower, a tragic scene shown in the film’s opening sequence. Now his ghost seeks vengeance on the cell phone industry and its users in the form of the terrifying cell phone “bird” controlled by his ghost. After a series of violent confrontations, the “bird” is eventually defeated by a flock of microbot versions of Chitti (named Kutti 3.0) riding on pigeons. Although Pakshirajan’s ghost is vanquished, Dr. Vaseegaran declares at the film’s end that Pakshirajan’s ideas were right, even if his methods were wrong, and insists that the cell phone industry must be controlled so that birds will not be harmed.¹

This paper examines posthuman themes in *2.0* and places the film’s posthumanism in the context of the monistic Advaita Vedānta philosophy of Hinduism.² I argue that *2.0* constitutes a reading of contemporary India’s environmental issues in light of a monistic perception of a spiritual interconnectivity that transcends individual identity. The film presents a vision of a posthuman *dharma* that decenters the human subject and understands animals, the environment, humans, and technology as aspects of an integrated whole.

The android often functions in cinema as an icon of non-emotional rationality, contrasted with the unstable emotions of humans. However, S. Shankar’s *2.0* upends this science fiction film trope by making the non-human characters the film’s emotional center. I will demonstrate that reading *2.0* in the light of Indian *rasa* theory underscores the film’s posthuman message and invites the audience to participate in its shift away from modernity’s anthropocentrism.

2. Posthumanism and Vedānta

Posthumanism is a critique of modernity’s implicit definition of the “human” subject in ways that exclude non-white, non-European, and non-male humans, and of modernity’s exploitation of animals and the environment. Posthumanism seeks to expand the definition of humanity to those who have been excluded by modernity, i.e., people of color, non-Europeans, and non-males, but it also stresses the interconnectedness and interdependence of the human subject with animals and the environment (Brown 2022, p. 171) and represents a decentering of the human subject. Significantly, posthumanism takes issue not only with the perceived universality of the white, male, human subject, but also with the idea of a unified identity itself and helps us re-think the interactions of human and non-human agents (Hayles 1999, p. 4). Posthumanism, as Cary Wolfe reminds us, is radically different from transhumanism, which dreams of humans transcending their bodies and uploading their consciousness to machines, a dream that has its origin in Renaissance humanism and its ideals of human perfectibility and rationality (Wolfe 2010, p. xiii). Posthumanism, on the other hand, embeds the human in both the biological and technological world, while decentering the human and defining it as part of a larger network that extends to both machines and the natural world.

Although posthumanism is a more recent label, posthuman ideas have natural resonances in Indian philosophy. In post-Vedic Hinduism, human existence is a temporary condition; based on their accumulated *karma*, humans can be reborn as other humans, or as animals, gods, or demons. The foundational idea of reincarnation therefore destabilizes the very idea of a permanent human identity and creates a particular affinity between humans and animals. Hindu texts are rich in depictions of non-human subjects, including animals (the boy Satyakāma’s teachers in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 4.4.5–4.5.2 include a bull, the fire, a waterbird, and a goose), nature spirits (*yakṣas*, *apsaras*), gods, and demons. Hindu deities can take the form of sacred rivers (Gaṅgā), animals (the bird Garuḍa), or animal–humanoid hybrids (the elephant-headed Gaṇeśa or the horse-headed Hayagrīva).

Braidotti sees posthumanism as “associated to and supported by a monistic philosophy, which rejects dualism” (Braidotti 2013, p. 3), and she makes a case for replacing

the assumption of (white, male) human exceptionalism that has resulted in hierarchical thinking and violence with a monistic relationality (Braidotti 2013, p. 86). Several modern ecofeminists have argued that it is necessary for the future of the planet to overcome the dualisms inherent in patriarchy (human/non-human, nature/culture, male/female, etc.). A monistic philosophy that breaks down the perceived duality between human and non-human, nature and culture, can therefore function as a theoretical foundation for contemporary environmentalism (see Ruether 1975, pp. 13–14; Warren 1987, pp. 18–20; Daly 1990). While Braidotti embraces a Spinozist monism as a guiding philosophy for posthumanism (Braidotti 2013, p. 86), I will argue that a more Indian monist philosophy underpins the ecological posthumanism of 2.0. While Spinoza's pantheism leans in the direction of a panentheism that sees the world as infused by the divine, Indian Advaita Vedānta philosophy sees all reality as an undifferentiated whole.

The most well-known proponent of an absolute monism in India is the 8th century CE philosopher Śaṅkara, who taught that the self or *ātman* of all living beings (human and non-human) is identical to the cosmic force *brahman*. Śaṅkara's Advaita (non-dualist) Vedānta philosophy postulates that all selves are ultimately part of the same divine substance, an idea that is based on the classical Upaniṣads (ca. 8th century BCE onwards). While Advaita Vedānta does not explicitly address environmental concerns, its monistic philosophy has profound implications for how we might understand the relationship between humans and the environment, and I argue that an Advaita-inspired monism informs the environmental themes of 2.0.

