

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **MR 420, SHRI 420 (aka SHREE 420)** 1955

Raj Kapoor

(Hindi language)

**Contents** (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

### OVERVIEW

This film is one of masterpieces of India's Golden Age of cinema in the 1950s featuring legendary actor-director Raj Kapoor in his heyday. Here as elsewhere, he plays a Chaplin-esque figure, Raju, who is something of an Indian Everyman. The title refers to section 420 of the Indian penal code, which covers fraud; in other words, to call someone 'a 420' is to say that he is a cheat or a con-man. Shri (or Shree) is a respectful form of address. The title can thus be read as 'Mr Cheat.'

The plot is deceptively simple. A young man named Raja travels from his home town to Bombay, a distance of more than 2,000 miles, to find work. In the big city, he falls in love with the poor but virtuous Vidya ('wise'), but he later gets involved with an unscrupulous businessman and a woman of ill repute (Maya, or 'illusion', 'deception'). Raju soon becomes a confidence man (a '420') despite the efforts of Vidya to prevent this. The central drama revolves around a Ponzi scheme (named after a famous fraudster in the 1920s) that is operated by Raju and his boss. Raju finally wakes up morally and tries to ruin the scheme, an action that gets himself shot. Only unconscious rather than dead, Raju provides the police with enough evidence to arrest his boss. Raju and Vidya are happily reunited at the conclusion.

### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

*Mr 420* is a masterful combination of a romantic film, peppered with songs, that also tells a serious story. It manages to dramatise several problems faced by the newly-independent India, which was embarking on modernity without the support of the colonial power that had ruled it for 300 years. The plot, dialogue and songs are loaded with Indian cultural symbols, including naming a nightclub after a goddess and a laundry after India itself. Ironically, in calling for a new identity for a new nation, the film cannot fully escape the westernisation that it deplores since cinema itself was imported from the West. The debt that Kapoor owes to Charlie Chaplin in this film is large, but as the film's famous song declares, no matter how much surface is borrowed from elsewhere, the heart of this film is indisputably Indian.

Over the years, *Mr 420* has come to be regarded as one of the greatest films in that difficult decade of the 1950s. This status is almost completely due to the skill of its producer, director and leading actor, Raj Kapoor (1924-88), who was Indian cinema's first megastar. His cultural significance and that of the film is commemorated in a stamp issued by the Indian government in 2001.

### STORY

*On the road* The film begins with Raju hitch-hiking on a deserted road, with all his worldly goods tied in a small bundle hanging from a stick held over his shoulder. Pretending to have collapsed on the road, he is picked up by a rich man, who says, 'You know, it's my duty to help the poor.' This is Sonachand Dharmanand (whose name means something like 'gold-and-silver-merchant delighting in righteousness'). Soon, however, Raju is thrown out of the car when Sonachand discovers that he has feigned injury. Significantly, each one accuses the other of being a '420' (or 'fraud'). Back on the road, Raju regains his happy-go-lucky attitude and sings a famous song about his patchwork identity:

My shoes are from Japan,

my pants are English style,  
on my head's a red Russian cap,  
ah, but still my heart is Indian!

*Bombay* Travelling by bus, train and bullock cart, Raju finally reaches his destination. Bombay overwhelms him with its size, speed and density of population. A beggar informs him that the city is a heartless place, where Raju's college degree and honesty are not enough to secure employment. Despite this warning, he does encounter kind people, such as a fruit-seller who takes pity on him and gives him free food.

*Vidya* Raju pawns his 'honesty-medal,' which he won at his college, for 40 rupees. In the shop, Raju meets Vidya, who is selling her bangles, and is immediately attracted by this woman (played by a woman who was his real-life lover). Exiting the shop, he is swiftly relieved of his 40 rupees by a pickpocket.

*Street-life* Battered by the cruelty of the city, Raju is forced to sleep on the street, where he is exploited by other pavement-dwellers who try to extract 'rent' from him. He is then rescued by Gangama, the kindly fruit-seller who helped him earlier. She adopts him and his fellow street urchins. Raju then leads them in a heart-warming song about finding a silver lining in every cloud, which angers Sonachand (the wealthy man who picked Raju up on the road). Sonachand complains to the police, who come and scatter Raju and his gang.

*Rescued* Chased by the police, Raju ends up sleeping on a beach, where Vidya sees him and calls him a 'useless vagrant.' Stung by her words, he leaps into the sea, but Vidya rescues him and takes him home, where he meets her father. He is a cripple, who has started a school for poor children that is run by Vidya.

