

Divine Spectacle: The Cinematic Rebirth of Indian Epics

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Abstract: This paper explores the cinematic adaptation of Indian mythology in the films *Brahmāstra* (2022), *Adipurush* (2023), and *Kalki 2898 AD* (2024), focusing on how classical narratives are reimagined in contemporary visual culture. The study examines the narrative and thematic transformations that occur when mythological content is adapted for the screen. It analyses the selective appropriation of elements from traditional sources, where morally and culturally affirming motifs are emphasized, while aspects deemed outdated, problematic or considered unsuitable for contemporary audiences are modified or omitted. The language and characterisation are reworked to resonate with younger audiences, often through the use of modern idioms and dialogues and familiar archetypes. The paper investigates how the protagonists and supporting figures are reshaped to reflect present-day sensibilities, making them more accessible to a digitally native generation. Special emphasis is placed on the use of visual effects, music, and promotional strategies designed to enhance the films' appeal to contemporary viewers. Additionally, the paper considers the audience's response to these adaptations, noting the varying expectations and receptions shaped by cultural, religious, and generational factors. By comparing these three films, the paper highlights the ongoing negotiation between innovation and reverence in mythological adaptation and situates these practices within the broader framework of adaptation theory.

Keywords: Adaptation, Narrative Study, Mythology, Popular Cinema, Audience Reception, Visual Culture, Generational Shift, Narrative Transformation, Cultural Negotiation

Indian mythology has always been a fertile ground for storytelling. For centuries, epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have not only shaped religious and cultural consciousness but also inspired diverse performance traditions, including oral recitations, classical theatre, folk plays, devotional songs, and, eventually, cinema. In the twentieth century, mythological films became

foundational to Indian cinema and today, mythology continues to serve as a cultural reservoir, but its adaptation is no longer straightforward. In the twenty-first century, myth is increasingly reframed for digital-native audiences, shaped by global visual idioms of superhero franchises, dystopian sci-fi, and video games. This creates a tension: how to retain reverence for sacred stories while making them appealing to audiences accustomed to Marvel, *Game of Thrones*, or anime, etc.

This paper examines three recent cinematic adaptations that illustrate different approaches to negotiating this tension: *Brahmāstra* (2022), *Adipurush* (2023), and *Kalki 2898 AD* (2024). All three films engage with mythology, but their methods, successes, and failures vary. Where *Brahmāstra* hybridizes myth with the superhero genre, *Adipurush* attempts devotional fidelity but falters in execution and ideological positioning, and *Kalki 2898 AD* imagines mythology as a pluralist sci-fi futurism. By situating these films within adaptation theory, the paper argues that contemporary Indian mythological cinema exemplifies adaptation as cultural negotiation, an iterative process shaped by reverence, innovation, audience identity, and socio-political context.

Adaptation Studies has long debated the problem of fidelity: whether adaptations succeed or fail by how closely they adhere to their sources. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, rejects fidelity as the primary criterion, emphasising the adaptive process as a form of palimpsestuous rewriting instead. Similarly, Julie Sanders in *Adaptation and Appropriation* frames adaptation as both intertextual dialogue and cultural negotiation, where texts are reshaped to resonate with new audiences. Robert Stam extends this view by emphasizing the intertextual dialogism of cinema, where adaptations are always in conversation not only with the source text but with other media, genres, and cultural contexts. This is particularly relevant for Indian mythological films, which borrow as much from Hollywood blockbusters as from Sanskrit epics.

In the Indian context, adaptation cannot be understood solely in terms of fidelity, because mythology itself is fluid and plural. The *Ramayana* has more than 300 versions across South and Southeast Asia. The *Mahabharata* too exists in multiple versions, folk performances, and reinterpretations. Myth is not a fixed text but a living tradition, continually retold to address

contemporary concerns. This flexibility enables innovation, but it also poses challenges. Adaptors must decide which elements to retain as sacred and which to modify. They must balance reverence for tradition with relevance for modern audiences. The three films examined here dramatize this negotiation in distinct ways.

