

BACK TO THE ROOTS
INDIAN
HORROR
TURN TO FOLKS

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY



MUNJYA

In the last decade, independent directors, followed by more mainstream filmmakers, have coined a new language of Indian horror. Moving away from urban middle-class lives, spaces and values, they have tapped into folk traditions to frighten audiences.



Fifteen years after mysterious events unfolded in Tumbbad—a bleak, rain-soaked hamlet in the Sahyadri range of Maharashtra—Vinayak (Sohum Shah) returns to his ancestral land. As a child, he had fled with his mother to Pune, vowing never to go back to this terrifying place. Yet the village holds a haunting grip on him—and here he is, back again. Rahi Anil Barve's 2018 folk horror film, eponymously named *Tumbbad*, was hailed by critics as signalling a shift in Indian horror aesthetics towards more culturally specific stories and framed as part of a global folk horror revival. The hero's repeated trips from the colonial urbanscape of Pune to the remote hamlet mirror a broader shift: Indian horror has turned to the rural.

In India, the horror genre once focused on the internal—paranormal forces invading private, upper- and middle-class spaces like holiday homes and high-rises, as seen in *Raat* (1992), *Raaz* (2002), and *Bhoot* (2003). In the last decade, however, the

focus has shifted outward, to the external—to landscape, atmosphere, and communities living in communion with nature. At the same time, the essence of the horror changed too. From possession by the avenging undead, horror was externalised in figures of mythic demons, wilful demigods and monstrous maternal forces.

This return to the roots and to the past is essential—it prompts the crucial encounter that lies at the heart of the subgenre of folk horror: a clash of the urban with the rural, of culture with nature, of the male with the female, of the modern with the ancient, of the elite with the subaltern, of the civilised with the savage.

City folk, secure within the modern, logical order of the city travel to a world where their rational, western-educated minds and belief systems are violently called into question. In *Bulbbul* (Anvita Dutt, 2020, Hindi), set in the Bengal Presidency of the late 1800s, Satya (Avinash Tiwary), who has been away in London studying law and is now a veritable outsider to the place, comes back. Modernised and complacent, he discovers the horrifying secrets of the village. In *Munjya* (Aditya Sarpordar, 2024, Hindi), about the eponymous adolescent male ghost borrowed from Konkan

mythology, young Bittu (Abhay Verma) must travel from Pune to the cursed ancestral site of Chetukwadi to confront his demons and put a stubborn past to rest.

Similarly, in *Vadakkan* (Sajeed A, 2025, Malayalam), paranormal investigator Raman Perumalayan (Kishore Kumar G), who lives and teaches in Helsinki, is called back to his native Kerala to look into a set of murders that have taken place in the misty Brahmagiri range. There, he confronts the spirit of Kunjambu, a Theyyam performer who was killed several centuries ago by a powerful feudal lord.

In folk horror films, landscape, viewed almost always at a distance—from an urban lens—is decidedly anti-idyllic, unruly and adversarial. It is also instrumental in the production of their characteristic sense of unease and dread. In *Churuli* (Lijo Jose Pellissery, 2021, Malayalam), inspired by the story of Perumadan, a phantom who leads people astray, two policemen in pursuit of a criminal find the forest they journey into both fantastical and capricious. Moreover, a profound sense of isolation permeates these settings, intensifying the arrival's sense of terror while also emphasising their outsider status. In the Marathi film *Lapachhapi* (2016) and its Hindi remake *Chhorii* (2021), both directed by Vishal Furia, a city couple plagued by goons escapes to



CHHORII

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a village with no cellular coverage and takes refuge in a house positioned in the middle of a large field that effectively entraps and insulates them.

Rooted in these rustic geographies and intricately connected to its lands and rivers, forests and myths are the pastoral communities of these films. This community's ties to the natural world run deep: they can be nurturing as in *Kantara* (Rishab Shetty, 2022, Kannada), where a coastal community in Karnataka rallies to save a forest that feeds and protects it. They can also be malevolent, born out of a ruthless system of exchange as in the Chhorii films where agricultural prosperity can only be ensured by the continual sacrifice of female infants.

