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## Billu

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## Billu

### Abstract

This is a review of *Billu* (2009).

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As a modern retelling of the Krishna-Sudāmā story, *Billu* (Dir: Priyadarshan 2009) is primarily notable for its implicit suggestion that film stars are the closest modern equivalent to kings and gods. Billu (Irfan Khan), a village barber who is barely able to support his family and must beg at the local school when he is unable to keep up tuition payments for his children, has mentioned to his family that he was a friend of film star Sahir Khan (Shah Rukh Khan, playing a thinly disguised version of himself) when they were in school together. With the village stunned and delighted by the news that a film starring Sahir Khan will be shot in their town, Billu's family cannot keep news of the friendship to themselves, with the result that Billu's life is turned upside down as people first fall all over themselves to ingratiate themselves to him, and then turn against him when he proves unable and/or unwilling to arrange meetings for them with the megastar.

As in the original story, Billu is extremely reluctant to impose on his friendship, especially given his material poverty. He agrees to do so only at the insistence of his wife. Throughout most of the movie, it is not entirely clear whether or not Billu has told the truth about his friendship with Sahir Khan, and this provides a welcome element of tension. The storyline is a bit simplistic, though there are a number of comic moments as the realities of a film shoot overwhelm the village. In one vignette, the owner of Sahir Khan's boarding house begs to be given a role in his movie, explaining that he is an experienced actor. Every year Sita sits

under his shade as he plays the tree during Dussehra, when the village reenacts the Ramayana. He also plays the largest floating rock in the bridge to Lanka.

The contrast between the simple villagers rooted in the realities of agriculture and small town life and the glamorous life of the stars producing fantasy has been deliberately heightened. Bollywood costumes often look gaudy to Westerners unaccustomed to the genre but the costumes in the ridiculous movie being shot in the village stretch beyond Bollywood standards.

The visit of Sudāmā, a poor Brahmin, to Krishna at Dvārakā is found in its earliest recorded form in the Bhagavata Purana (S.B. 10:80-81). It is well-known in India, told in many ways. The story is used to stress the value of friendship that cuts across the boundaries of wealth and poverty, the importance of hospitality, Krishna's willingness to accept gifts on the basis of the devotion of the giver rather than the quantity or quality of the gift itself, and even the folly of consuming food in secret.

As Billu does not attempt to follow the Sudāmā story closely, many of the layers of meaning found in that story are lost. The movie sticks to the broad outline of the original consistent with the realities of modern life. The humility of Sudāmā/Billu remains. Once he reluctantly decides to attempt a visit, Billu has much more difficulty getting through to the superstar than Sudāmā has in getting to

Krishna, a reasonable difference given that security for Indian megastars may actually be more stringent than security for ancient kings. In both stories the guards of the famous man are skeptical that such a ragged visitor could possibly be welcomed. The nobility of both Krishna and Sahir is displayed in their eagerness to embrace their old friend, despite his poverty. Sudāmā leaves the presence of Krishna with no tangible benefit (not knowing a palace awaits him at home). He is content, like Billu, that the friendship has been remembered. Viewers are left guessing whether later tangible rewards might accrue to Billu.

Ultimately, this movie will bring the most delight to the large number of people who are eager to watch Shah Rukh Khan, the “King of Bollywood,” do almost anything. Unfortunately this role does not display much of his considerable talent. The more demanding roles of Billu and his wife are excellently rendered by Irfan Khan and Lara Dutta.