***Brahmāstra*: Myth in the Superhero Mode**

Ayan Mukerji's *Brahmāstra: Part One – Shiva* positions itself as India's first attempt to build a film "astraverse," a cinematic world where mythic energies become franchise elements. The "Astraverse" is Mukerji's term for a cinematic universe modelled on Western superhero franchises, in which each *āstra* serves as a narrative and visual anchor for future stories. *Āstras* (or astras) are celestial weapons in Hindu mythology, frequently described in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Unlike ordinary weapons, they are invoked through *mantras* (sacred chants) and are associated with particular deities, embodying divine power. Each *āstra* has a specific destructive capacity; for example, the *Brahmāstra*, linked to the creator god Brahmā, is said to be capable of devastating entire regions. In *Brahmāstra*, these mythological motifs are reimagined as franchise elements: portable and repeatable features that can structure sequels, spin-offs, and merchandising. Like superheroes in Western franchises, each *āstra* can generate its own plotline while remaining part of a larger shared world. The film is rooted in Indian motifs (*āstras*, divine lineages), but it speaks in the language of global superhero cinema. This choice shows one way to make myth accessible to younger, digitally native audiences. The most visible move in *Brahmāstra* is what it does with *āstras*. In classical texts, *āstras* are invoked and described through ritualized language and moral contexts. The film transforms them into glowing superpowers visualized through computer-generated imagery (CGI), using digital effects to stage battles and spectacular fight sequences. That visual translation is important: cinema must show what a text can only describe. By rendering *āstras* as spectacular visual effects, the film gives modern audiences a felt experience of the numinous. This is a bold move: it makes a traditional motif visible in a way that immediately maps onto viewers' familiarity with Marvel and similar franchises.

The protagonist Shiva is an example of selective appropriation and recharacterization. Shiva in this film is not an emperor or an ascetic; he is a Mumbai DJ, an urban young man who falls in love, makes mistakes, and gradually discovers his powers. This “reluctant hero” arc is familiar from global franchise cinema: the chosen one who must accept responsibility. By making the hero young and urban, the film aims to build empathy and to place the epic inside everyday life. Shiva’s modern life, with its music, romance, and city friendships, creates a bridge between the everyday and the mythic.

Language in *Brahmāstra* follows the same logic. The dialogues are colloquial, often peppered with slang and playful banter. Shiva’s romantic exchanges with Isha (his love interest, played by Alia Bhatt), his one-liners, and his pop-culture references are designed to make him feel like someone today’s audiences would recognize. This strategy makes the film more approachable for younger viewers. The downside, as critics noted, is that this register can sometimes feel too casual when the film attempts to handle cosmic stakes; the voice tones can undercut the sense of religious grandeur the film otherwise gestures toward.

Spectacle is central to the film’s identity. The marketing emphasized its CGI sets, *āstral* battles, and the idea of a larger universe. Music mixes Indian motifs with contemporary orchestration. These production elements function together: VFX show the *āstras*, music anchors emotional beats, and marketing sells the film as both a mythic spectacle and a youth-oriented blockbuster.

Reception shows the benefits and costs of this approach. Young, urban audiences generally welcomed *Brahmāstra* as a fresh attempt to bring myth to the superhero idiom; they enjoyed the visual spectacle and the accessible characterizations. Some traditional viewers, however, felt unease when ritual language and devotional nuance were shortened for time and replaced by modern slang. The film’s result was a mixed reception that leaned toward acceptance among the younger demographic and cautious reserve among more devotional viewers. In short, *Brahmāstra* stands as a model of innovation anchored to selective reverence: keep the symbolic power of *āstras*, translate them into spectacle, and reframe the hero so that modern audiences can emotionally enter a mythic world.

***Adipurush*: The Contested Adaptation**

Adipurush presents a very different case. Announced and marketed as a grand retelling of the *Ramayana*, it became notorious for failing to meet many audiences' expectations on several counts: narrative compression, awkward language such as “*Kapda teri Lanka ka,, Tel teri Lanka ka, Aag bhi teri Lanka ki to Jalegi bhi teri Lanka hi,*” visual design choices like demon armies resembling *Harry Potter*'s Dementors, and production quality, especially the much-hyped CGI, was judged substandard, with reviewers describing the Lanka sequences and battle scenes as clunky and unconvincing. The film's box-office controversies, public debate, and heavy online mockery show how adaptation can go wrong when execution and cultural reading do not align. After strong advance bookings, collections collapsed within days, with *The Hindu* noting that negative word-of-mouth and widespread criticism “crippled” its commercial run (*The Hindu*, June 20, 2023). Public debate split into politics and religion, as petitions accused the makers of disrespecting the *Rāmāyaṇa* and forced revisions of lines such as “*Lanka laga denge*” (*Indian Express*, 19 June 2023). Online, the film became a meme template, with audiences ridiculing Hanuman's “maths problem” dialogue or Ravana's bat-like aircraft, examples of how intended spectacle turned into parody (*Hindustan Times*, June 17, 2023).