*Courtship* Impressed by her devotion to these destitute children, Raju falls deeply in love with her and sets out to woo her. He takes a job at a laundry, where he 'borrows' someone's suit to impress Vidya on their dates. Strolling along the moonlit streets of Bombay, he sings to her of his love and they begin to talk of marriage.

*Sonachand* The innocent Raju then meets the voluptuous Maya ('Illusion'), who takes him to nightclubs and he loses his way. Dancing with showgirls and making money, he meets the dodgy Mr Sonachand (a true Mr 420), who makes him his partner in shady business deals. Swept away by the promise of quick wealth, Raju buys an expensive sari and invites Vidya to a 'special event.' It is the Hindu festival of Diwali (celebrating Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity), and Raju takes her to the 'temple of Lakshmi,' which turns out to be the nightclub where Maya works.

*Ensnared* Vidya is repulsed by the gawdy sensuality and is insulted by Maya, but Raju is lured back by Maya's sensuality and Sonachand's promise of money. Loaded down with bank notes he won at cards, a drunken Raju shows up at Vidya's house and praises the benefits of money and curses the ills of poverty.

*Tibetan Gold* Sonachand arranges for Raju to run a scam called the 'Tibetan Gold Company'. He becomes rich by deceiving investors into buying shares, even faking phone calls from investors in America and Japan. Meanwhile, Vidya's family falls on hard times and she closes her school. Raju meets her again in the pawn shop, where he has gone to reclaim his honesty-medal and she is pawing her father's favourite books. They argue over the virtues of honesty and the morality of getting rich. Again, stung by her rebuke, Raju revisits the street dwellers, who appear free of worry.

*Another scam* Sonachand unveils a new scam called 'People's Homes', which promises to get a poor person a house for only 100 rupees. Raju, with his conscience awakened by Vidya, is not willing to cheat the poor and refuses to cooperate. But when Sonachand threatens to reveal his past fraudulent activity, Raju is forced to work for him. Raju persuades dozens of people to hand over their hard-earned cash, which Sonachand plans to split with Raju and flee, leaving the people with no home.

*Change of heart* In a series of dramatic scenes, Raju takes decisive action to scupper the scam. Vidya appears and casts her moral spell upon him. As a result, he rejects Maya's escape plan and raids Sonachand's safe in order to hand the money back to the poor people who entrusted him with it. He is interrupted by Sonachand's men, who shoot him. When the police arrive, Sonachand explains that Raju was simply a thief who got killed in the act of stealing. At this moment, the 'dead' Raju leaps up from the floor and exposes Sonachand's criminal activity.

*Justice* The criminals are sentenced at the High Court, and Raju delivers a sermon to a crowd of the city's poor, exhorting them to work hard and look out for cheats like Sonachand. His advice is to give their money to the government, which will use the 'public wealth for the public good.'

*The future* Raju, dressed again in the rags in which he entered the city months ago, sets out on a journey without a destination. But as he leaves the city and enters the countryside, Vidya tracks him down and urges him to return with her. In the final shot, the reunited lovers gaze out at the skyline of Bombay, where they will make a new life for themselves.

## THEMES

**Corruption** The main theme of this famous film of the fifties, as announced in its title, is fraud. Indeed, the action begins with the hitch-hiking Raju feigning illness in order to get a ride in a car. The car-owner (Sonachand) then berates him for 'cheating', calling him a '420', although we later learn that Sonachand is a far more sinister cheat than the hapless tramp-hero. The physical landscape also has a moral character. In the opening scenes, Raju's rural world is replete with symbols of 'tradition', such as snakes, rajas and elephants. Raju leaves this 'Indian' countryside and enters 'foreign' Bombay, walking beneath a sign for Coca-Cola. He has passed from the innocence of the village and into the corruption of the city. Once inside the urban jungle, Raju is robbed, chased by the police, seduced by the vamp Maya and trapped by the crook Sonachand. The rustic bumpkin is corrupted by money, drink, gambling and sex as represented by the nightclub, which is the natural haunt of Maya and Sonachand. This corruption is juxtaposed with the innocent of the laundry, where Raju gets a job. As if we didn't catch their significance, the nightclub is named 'Temple of Lakshmi' (money), while the laundry is named 'Jai Hind' ('Hail India').