The 'folk' of folk horror are working-class, tribal figures, viewed as simple and backward on the one hand, and, with their indigenous practices and knowledge systems, as simultaneously uncontrollable and dangerous—the veritable other to the urban, progressive, middle-class, upper-caste self. Of course, such characterisation can further alienate these rural communities from the mainstream. However, horror, with its subversive potential and customary siding with the marginalised, also becomes a platform for the subaltern to reclaim power.

In *Bramayugam* (Rahul Sadasivan, 2024, Malayalam), set in South Malabar in the 17th century, wandering folk singer Thevan (Arjun Ashokan) arrives at a derelict mansion lorded over by Kodumon Potti (Mammootty), a powerful sorcerer and the head of a prominent Brahmin family, who quickly enslaves him. The final confrontation in this drenched, black-and-white slow burner sees it disenfranchised—the singer Thevan and a lowborn, habitually ill-treated cook—joining forces to vanquish the sorcerer, put an end to his Brahminical line and assume control of his mansion. In *Kantara* too, the subalterns rise against a deceitful, upper-caste landlord grabbing land that is rightfully theirs. What tips the scale in their favour, however, is the spirit they invoke to exact their righteous revenge.

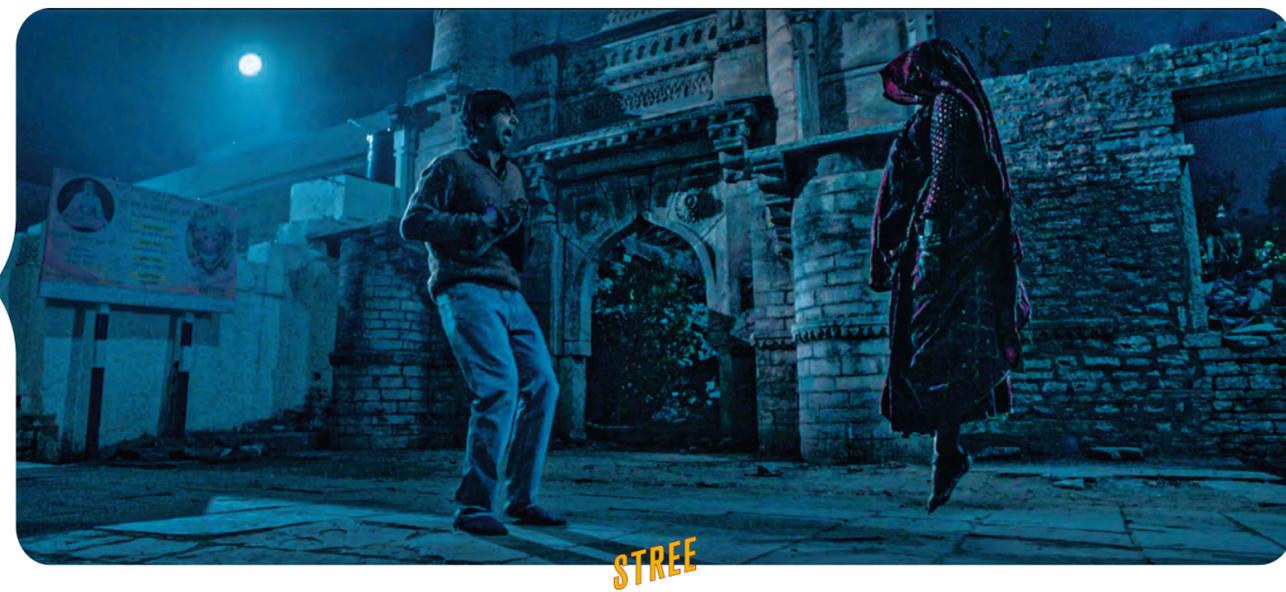
The spirits, deities, demigods and demons of folk horror are powerful, magical beings. They are also morally ambivalent figures, alternately protective and diabolical. It is this tension between their near-divine powers and their vengefulness, the awe they evoke and the terror they can unleash, their benevolence and their malevolence, that generates the horror of these films. These deities lie outside the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses and their immense powers typically cannot be categorised as virtuous or wicked, capable as

they are of being harnessed by those who invoke them.