The film makes a stark choice in narrative compression, condensing a large, complex story into a shorter version that sacrifices depth for speed. In practice, it reduces the slow-building social and moral world of Ayodhya to mere glimpses, rushing through the backstories of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana and moving quickly to exile, abduction, and battles. This compression strips away what makes the *Rāmāyaṇa* resonant: not only its heroic outline but the thick moral life of its characters. Here, thick moral life refers to the dense web of family rhythms, doubts, domestic politics, and ethical dilemmas that allow audiences to feel the gravity of choices and sympathize with conflicting duties. When a film removes the time characters spend as people, negotiating loyalty, love, or hesitation, what remains is a bare sequence of actions rather than the rich moral texture that has made the epic endure for centuries.

Visually and in characterisation, the film often replaces nuance with caricature. Ravana is stylized with tattoos, dark clothing, and an exaggerated multi-headed projection that looks more like a fantasy villain than the learned, complex king of the texts. Demons are designed in “Hollywood” modes, some describing them as resembling figures from Marvel or fantasy franchises, and Hanuman’s depiction, very muscular and marked by exaggerated facial expressions, struck many as cartoonish or even insulting. Lanka serves as an example, presented as a black-and-gold, modern, dystopian palace. The design is spectacular, but viewers complained it lacked symbolic depth: where the epic evokes sacred architecture and poetic description, the film offers shiny but shallow modern set pieces.

Language proves decisive in *Adipurush*’s reception. The film attempted a modern, punchy register, but many lines read as out of place in a devotional retelling. Examples that became widely remarked include lines that came across as colloquial or awkward, phrases that the public quickly turned into memes. Lines like “*Lanka laga denge*” or casual slang such as “*fisaddi*” (a modern, rough dismissal) were widely mocked on social media. Instead of enhancing accessibility, these lines felt disrespectful to many viewers who expected a more elevated register for a story treated as sacred by many.

Two linked responses are important to note. First, critics of *Adipurush* emphasized that sloppy craft (uneven CGI, odd visual compositing) made the film look cheap, undermining its claims to be a majestic retelling. Second, scholars like Santosh Kumar Mamgain have argued that some of the problematic choices may not be mere incompetence but deliberate ideological decisions. Mamgain reads visual and rhetorical choices, such as the demonised design of Ravana, the heavy use of saffron imagery in battle, and lines that emphasise protection and masculine honour, as coded to fit contemporary communal narratives. In this reading, the film’s adaptation choices become political: mythology is not only reworked for audiences, it is used to speak to a political present.

Marketing responded to the backlash in striking ways. After early criticism for CGI and certain scenes, the producers shifted promotional tactics toward devotional framing: campaigns

included reserving a seat in every theater in the name of Hanuman and conducting charitable ticket donations to schools and orphanages.

The marketing pivot aimed to reposition the film as a devotional event, promoted as “*Sabhi Bhartiyan ki Adipurush*,” and to rally those who see these stories as part of national and religious memory. Karthikeyan Balakumar’s marketing analysis shows that this pivot was reactive; it did not fix the fundamental craft problems and arguably reinforced the sense among critics that the film was being defended as a cultural object regardless of quality.

The film’s reception was sharply polarized. Religious audiences who felt the film respected the epic were fewer than those who felt insulted; younger, digitally native viewers mocked the dialogue, the CGI, and the tonal inconsistencies. The result was that *Adipurush* alienated both sets of viewers, those who wanted devotional seriousness and those who wanted slick modern spectacle. Whether the film’s key missteps were artistic or intentionally ideological, the outcome was the same: a contested adaptation that exposed the risks of superficial modernization and politically coded selection.

Kalki 2898 AD: Pluralist Futurism and Techno-myth

Kalki 2898 AD takes a different track. Rather than present itself as a devotional retelling, Nag Ashwin’s film relocates epic themes into a speculative, post-apocalyptic future. It opens with Ashwatthama’s curse after the Kurukshetra war and jumps six thousand years into a world of environmental collapse, authoritarian rule, and radical social stratification. The prophecy of Kalki becomes a thread of hope within this broken world. The film thereby shows how myth can be used to reflect modern crises, whether ecological, technological, or political, while also imagining renewal.

The production design is central to this adaptation’s success. The film constructs three major spaces that function as symbolic anchors: Kashi, the last habitable city, is a rotting metropolis: dilapidated buildings, narrow alleys, and scattered remnants of sacred carvings. This visual world makes the moral and ecological stakes felt: spiritual memory remains but is fragile. “The Complex” is a floating, high-tech sanctuary for the elite. Its sleek architecture, secret labs, and impermeable

spaces symbolize authoritarian excess and class separation. The Complex literalizes the film's critique that technological advancement can deepen injustice. Shambhala acts as a rebel refuge. It incorporates traditional elements and communal spaces referred to in the film as sites of hope and cultural continuity. The architecture here references natural motifs, such as an ancient tree and communal hearths, to show cultural resilience.