In the ontological system of Advaita Vedānta, the only reality is the cosmic consciousness of *brahman*, which is absolutely identical to the *ātman* in all living beings.³ All living and non-living things emanate from this primordial consciousness:

As a spider spreads out its threads and draw them back in itself,
as plants sprout from the earth,
as head and body hair grows from a human being,
so from the Imperishable [*brahman*] all things spring. (*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* 1.1.7)

According to Advaita Vedānta, all reality is *brahman*, a supreme consciousness that is without attributes or form. Any perception of multiplicity comes from ignorance, and liberation consists of removing this ignorance and realizing the oneness of all reality. Although the human self is one with the eternal *brahman*, there is no human exceptionalism in Advaita Vedānta; all selves are equally identical to *brahman*. As the character Yājñavalkya explains in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*:

One holds a husband dear, not out of love for the husband; it is out of love for the *ātman* that one holds the husband dear. One holds a wife dear, not out of love for the wife; it is out of love for the *ātman* that one holds the wife dear. One holds children dear, not out of love for the children; it is out of love for the *ātman* that one holds the children dear [. . .] One holds livestock dear, not out of love for the livestock; it is out of love for the *ātman* that one holds the livestock dear". (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.5.6)

Here, Yājñavalkya recognizes the same *ātman* in human beings and in animals. The same point is made in the *Bhagavadgītā*, another foundational text for Advaita Vedānta:

Fortifying himself with discipline,
seeing everything with an equal eye,
he sees the *ātman* in all beings,
and all beings in the *ātman*". (*Bhagavadgītā* 6.29)

The monistic philosophy of Advaita Vedānta, which postulates the absolute oneness of all things, is elaborated in Śaṅkara's commentaries on the *Upaniṣads*, the *Bhagavadgītā*, and the *Brahmasūtra*. This monistic philosophy is redeployed in 2.0 in order to make a point about humans and non-humans forming a unified ecological community. As

Dr. Vaseegaran says at the end of the film: “If human beings live on earth, birds should also co-exist [. . .] Pass a rule, no technology should affect any living thing, human, bird, or beast.” By placing humans at the same level as birds and beasts, the film interrogates the assumption of humans’ central position in our world and makes a larger argument about the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world. This argument is bolstered by the film’s depiction of individual identity as shifting and unstable.

3. 2.0: Machines, Mūrtis, and Maṇḍalas

The posthuman querying of individual identity as stable and permanent plays out in several ways in 2.0. The very title of the film points to the simultaneous rupture and continuity of identity implied in computer upgrades: the upgraded system is similar to previous versions, but no longer the same, and perhaps not even compatible. Identity, and especially human identity, is destabilized in multiple ways in the film. Pakshirajan is not a man, but a posthuman collectivity, made up of numerous entities that act, for a moment in time, like a whole. He fluctuates in the course of the film between ghostly spirit, information stream, and material instantiation. The film questions the integrity of the unified subject by depicting its two main characters, Vaseegaran/Chitti and Pakshirajan, as visually fractured, divided, and recombined. The posthuman relational subject is no longer singular and unified, but characterized by multiplicity and fragmentation, as well as an interconnectedness to all living and non-living things. The subject is no longer an individual, but what the anthropologist McKim Marriott has termed a “dividual”, a person composed of one’s relationship to others (Marriott 1976; see also Strathern 1988, pp. 13–14; Wagner 1991). Significantly, Marriott’s notion of the “dividual” relational person, is grounded precisely in his reading of Hindu culture, which understands the person as a part of a greater whole.

The multiplicity and fragmentation of identity form, quite literally, patterns with religious resonances in 2.0. As I have demonstrated in my previous analysis of the first film in the *Enthiran* franchise (Cohen 2020), the title *Enthiran* carries a double meaning. *Enthiran* is the Tamil version of the Sanskrit *yantra*, a term that signifies both a robot or mechanical device and a religious diagram used in meditation and rituals (also called a *maṇḍala*).⁴

This dual meaning of the franchise title *Enthiran* is underscored by the rich imagery in 2.0 related to *yantras* as sacred diagrams. The film’s opening and closing sequences feature swirling clockwork and mechanical parts forming and re-forming the abstract patterns commonly associated with Hindu *yantras*. As the robot Chitti and his army of look-alikes face the haunted bird made from cell phones, the battling protagonists weave in and out of yantric forms, creating visual *maṇḍalas* out of their own unstable bodily forms. Chitti and his minibots assume a series of formations that make them into giant men, monsters, or war machines, while the cell phones likewise shift from bird to giant man and back again, forming *yantra*-like patterns in the process. The fact that both Chitti and Pakshirajan become *yantras* at various points in the film suggests that both opponents are, on some level, connected with a sacred reality, and that they are not easily classified as representatives of good and evil.