Kantara centres on Bhoota Kola, an ancient ritual art form from Tulu-speaking Karnataka, prevalent among Adivasi and non-dominant caste communities, as per which performers become possessed by guardian spirits who are believed to guide and protect the community. In the film's explosive climax, when Shiva (Rishab Shetty) becomes a vessel to the fierce guardian spirit Guliga, he transforms into a fearsome creature. With wild eyes, face and body smeared black with dirt, his mouth gaping, tongue lolling, and with shrieks, trembles and howls, he moves as if charged with an almost animalistic strength, rolling on the ground and crawling on rooftops, wringing necks, breaking limbs and slashing bodies—a gruesome deity of death.

In *Kumari* (Nirmal Sahadev, 2022, Malayalam), a girl marries into a feudal family that harbours generational secrets and curses. Two monstrous male demigods, Ilymala Chathan and Gari Devan, are periodically summoned to ensure peace and prosperity—through a brutal barter involving the protection and the sacrifice of children.

A similar ambiguity between the divine and the diabolical is found in *Bulbbul*, where the *chudail*,



or witch, merges with the dark, wrathful figure of the goddess Kali—herself set apart within the Hindu pantheon by her murderous visage and associations with the traditions of crime of the notorious Thuggees, a network of ritualistic murders active in 19th century India. In *Bulbbul*, legends of the *chudail* are told while Kali is worshipped. Red dominates the film's palette—blood, *sindoor*, *alta* and the blood moon all evoke these two powerful non-human female figures. In the film's red-soaked climax, *Bulbbul* (Tripti Dimri) appears in the forest with her unbound hair, bloody mouth and bent ankles—an avenging angel who contains both forces within herself, righting the injustices of patriarchy.

The female monster has long been a horror staple epitomised in such figures as the ghost, the witch and the monstrous mother, often depicted through allusions to biological functions like menstruation and birthing. The folk horror film too, especially given its preoccupations with nature and agricultural prosperity and their easy associations with the feminine, frequently uses the woman-as-monster trope. Often, these female monsters are themselves the victims of patriarchy. For instance, *Stree* (Amar Kaushik, 2018, Hindi) and its sequel *Stree 2: Sarkate Ka Aatank* (2024)

are based on the Nale Ba urban legend of Karnataka, about a witch who roams the streets at night and lures people by imitating the voices of their loved ones. In the films, *Stree* is a female ghost who has been wronged—a courtesan in her earthly life, she was murdered, and now returns seeking lost love.

In others like *Bokshi* (Bhargav Saikia, 2025, Hindi), about a school trip that unfurls myths about a folkloric demoness, the witch is reclaimed as representative of female power.

The female monster is also closely associated with mothers and mothering. There is, for instance, the uterine imagery of *Tumbbad*. A living, sinewy, bloodied cavern deep inside the earth is the hellish womb of an ancient goddess of fertility and houses her wayward, avaricious child, the demon Hastar. *Bokshi* similarly centres its story on the mysterious prehistoric site called 'The Navel' which serves as a remnant of a primal severed connection with the maternal. It eventually resurrects the figure of a prehistoric mother long subdued by patriarchy and forgotten by history.

Kothanodi (Bhaskar Hazarika, 2015, Assamese), which adapts Assamese folktales drawn from the compilation *Burhi Aai'r Xaadhu* (*Grandmother's*

Tales), uses body horror elements to tell four dark, connected, rural tales about mothers: one who gives birth to a vegetable; another who coaxes her daughter to marry a python; a third who colludes with a demon and torments her stepdaughter to death; and a fourth who births female infants only for them to be ritually put in the ground.

In the last decade, folk horror has seeped into both mainstream and independent films in India. Some of its features, like folklore-inspired plots, eerie landscapes and a move away from the metropolis, serve as significant markers of the subgenre in both filmic spaces. Mainstream folk horror films, however, also rely heavily on songs, romance, a hero's arc culminating in a satisfying, victorious resolution, and popular, recognisable faces. In order to make the genre's more unsavoury elements palatable for the larger audience, the mainstream has also presented these stories through the prism of comedy. From Indian horror's campy roots in the B-movies and shows that came out of the Ramsay Brothers' stables, the genre has come of age gaining a new respectability and credence. This blossoming is decidedly a result of its return to the roots—to the country's rich folkloric traditions, to myth, history and culture. 🌿



KANTARA



BOKSHI

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