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## Televsual Mythmaking and Subverting Hierarchy: A Study of *Jai Malhar*

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### Abstract

This paper tries to evaluate the Marathi television serial *Jai Malhar* as a cultural text that reinterprets the myth of Khandoba (Malhar) produced for the telecasting. The telecasting has a main purpose to make it spectacular and entertaining show and at the same time the producer tries to make it contemporary to relate it with the taste of audience. In doing these attempts what gets manifested arises several questions of caste hierarchy, tribal identity, gender politics, and symbolic power. Through the characters of Banai and Mhalasa, the serial dramatizes the dichotomy between tribal/common masses and upper-class social structures. The study reads the telecast of myth as a modern visual discourse that reworks tradition to address contemporary anxieties about class, caste, and gender in Maharashtra and makes us enquire the questions of spectators' taste for the T.V. serial. But at the same time being a part of media form it reshapes the mythical space matching the demand of popular mass culture, that dramatizes and domesticates the myth in an emotional, interpersonal melodrama.

**Keywords:** Myth, Television, Social Hierarchy, Tribal Identity, Jejuri, Cultural Representation.

### Introduction

Myths, folktales, and legends function as repositories of cultural memory and belief, embodying the values, practices, and historical imagination of the communities that sustain them. They are the inseparable parts of the socio-cultural life irrespective of their antiquity. When these narratives are adapted or transformed for television, the producers have to balance multiple demands: preserving the sense of antiquity and cultural authenticity while simultaneously making the narrative appealing to contemporary audiences. Television productions particularly serials, are not the documentary in forms, and are shaped not only by the intention to inform but also by the need to maintain popularity, audience engagement, and viewership ratings. Considerations such as audience taste, commercial investment, and the need to sustain TRP ratings inevitably influence the manner in which myths are re-told on screen. As a result, the original mythical narrative often undergoes a transformation and emerges as a cultural text that reflects the socio-cultural and economic conditions of the time in which the television

show is produced and broadcast. The Marathi television serial *Jai Malhar* exemplifies this process. While drawing upon various mythological and folk sources related to the deity Khandoba – worshiped across Maharashtra, particularly among pastoral and warrior communities – the show re-narrates the myth in a form suited to contemporary television audiences. As noted by Zee Marathi’s business head Deepak Rajadhyaksha, the aim of the production was to “transform the saga of Maharashtra’s Lord Khandoba into a gripping and thoughtful show with state-of-the-art visual effects and presentation.” Through elaborate sets, costumes, and stylized character portrayals, the serial attempts to recreate the mythic setting associated with the *Kṛta Yuga*, the period in which the legend is believed to have taken place.

*Jai Malhar*, a Marathi TV serial was initially telecast on Zee Marathi during 2014 – 2017 with 942 episodes, produced by the veteran Marathi actor, director Mahesh Kothare. It received tremendous popularity and viewership. It was dubbed in Hindi, Tamil and Thai. Presently, the serial can be viewed on the OTT platform of Zee5, and some of its episodes are available on YouTube too.

### Discussion

As A. K. Ramanujan states Indian mythological traditions exist in multiple narrative versions shaped by regional cultures and historical contexts (Ramanujan, 1991). Similarly the myth of Malhar or majorly known as Khandoba is presented as a ‘Shiv Leela’, a reincarnation of Lord Shiva in the form of ‘Martand Bhairav’ or popularly known as Khandoba. Through the serial it is stated that it is a part of ‘Malhar Mahatmya’ considered to be in Sanskrit and as a part of ‘Brahmand Purana’. It has been translated into Prakrit/Marathi. The myth has also been a part of folktales or legends among the several communities where the Sanskrit and the oral versions are mixed together to form a living culture of Maharashtra. The tale of Malhara tells the reason of Malhari Avatar (incarnation), his bravery and a fierce war against Malla and Mani, the form of demons who are punished by Khandoba, his marriage with Mhalasa a daughter of upper-caste mercantile community, also a devotee of Lord Shiva and Banai associated with Dhangar/tribal pastoral community. The tale of Malhari Martand along with several sub narratives of Murali, the queen of Naldurga and other sources are interwoven into the major story of incarnation of Khandoba.