Dharma and Adharma in 2.0

Gokulsing and Dissanayake claim that Indian popular films must be understood as morality plays, where good invariably triumphs over evil (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2004, p. 29). The films’ heroes function as guardians of *dharma*, the moral, social, and religious order. The villains, on the other hand, tend to embody—much like many of the demons of Hindu mythology—*adharma*, a force of moral disintegration and chaos.⁵ However, the depiction of *dharma* and *adharma* is both complex and ambivalent in 2.0.

While *Enthiran*, the first film in the franchise, complicates the dichotomy of *dharma* and *adharma* by introducing the android Chitti’s evil double, the sequel 2.0 does away with the dichotomy altogether. Tamil cinema has long embraced the convention of the “double role”, where the protagonist and antagonist are played by the same actor. Pillai traces this plot element’s popularity in Tamil cinema back to the 1940 film *Uthimapputhiran*,

an adaptation of John Whale's 1939 film *The Man in the Iron Mask*, based on Alexandre Dumas' classic novel (Pillai 2015, p. 119). The idea that two characters, indistinguishable in appearance, represent a dichotomy of *dharma* and *adharma* is complicated in the first *Enthiran* film, where a "double role" is played both by the human scientist Dr. Vaseegaran and his robot doppelgänger Chitti, but also by Chitti himself, who has two versions: the well-meaning "good" Chitti built by Vaseegaran and the evil form of Chitti, created when Vaseegaran's rival Dr. Bohra inserts a "red chip" into Chitti's programming. Extending the "double role" of Tamil cinema, all three roles, that of the scientist, his good robot, and the robot's evil double, are played by the same actor in *Enthiran*.

The "double role" convention is further complicated in 2.0. Not only do we yet again encounter Dr. Vaseegaran and his robot double Chitti, but Chitti himself becomes a creator and makes an army of minibots in his own image. As these minibots swarm onto the screen, it seems as if Rajinikanth's "double role" has now become multiplied by infinity. The idea of individual identity as a construct is illustrated in stunning fashion by the monstrous bird, made up of tens of thousands of cell phones and haunted by the ghost of a dead man, and by the equally monstrous opponent formed and re-formed by armies of miniatures Chittis. The cell phones become symbols of a fragmented reality, forming a new monstrous whole independently from their human owners, but so are the minibots, who represent Chitti fragmented and multiplied. The trope of the "double role" is here reinterpreted as a fantastic multiplicity as the two main opponents, Vaseegaran/Chitti and Pakshirajan are continuously deconstructed and reconstructed in front of our eyes, thereby undermining the very notion of identity as a stable entity.

Not only is identity fractured in the film, but so are classical notions of *dharma* and *adharma*. The film becomes a dialectic space where perceptions of *dharma* and *adharma* are constantly renegotiated. The physical re-shaping of characters that occurs throughout this film illustrates that *dharma* and *adharma*, like identity, must be constantly re-formed and re-negotiated. There is a battle between *dharma* and *adharma* being fought, but the identity of each protagonist is constantly re-negotiated, and *dharma* and *adharma* assume new constellations throughout the film. While the audience is initially invited to see Chitti as the upholder of *dharma* and his monstrous opponent as the embodiment of *adharma*, the forces of chaos that threaten the cosmic order, it soon becomes evident that Pakshirajan is also striving to uphold *dharma* in his own way. Chitti and Pakshirajan articulate two very different forms of *dharma* in the film, one anthropocentric and the other not. At one point, Chitti says: "Killing humans is wrong," to which Pakshirajan responds: "They killed countless flocks of birds. Isn't that a crime? You label human life differently. How are birds' lives inferior?" For Chitti, *dharma* consists of protecting human life at all costs, while Pakshirajan defines *dharma* as the larger protection of *all* life, even at the cost of a few human lives.⁶ At the film's end, both of these competing forms of *dharma* appear incomplete; Chitti's anthropocentric *dharma* is too narrow, while Pakshirajan's more expansive *dharma* is flawed in its willingness to sacrifice human lives for the sake of the larger world.

As Vijay Mishra writes of Indian cinema:

The relay through *dharma*-*adharma*-*dharma* allows for transgressive eruptions to take place from within so that the unspeakable, the anti-dharmik, may be articulated. Hence pleasures of transgression are entertained as the spectator identifies with any number of ideologically unstable elements with the foreknowledge that the order will be re-established. (Mishra 2002, p. 5)

However, the posthuman *dharma* that is established at the end of 2.0 is different from the anthropocentric *dharma* hinted at in the film's beginning. While the destructive "bird" haunted by Pakshirajan's ghost is initially the film's antagonist and represents a threat to *dharma* that must be overcome, at the film's end, Vaseegaran comes to realize that Pakshirajan's actions were motivated by a different *dharma*, one that is not centered on human beings, but on the living world as a whole. What initially appears to be a conflict between *dharma* and *adharma* is shown to be a conflict between two competing forms of

dharma, one that is exclusively focused on protecting human life, and one that is invested in the protection of non-human life as well.