Ashwatthama's outfits feature textures that recall tree bark and aged fabrics, evoking his immortality and long suffering. Rebel costumes use reclaimed materials that visually underscore ecological collapse and social scavenging. Even the film's use of Buddhist iconography and more plural spiritual images signals a deliberate turn away from sectarian devotion toward a broad, inclusive spiritual language. Language and characterization in *Kalki* balance prophetic solemnity with modern clarity. The film uses slogans like "For Tomorrow" rather than exclusively devotional proclamations, which makes the Kalki figure accessible as a symbol of hope across communities. Characters such as Bhairava (a rogue bounty-hunter figure linked to Karna) and Ashwatthama are given psychological depth; the film centres their doubts and histories, making mythic archetypes feel lived-in and human.

Critics praised *Kalki* for its ambition, production values, and the way it reimagines myth as a tool to discuss contemporary challenges such as climate collapse, authoritarian rule, and moral decay. Some reviewers note borrowings from Western sci-fi visual language (moments that echo *Mad Max* or *Star Wars*), but the film generally integrates these references into an Indian techno-myth that aims for pluralism rather than narrow nationalism. Importantly, *Kalki* appears intentionally aimed at a younger, globalized audience. Its paratextual campaign emphasized world-building, VFX breakdowns, and concept art; the film invited viewers into a design-led experience. This strategy paid off, and the film attracted enthusiasm from sci-fi fans and young viewers interested in speculative narratives that combine mythic depth with global genres.

Comparative Synthesis: When Reverence Meets Innovation Selective Choices, Spectacle, Markets, and Publics

When we look across *Brahmāstra*, *Adipurush*, and *Kalki 2898 AD* together, a clearer picture emerges. Contemporary mythic cinema negotiates five related pressures at once: which parts of an old story to keep, how to recast language and personality for new viewers, how to show the sacred visually and sonically, how to sell the film to different publics, and how audiences actually receive and reinterpret the result. Below, I bring those five pressures into a single, comparative discussion using concrete examples from the three films. I avoid repeating the fuller film-by-film descriptions already given. The aim is to show patterns, to mark where filmmakers succeed, where they stumble, and what those outcomes mean culturally and politically.

First, selective appropriation and narrative reconfiguration. All three films retain the bones of epic meaning, including prophecy, chosen figures, and acts of cosmic violence and repair, but they differ in what they highlight and in the story logic they build around those elements. The common strategy is to keep motifs that easily translate into cinematic symbols (a weapon, a curse, an avatar) and to drop or rework material that requires long textual exposition or ritual context. Examples: the *āstras* become visual set pieces in *Brahmāstra*; the *Pushpak Vimaan* is reshaped as a menacing flying craft in *Adipurush*; Kalki's prophecy is recast as an ecological promise/technology dilemma in *Kalki 2898 AD*. These choices show a pragmatic logic: filmmakers keep what is legible in image and action and adapt or remove what is primarily discursive or devotional. But selective appropriation is not neutral. It signals what a filmmaker expects audiences to value: spectacle, moral clarity, or thematic resonance. *Brahmāstra* and *Kalki* choose legibility-plus-depth (visual spectacle tied to a thematic center); *Adipurush* often chose legibility without the supporting depth, which is part of why its compressions felt hollow.

Second, language and characterization as acts of translation. Re-speaking an epic for a digital generation requires a tonal decision: make the voice colloquial and contemporary or retain elevated diction and devotional cadence. Each film tested a different balance. The result shows that register is

an instrument of trust: when colloquial language sits comfortably inside a coherent tonal design, it can humanize mythic figures and broaden appeal; when the register clashes with visual or marketing promises, it produces ridicule or rejection. For example, short, modern catchphrases can energize a trailer and yield viral clips, as *Brahmāstra*'s pop-inflected beats did. The same technique turned toxic in *Adipurush* when pithy, modern lines ran up against devotional imagery and ritual cues. By contrast, *Kalki* adopts measured, slogan-like lines that read as prophetic rather than irreverent, lending it a sense of both contemporaneity and seriousness. The comparative lesson is simple: reworking language can welcome younger viewers, but only if register, visual style, and narrative logic remain coherent.