In the tainted world of the nightclub, Raju is renamed Rajkumar ('prince Raju'). However, if Raju is to become a prince in this new urban world, he must literally pawn his honesty (or his 'honesty-badge' that he won at school). It is hardly a subtle symbol of lost innocence, but it nevertheless works within the logic of the film. The plot is so saturated with fraud that even when Raju finds his courage and is transformed into an honest man, he must resort to deception. Just as he feigned illness at the beginning, now, at the end, he fakes his own death in order to fool Sonachand. Rising up from the dead, Raju becomes a new man to lead a new nation through the moral complexities it will face as it modernises.

**National identity** The other important theme, which is related to the first, is that of national identity. Throughout the 1950s, film after film tried to articulate an identity for the new nation. Fewer than ten years before, Indians were subjects of the British Crown, so what are they now in 1955? The film provides an answer in its plot and, perhaps more memorably, in its songs. Raju sings the signature song in an early scene:

My shoes are from Japan,  
my pants are English style,  
on my head's a red Russian cap,  
ah, but still my heart is Indian!

In other words, India, or more accurately Bombay and other large cities, were not purely Indian in the 1950s. Colonialism, trade and travel had transformed a rural India into a country of modernising metropolises. Raj Kapoor wanted neither to deny nor reject these cultural influences, and yet maintain that his true identity, his heart, was Indian. This bifurcation of identity—a mixed, foreign outer layer obscuring a deeper traditional core—was a convenient formula that had evolved since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in urban India. Men, who operated in the external world of jobs and politics, often

wore foreign clothes (shirts and trousers). ON the other hand, women, who historically kept themselves inside the house, maintained tradition by wearing saris. These sartorial symbols are also present in the film. When Raju comes under the influence of Maya and Sonachand, he discards his 'hobo' clothes and puts on a flashy suit. At the end, when Raju has reverted back to his Indian core, he again dresses like a poor man. Standing in his battered shoes and ragged trousers, Raju delivers the nationalist message of the film when he addresses the crowd of poor people gathered outside the courthouse, where the criminals have been sentenced. He explains that he, too, is a common man, who came to the city and lost everything. However, he warns the listeners that the way to beat poverty is not to follow get-rich-quick schemes but to trust in the collective power represented by the government. Nationalist imagery is also seen throughout the film. For example, a wall in Vidya's house is decorated with a large photograph of Prime Minister Nehru. While Gandhi advocated a romantic return to village communalism (Raju's past), the mainstream followed Jawaharlal Nehru's state socialism (his present and future).

## CHARACTERS

**Raju** Raju is the protagonist of the film, a village man who comes to the city. Raju is representative of India as a whole. He is both an innocent rustic and an educated (but unemployed) man. He, and the country, are unsophisticated and susceptible to the vices of the city. Desperate to succeed (like the country), he falls prey to the deceptive promises of others. In this, he is weak and almost succumbs to depression, but he shows decisiveness at the end.

**Innocent** Raju is an innocent, unfamiliar with city ways and sophisticated habits. This means that he has a simple moral view of the world: honesty is best, greed is bad. This enduring aspect of his character is illustrated in the opening scenes when he is hitch-hiking and lies on the road, faking an injury in order to get picked up by a car. When this happens and he overhears the car-owner (Sonachand) say that they must take him to the hospital, he 'wakes' up and explains that he doesn't want to go there. 'You faked it, huh?' asks Sonachand, and Raju smiles broadly, 'Yes, you see, I didn't have money for the train and so....' Sonachand gets angry, throws him out of the car and tells him to reform and be honest. Raju responds with this observation: 'On the contrary, you should reform. If you drive a big car like this, you must be a cheat.' His innocent morality will not survive long once he is in Bombay.

**Susceptible** Raju's susceptibility to immoral influences in the city is the burden of the plot. From the moment he enters Bombay, he begins to spiral downward into drinking, whoring and criminality. A good demonstration of his vulnerability occurs midway through the story. After Raju has impressed Sonachand with his cagy cardplaying, the businessman pays a visit to Raju in the humble setting of the laundry where he works. Sonachand flatters Raju by saying he has a 'fine brain, able to earn millions.' Raju is confused and asks if it is really so easy to become rich, and Sonachand hands him a fistful of notes, as 'an advance on our partnership.' When Sonachand leaves, Raju fondles the notes and envisions a future full of glittering clothes, expensive hotels and fancy cars. It is an irresistible temptation for the man who comes from the country.