The film's two main characters, Vaseegaran/Chitti/Kutti and Pakshirajan, are not easily classified as protagonist and antagonist. Pakshirajan's desire to protect the birds is presented as good and justified, while his willingness to sacrifice human life to protect nature is not. Pakshirajan's violence is framed as the revenge of the natural world, a natural consequence of the destruction of the environment. However, both Chitti and Dr. Vaseegaran himself have the potential for destructive violence as well and are not unproblematic representatives of *dharma*. The first *Enthiran* film is, on one level, about Dr. Vaseegaran learning about humanity from his own robot creation, who ultimately proves much better at social relations than its maker. Similarly, in *2.0*, Vaseegaran learns another important lesson about humanity from the haunted bird-monster made of cell phones: humans have a responsibility, not only to their own loved ones, but also to the natural world that surrounds them. These films are as much about a man lost in his own world of science acquiring humanity and a social consciousness as they are about machines acquiring sentience. *2.0* blurs human and non-human, living and dead, sentient, and non-sentient, good and evil, but at the end, a larger message about *dharma* emerges: we have a responsibility towards the natural world, but this responsibility must be founded on a respect for *all* life, human and non-human alike.

The film's message of interconnectedness is highlighted through its depiction of the detrimental effects of technology on human relationships. *2.0* explores the ironies of isolation and disconnectedness in the age of social media and digital communications. One scene shows a family sitting several feet apart in their living room, each person silently absorbed in their own electronic device. Another scene shows a glimpse of a smiling man taking a selfie with the dead body at a Hindu funeral, a jarring depiction of an obsession with social media overriding both grief and respect for the dead. Dr. Vaseegaran himself is also emotionally isolated; the repeated cell phone calls and messages from his absent beloved Sana throughout the film go largely unanswered.

The film's bleak vision of the near-present, where an obsession with technology has led to deteriorating human relationships as well as destruction of the natural world, destabilizes classical notions of good and evil by shifting the focus away from individuals as the loci for *dharma* and *adharma*, towards a new vision of a posthuman *dharma* based on a greater interconnectedness. There is no absolute good-evil binary in the film; the moral center shifts as the main characters grapple with issues of environmentalism, protection of birds, protection of humans, and navigating a technological future. What emerges at the film's end is not a hero or a villain, but rather a path forward that involves overcoming the dualism embodied in Chitti and Pakshirajan's competing *dharms*. In one of the final scenes of the film, Dr. Vaseegaran rejects both Chitti's privileging of human life to the exclusion of all other life and Pakshirajan's willingness to sacrifice human life to protect the environment: "The earth doesn't belong only to us. Everyone should realize it belongs to all the creatures here." Addressing the audience as much as the other characters in the scene, Vaseegaran outlines what a modern *dharma* that moves beyond the duality of human/non-human would look like: "Technology saved us, but we are the ones misusing technology. We should eliminate poverty with technology, eradicate diseases, promote education. If we use it for personal comforts and fueling our greed, it will be doomsday. Control radiation, reduce networks!" Embedded in Vaseegaran's remarks is a deep concern for *both* human and non-human life. At the end of *2.0*, this socially and environmentally conscious posthumanism that sees all life as one emerges as the only viable alternative to a dystopian future.

Hayles suggests that the prospect of becoming posthuman "evokes terror and excites pleasure" (Hayles 1999, p. 283). There are certainly several moments of terror as the human is continuously decentered throughout *2.0*, but the film does end with a cautiously hopeful formulation of a posthuman ethics that recognizes that humans are part of their environment. The emotions evoked by the film go beyond terror and pleasure, however,

and reflects a deeper engagement with Hindu aesthetics as the notion of *rasa*, which, as I will show in the following, is an essential part of the posthumanism of 2.0.

4. Deleuze, the *Rasa*-Image, and 2.0

The postmodern French philosopher Gilles Deleuze famously classifies cinematic images as “movement-image” or “time-image”. The movement-image is predominant in realistic cinema and action films and is further subdivided into perception-images that convey what is seen, affection-images centered on feelings, action-images that focus on behaviors and on affecting change in the world, and mental-images that depict habitual memory (Deleuze 1986, vol. 1, pp. 56–215). The time-image, on the other hand, focuses on time, memory, thought, and speech and is predominant in art-films. Time-image cinema moves beyond movement perceived as sequential towards a freeing of images from the constraints of linear narrative. These time-images, then, become expressive, rather than representative (Deleuze 1986, vol. 2, pp. 1–13). However, as David Martin-Jones demonstrates, Deleuze’s taxonomy breaks down when applied to Indian cinema, which creates a third type of image by alternating between movement-image and time-image, and thereby exploring identity in flux (Martin-Jones 2008, p. 25). Martin-Jones sees in Indian cinema a fluid interaction between the movement of the world typical of the Deleuzian time-image, and a movement of character typical of the movement-image. He tentatively names this type of cinematic image “the *masala*-image”, but hints in a final footnote that “the *masala*-image described herein might be reconsidered in another light in terms of a *rasa*-image. This argument, however, will have to wait for another occasion” (Martin-Jones 2008, p. 48). I am greatly in favor of adopting the more culturally meaningful term *rasa*-image for the predominant type of image of Indian cinema, as explained below.