Third, spectacle, production design and music — translating the numinous into the sensory world of cinema. Here, cinema's medium-specific power is obvious: sight and sound can carry spiritual weight when craft is convincing. All three films attempt to render the sacred via VFX, architecture, costume, and score. The difference is one of integration and craftsmanship. Where *Kalki 2898 AD* uses architecture (Kashi, the Complex, Shambhala), texture, and integrated VFX to make myth feel materially persuasive, and where *Brahmāstra* uses *āstras* and music to create moments of awe, the spectacle enhances thematic meaning. Where *Adipurush*'s spectacle appears disjointed from tone and technical polish, the visual attempts undermine rather than realize the intended numinous effect. The comparative point: spectacle is not merely ornament; it is the medium's primary tool for making myth believable on screen. If craftsmanship fails, spectacle collapses into parody; if craftsmanship succeeds, even radical reworkings can feel reverent.

Fourth, marketing, paratexts and cultural positioning. These films demonstrate that adaptation is as much a paratextual project as it is a textual one. A trailer, a promotional stunt, or a social media campaign frames the lens through which audiences decode a mythic film. *Brahmāstra* framed itself as a franchise-in-progress; *Kalki* framed itself as a globalized science-fiction experiment built on Indian myth; *Adipurush* shifted from spectacle to devotional paratext after technical criticism. Those paratextual choices are not merely tactical; they shape the ethical expectations audiences bring: if

your ads promise sacred reverence, critics and devotees will expect ceremony, careful ritual context, and tonal dignity; if your ads promise franchise spectacle, viewers expect high-standard VFX, coherent world-building, and serialized hooks. A misalignment between marketing and the finished film prompts the public to engage in an oppositional reading. Viewers feel misled and react accordingly. Thus, paratexts are a form of meta-adaptation that can either cushion innovation or expose its limits.

Fifth, reception: negotiation across generational and ideological lines. Audiences are not passive recipients of adaptation; they decode according to memory, media habits, and politics. Younger, urban viewers are often eager for inventive reworkings if execution respects craft; older and more devotional viewers prioritize symbolic fidelity and ritual coherence. But these divisions are not neat: a well-crafted innovation may win both groups; a poorly executed “faithful” retelling may succeed with neither. *Adipurush* is a stark example: because its craft and tonal framing faltered, it produced both meme-fueled derision from younger viewers and anger from religious audiences. *Kalki*’s pluralist design reduced political friction by avoiding straightforward sectarian appeals; *Brahmāstra*’s hybrid positioning invited negotiated readings that accepted some liberties in exchange for spectacle and emotional accessibility. The takeaway is that reception is a bargaining table. Audiences reward work that clearly signals what it intends to do and delivers on that promise. Taken together, these five pressures show how adaptation works as a bundled practice: choices about what to keep, how to speak, what to show, how to sell, and how to expect audiences to react are all made together. When choices align, and narrative logic, tonal register, technical craft, and paratextual framing are coherent, innovation can be read as respectful reinvention. When they misalign, innovation is read as disrespect or incompetence. These films reveal three broader truths about the place of myth in contemporary India. First, myth remains alive and valuable as cultural capital. Filmmakers consistently turn to epic motifs because these stories still carry emotional authority, mnemonic power, and collective identity. Second, media form shapes meaning. Cinema cannot carry myth the same way a recitation or ritual does; it translates myth into image, sound, rhythm, and

duration. That translation invites both creativity and risk. Third, adaptation in modern India is entangled with political and economic stakes. Myths may be invoked in the service of national identity, commercial franchises, or speculative critique. The public reaction to a given adaptation, therefore, reflects not just aesthetic judgment but judgments about cultural stewardship and political alignment.

In a plural society, film adaptations must navigate demands for inclusive representation, commercial success, and artistic integrity. The three films show distinct strategies: franchise-building that aims to globalize myth (*Brahmāstra*), devotional spectacle that claims cultural ownership but risks politicization (*Adipurush*), and speculative reimagining that seeks a pluralist, globally legible mythic language (*Kalki*). None of these paths is inherently superior; each carries trade-offs that the public will evaluate.

When reverence meets innovation on the film set, the result depends less on which of the old stories you start with and more on how honestly and skillfully the new telling is constructed. The three recent films demonstrate that selective appropriation, reworked language, compelling spectacle, honest marketing, and sensitivity to audience decoding are the five pillars on which successful adaptation rests. Where those pillars stand together, myth may be reborn for a new generation; where any pillar collapses, the film becomes contested territory.

Adaptation, then, is not primarily a question of fidelity to texts but a public act of cultural translation. It asks filmmakers to take responsibility for how they reshape shared narratives, not only artistically but also socially and politically. It asks audiences to negotiate how much change a living tradition can accept. The conversations around *Brahmāstra*, *Adipurush*, and *Kalki 2898 AD* show that such negotiations are happening loudly in India today. That is difficult, sometimes ugly, often instructive, and ultimately a sign that myth continues to matter.

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