Roland Barthes observes that myth in modern society functions not merely as an ancient narrative but as an ancient story, as a system of signification through which cultural meanings are continually produced and circulated (Barthes, 1972). Myth, therefore, does not simply preserve the past; it actively reshapes cultural values by naturalizing historically constructed ideas and presenting them as timeless truths. In contemporary media cultures, myths are frequently reinterpreted in ways that reflect the ideological concerns of the time (Storey, 2018). The television serial *Jai Malhar* can be understood within this framework as a mediated reinterpretation of the Khandoba legend for contemporary audiences. Within the narrative structure of the serial, the myth is reconstructed and reinterpreted at multiple levels where traditional narrative elements intersect with modern socio-cultural meanings.

At the most visible or outer level, *Jai Malhar*, as a television production, carefully reproduces stereotypical conceptions associated with mythic time, characterization, locale, and the heroic deeds of its central figure, Malhar. The setting of the Kṛta Yuga is visualized through descriptions drawn from scriptures, folk tales, and regional legends, which are assimilated into the popular imagination of the masses regarding divine life, royal affluence, and the everyday lifestyle of tribal communities. The locales of the Kṛta Yuga, the kingdom of Jejuri, the tribal world of Banai and her community, and the surrounding landscapes of Chandanpur and Jejuri are recreated within a larger-than-life visual framework. Costumes and accessories used for the portrayal of Malhar, Mhalasa, and Banai, along with the visible markers of their respective social positions, reinforce stereotypical identities associated with royal elites and tribal communities of the mythic past. Such visual representations correspond to what

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John Fiske describes as television's capacity to produce culturally recognizable codes that enable audiences to easily decode narrative meanings (Fiske, 2011).

Along with the visual representation of locale, the naming of places, the characterization of demons, and the stylized language used in conversations among the characters further sustain the conventional expectations of spectators regarding mythological narratives. However, while the serial recreates a mythic universe at the outer visual level, at a deeper and more intricate level it simultaneously reconstructs mythic reality into a socio-cultural framework that resonates with the concerns of modern India. As Stuart Hall argues, media texts do not merely reflect reality but actively construct meaning through processes of representation shaped by dominant cultural ideologies (Hall, 1997). In this sense, *Jay Malhar* operates as a cultural text where the traditional Khandoba myth is mediated through contemporary ideological frameworks, allowing the narrative to remain culturally familiar while simultaneously addressing the sensibilities of modern audience.

The transformation of mythic content of Jay Malhar in the storytelling form of TV serial provides an arena to study the show as a socio-cultural site of modern India. The dramatization of myth in TV show evolves around three major figures; Malhar, Mhalasa and Banai. Though the storytelling is a reinforcement of the principle of victory of the good (in the form of Saptarshi and Malhar as a savior of goodness) over the evil (depicted through the characters of Malla and Mani) in its transformative act it also depicts the sub-story of Banai- Malhar marriage and its repercussion in the life of Malhar and Mhalasa.

In folk traditions, Khandoba is worshipped across diverse communities, including Brahmins, Marathas, Dhangars, and various tribal groups. His marriages to Mhalasa, associated with upper-caste mercantile communities, and Banai, linked to Dhangar and pastoral groups, symbolically represent social integration. However, the televised narrative reinterprets this integration through dramatized conflict. In the serial, Banai's character emerges from a sub-story involving Jayadri, a companion of Parvati, to whom Lord Shiva promises marriage in his Malhari incarnation. The unfolding of this divine promise relies on fate, chance, and coincidence. Despite this integrative mythological basis, the serial foregrounds division rather than unity. It emphasizes the class and cultural divide between Banai's pastoral, tribal background and Mhalasa's aristocratic upbringing. The contrast between "civilized" urbanity and rural simplicity is central to their portrayal. Banai and her father embody the pastoral ethos, reflected through their lifestyle, attire, dialect, and rituals. Banai is depicted as independent, emotionally expressive, and deeply connected to land and livestock. Her cultural practices – folk songs, pastoral labour, and communal celebrations – highlight a vibrant, organic way of life. In contrast, Mhalasa and her family represent structured authority, wealth, and ritual purity. Their world is governed by hierarchical codes, discipline, and social prestige. Mhalasa herself embodies refinement, restraint, and ritual devotion, often accompanied by a sense of superiority. These contrasting portrayals symbolize broader social stratification and internal tensions. Thus, the conflict between Banai and Mhalasa transcends personal rivalry; it reflects deeper tensions between institutionalized power and marginalized identities. Malhari's attempts to reconcile these worlds are marked by struggle, obstacles, and persistent tension, underscoring the complexity of achieving true social integration