Indian cinema has frequently been referred to as *masala* film, a term that was coined in the late 1970s, with reference to the mixed blend of spices often used in Indian cooking (Nochimson 2010, p. 261). Indian cinema, similarly, contains “a little bit of everything”: romance, drama, comedy, tragedy, song, and dance. Despite its reductionist nature, Pendukar argues that *masala* can still be a useful metaphor for understanding Indian cinema today because it draws attention to the wide variety of ingredients that make up an Indian film, and because Indian films, like *masala* spice blends, have important regional variations (Pendukar 2003, p. 95). However, unlike the whimsical *masala* metaphor, the metaphor of *rasa* captures something deeper about Indian cinema, its images, and its relationship to classical Indian culture.

Indian cinema is profoundly influenced by the great Hindu epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, both in its enduring religious themes and in the incorporating of digressions, detours, and plots within plots into its narratives (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2004, p. 17). As Martin-Jones observes, the narrative of Indian cinema often “progresses through a series of often seemingly disconnected episodes, like song and dance routines, fight scenes, comic sequences, moments of family melodrama, tearful confrontations between lovers, and so on” (Martin-Jones 2008, p. 31). However, the song and dance sequences of Indian cinema, so beloved of the audience and often so perplexing to foreign film critics, are not at all just “spice” added to the narrative, but an integral part of the storytelling itself. The song and dance sequences are not incidental to the films, but are used to reveal character, further the plot, and reflect on moral dilemmas (Pendukar 2003, p. 107). Most significantly, I argue, the songs also establish help to establish a particular emotion (*rasa*) (Baskaran 1996, p. 45; 2009, p. 36). The concept of *rasa* from Indian aesthetics is particularly helpful for understanding both the type of image that Indian cinema creates and the religious resonances of its posthumanism.

Rasa vs. Masala

While both *rasa* (“taste, juice, sap, essence”) and *masala* (“spice”) are terms that evoke the audience’s sensory pleasure in the experience of Indian cinema, the two terms have very different connotations. While *masala* emphasizes the pleasurable “mixing” of classical

cinematic genres that gives Indian film its characteristic flavor, *rasa* connotes a deeper aesthetic experience with religious connotations. As Rosie Thomas has noted, popular Indian cinema emphasizes “emotion and spectacle rather than tight narrative” (Thomas 1985, p. 130). The deliberate evocation of moods in Indian cinema is closely connected to the concept of *rasa* in classical Indian aesthetics.

In classical Indian poetics, works of literature are classified according to *rasa*, (“taste, flavor, essence, mood”), or the emotional experience the work evokes (see Chaudhury 1952, 1965). The *rasa* theory, first introduced in Bharata’s famous dramaturgical treatise *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. 1st century CE), distinguishes between eight basic moods in drama and literature (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 6. 42–45, text in Kavi 1926–1964. See also Schwartz 2004, p. 15):

- (1) *śṛṅgāra* (love)
- (2) *hāsyā* (humor)
- (3) *raudra* (anger)
- (4) *kāruṇya* (compassion)
- (5) *bībhatsa* (disgust)
- (6) *bhayānaka* (fear, terror)
- (7) *vīra* (heroism)
- (8) *adbhuta* (wonder)

In some later manuscripts of the text, a ninth *rasa*, *śānta* (peaceful), is added. The *rasa* theory was elaborated by the 11th century Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta in his *Abhinavabhāratī*, a commentary on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, where he defends the idea of a ninth *rasa* and claims that this *rasa* is attested in the oldest manuscripts of Bharata’s text known to him (Pollock 2016, p. 48). For Bharata, *rasa* is primarily an emotion that can be communicated on the stage, and he locates that emotion in the performative event itself, rather than in the audience (Pollock 2016, pp. 8–9). However, Bharata’s definition of *rasa* is later expanded in Ānandavardhana’s 9th century treatise *Dhvanyāloka* to be applicable to poetry and literary works other than drama as well. Another significant shift in the interpretation of *rasa* is represented by Bhaṭṭanāyaka’s *Hṛdayadarpaṇa* from around 900 CE, a text only preserved in fragments, but quoted extensively by later authors. For Bhaṭṭanāyaka, *rasa* is located in the audience, rather than in the work itself or the characters in that work. According to Bhaṭṭanāyaka, the aesthetic experience consists of three parts: (1) expression (*abhidhā*), (2) the capacity of actualization (*bhāvakatva*), which consists of “making common” (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*) the emotional states of the literary text with those of the audience, thereby allowing the audience to reproduce a stable emotional state in themselves, and (3) experience (*bhoga*), which is a state of being absorbed in aesthetic rapture. This absorption (*viśrānti*) is entirely different from normal emotional experiences (Pollock 2010, p. 156). According to Dhanika’s later summary of Bhaṭṭanāyaka’s ideas, this aesthetic rapture is “the true nature of consciousness” and akin to religious self-transcendence when the differentiation between self and other has vanished (*Daśarūpakāvaloka* 4.43; see Venkatacharya 1969; Pollock 2016, p. 147). The goal of the aesthetic experience according to Bhaṭṭanāyaka, then, is related to Advaita Vedānta’s goal of overcoming duality, although it is here achieved through art, rather than philosophical contemplation.

The larger purpose of the *rasas* is not mere aesthetic pleasure, but rather inspiring enlightenment. As Abhinavagupta writes in his *Dhvanyālokalocana*, the *rasas* are “like a taste of the ultimate reality” (*Nāṭyaśāstra* 6.35, see Chaudhury 1952, p. 147). The *rasas* are not, therefore, mere passing personal emotions evoked in the audience by an expertly wrought work of literature, but rather a realization of one’s own higher consciousness, spurred by the experience of emotions that are not tied to one’s own ego.

Applying Indian theories of *rasa* to Indian cinema is another extension of the classical theory, but one that is not at odds with the aesthetic philosophies of Bhaṭṭanāyaka or Abhinavagupta. As Edwin Gerow has demonstrated, many aspects of classical *rasa* theory inform contemporary Indian literature and film (Gerow 1978, p. 216). I argue that the experience of pure emotion, unfiltered by the ego, is central to Indian cinema. For this reason, the song and dance sequences, which are often dense with emotion and meant to

evoke romantic longing, laughter, anger, compassion, disgust, fear, bravery, or wonder in the audience, are not distractions from the film's plot, but rather revelations of its emotional—and perhaps even spiritual—core.

While the original *Enthiran* film contained the expected song and dance sequences, especially ones invoking romantic love, *2.0* expertly plays with the audience's expectations in this regard by delaying the emotional impact of the songs until late in the film. In the earlier parts of *2.0*, A. R. Rahman's musical score contains several fragments of song. For example, the audience naturally expects a full-blown song and dance scene following the initial few lines of the song "Iron heart blossoming for the first time" when the female robot Nila first sees Chitti, but an impatient Dr. Vaseegaran cuts off the song and reminds everyone that they need to stop Pakshirajan. After several scenes where a song fades out after only a line or two, the film's first full song, the haunting *Pullinangal*, over halfway into the film, becomes even more impactful as the film finally reveals its emotional center to the audience. *Pullinangal* is a love song, but true to the film's posthuman themes, it is not a love song directed at a human being, but rather to birds, and it incorporates bird song as well as vocal and instrumental music. Rather than showing human characters singing and dancing, the camera follows birds in flight for the duration of the song. In his review of the film's score, Devarshi Ghosh notes that A. R. Rahman has given the film's best score to the villain (Ghosh 2018). However, this lovely ode to the birds reveals a pure love for the natural world that complicates the picture of Pakshirajan as the film's villain in interesting ways.

While *Pullinangal* evokes compassion for the birds, as well as for the tragic figure of Pakshirajan, the upbeat song *Raajali* evokes a heroic mood as the robot Chitti is about to face Pakshirajan. Chitti muses on his own identity as a robot in the song's opening line, "Isaac Asimov peran daa . . ." ("I am the grandson of Isaac Asimov . . ."). The film's very last song, played as the final credits begin to roll, is finally the song and dance sequence the audience has waited for, featuring a couple declaring their love for each other in song while dancing in variegated costumes through a variety of beautiful fantasy settings. However, this song, *Endhira Logathu Sundariye*, also subverts expectations; it is a love song performed by two robot characters, Nila and Chitti, and features lines like "My life, my battery, do not leave me . . ." It is entirely in keeping with the film's posthuman themes that not a single one of the film's songs is ascribed to a living human character; the songs express the feelings of a ghost, a flock of birds, and two robots. Yet, the songs are filled with emotion, allowing the audience to experience the *rasas* of *kāruṇya* (compassion), *vīra* (heroism), and *śṛṅgāra* (love). The film invites its audience to enter the emotional world of non-human characters in order to transcend their own anthropocentrism and see the world as an integrated whole. In so doing, the film makes an intriguing contribution to posthuman theory, one that is presaged by Indian literary theorists: art can be an effective tool for transcending the limitations of our own humanity and partake in a larger reality beyond ourselves. *2.0* accomplishes this by inviting its audience to experience profound emotions, especially in its songs, that not only transcend the individual ego, but humanity altogether. By allowing the audience to experience emotions not tied to our own humanity, the film guides its audience towards a state of absorption (*viśrānti*) similar to the non-dual state of consciousness that is the goal of Advaita Vedānta.