Besides, the sacred geography of Jejuri Temple in the television serial does not merely appear as the divine abode of Khandoba but functions symbolically as a space that reflects and organizes social hierarchies. The temple becomes a cultural metaphor through which questions of power, belonging, and legitimacy are negotiated. Historically, Jejuri has been associated with the worship of Khandoba across diverse communities of Maharashtra, including pastoral, agrarian, and nomadic groups. However, the serial transforms this sacred landscape into a narrative site where entry into Jejuri signifies social validation and symbolic elevation. Characters who aspire to recognition within the divine household seek not only emotional acceptance but also spatial inclusion within the sacred centre. Mhalasa considers the supremacy of Jejuri and its occupation as an act of legitimacy of her identity. The

serial shows how Mhalasa does not allow Banai to enter into the palace of Jejuri. The symbolic centrality of Jejuri thus reveals how sacred spaces function as sites where social tensions are negotiated rather than entirely resolved. While the serial portrays the integration of diverse communities through the divine figure of Khandoba, the spatial organization of Jejuri continues to reflect distinctions between insiders and outsiders. Such representations align with Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, where dominant cultural systems incorporate subordinate groups without dismantling the underlying power structures. Jejuri thus emerges as a hegemonic cultural space where difference is accommodated, but the hierarchy of prestige remains intact.

The central figure of Malhar in the TV narratives reveals his attempts to integrate them both. The mythical space is exploited to weaken the stratification of the society. Mhalasa's curse on Malhar of turning into an aged person for twelve years provides a chance to deconstruct the social hierarchy. The TV show in delineate manner manifests Malhar's role as a servant to Banai in her household. This narrative strategy is well exploited by the TV serial in showing the temporal collapse of social hierarchy. When Malhar appears in a disguise of an old man working as a servant, this very act questions visible markers of power. It critiques superficial judgments based on status and destabilizes rigid caste hierarchies. The divine figure choosing servitude unsettles the logic of social stratification.

Thus, the serial tries to show that how the cultural "superiority" is repeatedly challenged through narrative conflicts and exposes the fragility of upper-class dominance. However, as a part of media form the TV show makes some popular choices and the mythical narrative that exposes the undercurrents of social hierarchy shifts its focus subtly from caste hierarchy to emotional domestic conflict. John Fiske argues that television narratives frequently translate complex social tensions into emotionally engaging melodramatic forms that are accessible to popular audiences (Fiske, 1987). The narrative treatment of the relationship between Mhalasa and Banai in *Jay Malhar* illustrates this tendency, where broader social hierarchies embedded in the myth are reframed as interpersonal emotional conflicts between the two women. In many scenes and dialogues between Malhar and Mhalasa or between Vishnu and Laxmi the serial domesticates the socially layered myth into a simplified narrative of jealousy and legitimacy of relationships. The mythological episodes thus turn as the visually dramatized 'scenes' with elaborate sets, costumes, and stylized character portrayals.

## Conclusion

The TV serial *Jay Malhar* transforms the original myth into a popular, emotionally engaging serial. While it retains the broad outlines of the mythical world, it simultaneously reshapes them to suit contemporary cultural expectations and audience tastes. It intricately addresses the issue of class and caste hierarchy and act of subversion through some scenes; it also tries to maintain it as a part of media form. In doing so, the show reframes socially embedded hierarchies into personal, melodramatic conflicts that resonate with modern viewers. This negotiation between mythic depth and accessible entertainment reflects the pressures of TRP politics, market demands, and the cultural desire to revive familiar narratives. The series ultimately occupies an intricate space where traditional myth and contemporary media logic meet, making the myth both recognizable and relevant for today's audience.

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