5. The Religion of 2.0

The religious undertones of the film are further underscored by its geographical setting. Part of the film's plot takes place in Tamil Nadu's Tirukazhukundram ("The Mountain of the Holy Vulture") near Chennai. Tirukazhukundram is famous for its Vedagiriswarar Temple to Śiva, which is also known to the locals as *Kazhugu koil* ("Temple of the Vultures"), or Pakṣitīrtham ("The Sanctuary of Birds") (Meena 1976, p. 33). The temple was long home to a pair of sacred vultures that returned to the site daily and were fed by the temple priests (Neelakantan 1977, p. 6). These vultures were believed to be sages who were cursed by the god Śiva for their sins and transformed into birds. They would come to the temple to

worship Śiva, hoping to obtain salvation (Meena 1976, p. 33). According to local legends, if the birds fail to return, this is a sign that the people gathered at the temple are too sinful (Thurston 1906, p. 282). The vultures have not returned to the temple for the last few decades, which has been a matter of great concern to the local population. This local legend surrounding the vanishing vultures of Tirukazhukundram is given a contemporary spin in *2.0*, where the disappearance of the vultures is expanded into the disappearance of all birds in the area and connected to excessive cell phone use, human carelessness, and lack of concern for the environment. The film's setting, then, is more than just visual background, but an integral part of the film's narrative, social commentary, and religious message.

The Hindu-inflected posthumanism of *2.0* is simultaneously forward-looking and embedded in tradition. At one point in the film, the overwhelmed Home Minister, Vijay Kumar, says to Dr. Vaseegaran: "Śiva came to earth as an *enthiran* to destroy demons." The Tamil term *enthiran* (Sanskrit *yantra*) carries the double meaning of a robot and a sacred diagram. Presumably, Vijay Kumar is referring to the belief that certain geometrical *yantras* associated with Śiva have the power to ward off evil. However, in the context of the film's plot, it is also natural to interpret the character's remark as a reference to the film's *enthiran* Chitti taking on a divine demon-slayer role in overcoming Pakshirajan and protecting the people of Chennai from his vengeance. However, in other ways, both Chitti and Pakshirajan function as *enthiran* in the film, visually and symbolically. Chitti is of course a literal *enthiran* in the sense of a robot, but he also becomes an *enthiran* in the sense of a *maṇḍala* at various points in the film, as his multiple forms divide and recombine. However, Pakshirajan is also an *enthiran* in *2.0*; he is a composite machine made from tens of thousands of cell phones, but also, intriguingly, a *maṇḍala*. Pakshirajan's association with the religious *maṇḍala* is underscored in the initial sequence of the film, which shows him hanging himself from a cell phone tower. However, as he is dying and his beloved birds begin to swirl around him, the camera shifts and tilts, and we see Pakshirajan from below, at the center of a swirling *maṇḍala* made up of a cell phone tower and birds. Additionally, as Chitti and Pakshirajan face each other in a series of violent high-tech confrontations, the technological spectacle of battle is transformed into a series of otherworldly *yantras*. The film constructs a visual imaginary that is closely related to the film's ambivalent title: the *enthiran/yantra* as machine and as locus for divine forces. In its modern Tamil iteration, the *yantra* is inflected through science fiction, but never loses sight of its religious origin and connotations.

However, if both Chitti and Pakshirajan can be seen as *enthiran*—both in the sense of a machine and a sacred diagram—which one is the film's Śiva in *enthiran* form? The answer is perhaps both. Śiva is an ambiguous god, both destroyer and savior in one, and this same ambiguity characterizes both Chitti and Pakshirajan. They are both striving to protect the innocent—and both sacrifice others who are innocent to accomplish their goal. At the film's end, there is no clear hero or villain. Age-old questions of good and evil are refracted differently through the shifting, fluid identities of protagonist and antagonist in this posthuman world. *Dharma* and *adharma* become questions of choices, rather than permanent identity. Dr. Vaseegaran admits that while Pakshirajan did wrong, some of his ideas were right, and he advocates for stricter control of cell tower radiation and a recognition that the earth does not belong only to humans. The film destabilizes classical notions of good and evil by creating an immensely sympathetic "antagonist" in Pakshirajan, while at the same time showing the horrifying and destructive impact of his anger.

However, while both Chitti and Pakshirajan evoke Śiva in his dual aspect as savior and destroyer, both characters are also aesthetically coded as the divine Viṣṇu/Garuḍa as well. The visual resemblance of the minibot Kutti riding on a pigeon to the protector god Viṣṇu riding on the divine bird Garuḍa in Hindu iconography underscores Chitti/Kutti's role as an upholder of *dharma*. However, the film's religious message is ambivalent and complicated, for the film's "antagonist", the stunning "bird" made from cell phones, also bears a strong visual resemblance to traditional depictions of Garuḍa. The ghostly antagonist's name, Pakshirajan, which is a traditional epithet for Garuḍa, emphasizes the ambivalence of the film's moral message.⁷ By coding both "protagonist" and "antagonist"

as icons of the divine, the film invites the reader to reflect on the possibility that they may *both* be upholders of *dharma* in different ways. The fact that *dharma* is not located in a single individual underscores the film's posthuman interrogation of individual identity and its valorization of interconnectivity. The film posits the individual as fractured, multiple, and unstable, but points to an interconnected posthuman world as not only a viable, but perhaps the only viable alternative for the planet.

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Notes

- ¹ Just prior to the film's release, the Cellular Association of India filed a complaint against 2.0 for promoting "obscurantist and anti-scientific attitudes against mobile phones, towers and mobile services" and demanded that the Central Board of Film Certification and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting stop the film's release (https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/telecom/telecom-news/ahead-of-rajinikanth-2-0-release-telecom-operators-protest-anti-scientific-attitude-in-movie/articleshow/66827800.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst, accessed on 15 August 2022) The complaint was not successful.
- ² Although I am using the term "Hinduism" here to denote post-Vedic Brahmanical religion, it should be noted that "Hinduism" is a modern term, first used by Westerners in the 19th century. There is no such thing as a monolithic "Hinduism" with a clearly defined set of doctrines and ideas. Rather, "Hinduism" is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of ideas, texts, and practices, including a reverence for the holy texts of the Vedas, worship of deities such as Viṣṇu, Śiva, and various forms of the Goddess (Devī), and a belief in *karma*, reincarnation, liberation (*mokṣa*), and the eternal nature of the self (*ātman*). Since the term "Hindu" is used in modern times by many Indians to define themselves, and since "Hinduism" is often understood in modern India to be an unbroken tradition going back to the Vedas, I do find the term to be analytically useful. It should be understood, however, that the term in no way implies a single unified system of thought.
- ³ In this regard, Advaita differs from other sub-schools of Vedānta philosophy such as Viśiṣṭādvaita (modified non-dualist) Vedānta, which postulates that *ātman* is contained within but not absolutely identical to *brahman*, and Dvaita (dualist) Vedānta, which sees *ātman* as separate from *brahman*.
- ⁴ The two terms are often used synonymously, although Tucci, for example, defines *yantras* as purely linear designs, as opposed to more intricate *maṇḍalas* (Tucci [1949] 1969, p. 46). Eliade also suggests that *yantras* are the simplest forms of *maṇḍalas* (Eliade 1969, p. 219). Brunner, on the other hand, in her study of *maṇḍalas* and *yantras* in Siddhānta, suggests that *yantras* differ from *maṇḍalas* in that they are only used for *kāmya* rituals (to fulfill personal desires), are small and portable, have linear designs, and always contain *bīja* syllables (Brunner 2003, p. 162). Bühnemann similarly draws a distinction between *yantra* and *maṇḍala*. While *maṇḍalas* are often larger and drawn in one place, *yantras* tend to be smaller and mobile and without colorization (Bühnemann 2010, p. 566).
- ⁵ The association of demons (*asuras*) with *adharma*, while present in Sanskrit literature, is not always straightforward, however. The Rāmāyaṇa epic features a pious *asura* who lives according to *dharma*, for example, Rāvaṇa's brother Vibhīṣaṇa. For further discussion of the complicated question of *dharma* and *adharma* in Hinduism, see Doniger (1976).
- ⁶ These two competing forms of *dharma* could perhaps be seen as a tension between an individual *svadharma* (individual *dharma*), focused on human life and determined by the individual's caste, state of life, and personal circumstances, and a larger *sanātana dharma* (eternal *dharma*), focused on all life. I am grateful to the editors of this issue for this suggestion.
- ⁷ It is possible to see a larger significance in some of the other character names in the film as well. Dr. Vaseegaran's name is the Tamil version of the Sanskrit *Vaśīkāra*, "controller", a very appropriate name for a creator and programmer of robots. Both "Chitti" and "Kutti" are names that mean "little one", reminding the audience that Chitti can be seen as Vaseegaran's "younger brother", as suggested in the first film, while Kutti is literally small in size. However, there may also be a further play on words intended in their names; *chitti* means "division" in Sanskrit, while *kuṭṭa* is a term for a mathematical multiplier—quite fitting, since Chitti and Kutti represent their maker(s) both divided and multiplied. However, there may also be a deeper religious resonance in the name Chitti; his name also recalls the Vajrayāna protective deity (*dharmapāla*, "protector of *dharma*") Citipati "(The Master of the Charnel Ground", Tibetan *Dur-khrod bdag-po*). Citipati is a deity that consists of two combined skeletal figures, one male and one female, dancing inside a halo of flames. Both one and not-one, not living and yet moving, Citipati, like Chitti, dances in circles and extinguishes evil while upholding the *dharma*. I am grateful to Arjan Sterken for suggesting this parallel. Chitti's name does

of course also recall the Sanskrit term *citti*, “thought” or “consciousness,” hinting that Dr. Vaseegaran has succeeded in creating sentient life.

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