**Decisive** Weak-willed and naïve throughout most of the film, Raju is cajoled and persuaded into several immoral activities. His transformation, and the film's message, comes only at the end. With the moral persuasion of Vidya, he regains his old moral principles and turns against his partner, Sonachand. In a flurry of scenes, he tells Maya (who has planned an escape for the two of them) that he 'can escape from India but not from myself.' He opens the safe and takes the money, intending to return it to the people who gave it to him. But he is shot and lies unconscious on the floor of Sonachand's mansion when the police come. After he jumps up and convinces the police that Sonachand is the real thief, Raju launches into a moving speech to the people watching. He tells them to combine their savings, not to disperse it, and to trust in the government. In this quick-fire series of actions and speeches, Raju has transformed himself into a man of conviction and courage.

**Sonachand** Sonachand is a corrupt businessman. Sonachand is a first-class hypocrite. He is puffed up with his own distorted ideas of his morality when in fact he is venal through and through. He is arrogant, demanding and ever so slightly unctuous, a perfect combination of the traits necessary to manipulate others and ensure that he gets his way.

*Self-deluded* Sonachand is a fascinating study in self-delusion. While he is clearly a cruel and arrogant man, he actually believes that he is a do-gooder. An excellent illustration of this paradoxical characteristic comes in the opening scenes when Sonachand displays his *noblesse oblige*. His chauffeur stops the car suddenly and explains that there is 'a vagrant lying unconscious on the road.' Sonachand immediately says, 'Miserable fellow. Has no money. It's my duty to serve humanity.' He orders his driver to put Raju into the car. Satisfied that he has acted properly, he sits back with a wide grin and basks in his own self-glorification. Of course, he has 'done the right thing' but not for the right reason. His purpose in 'saving the vagrant' is not to protect the poor man but to shine a positive light on himself. It is a complex and well-acted scene.

*Hypocrite* Hypocrisy is not far removed from self-delusion. It differs only in that the character lies knowingly, without the mitigation of not understanding one's motives. This trait is displayed in the final scenes, when Sonachand (and everyone else) thinks that he has shot Raju dead. When the police come, he admits openly that he killed him. 'You see,' he tells the officer and the listening crowd, 'Raju was taking the money that I had gathered to build homes for these people [he gestures to the crowd]. I shot him for their sake only.' This, as the viewers know, is a boldfaced lie. This self-proclaimed champion of the poor has been stealing from them his whole life. Sonachand is the ultimate hypocrite, whose actions do not match his words.

**Vidya** Vidya is the lead female character and moral centre of the film. Vidya ('wisdom') is the moral centre of the film, with her character in sharp contrast with that of Maya, the vamp who flourishes in the nightclub. She is a sort of mother to her father, who is crippled, and a Florence Nightingale to Raju, whom she rescues literally (from the sea) and morally (from the grip of Sonachand). She is warm and polite, but also stern and censorious when necessary.

*Steadfast* Vidya is not just the moral core of the film, she is also steadfast in her virtue. While Raju and the rest of the characters are blown about by the changing times, Vidya stands resolutely on principle. A vivid illustration of this occurs when a drunken Raju shows up at Vidya's door with a bundle of notes, promising her a 'life of luxury, for you and me.' Staring at him, she condemns his gambling as theft. 'You have stolen, you have robbed,' she says in a firm tone. He dismisses his gambling as a 'sleight of hand,' but she persists and calls him a cheat (which is the watchword of the entire film). Then he stumbles, the bank notes float away, he chases them and she cries out in pain, 'You're chasing paper, mere paper. One day, you'll grovel in a pit of corruption. Don't do it, Raju. Don't fall into this trap.' When he makes a final play for her, stretching out a hand to caress her hair, she bats it away. 'You may live in a world where everything is for sale,' she says, 'but I'm not for sale.'

*Courageous* Vidya's virtue is not always overtly displayed in the film; many times she is merely silent, passive and refuses to take part in immoral actions. There is one moment, however, when she bursts forth in a courageous condemnation of Sonachand and his cronies. This is the final scene, when Raju lies on the floor, shot by Sonachand and apparently dead. A crowd of poor people, who have given their money to Raju, listen as Sonachand tells the police that Raju was a thief who tried to steal his money. All of sudden, Vidya marches forward and shouts, 'Lies. All lies. Raju wasn't a crook. You made him into one.' The businessman shrinks back in horror as Vidya continues her indictment, saying, 'You taught him your dirty tricks. How to lie, cheat and become a 420. You are the real criminal, not him.' Even then, she breaks down and begins to cry, unable to speak further. But she has inspired others in the crowd to come forward and attest to Raju's good nature and to condemn Sonachand. This is the decisive moment in the story, when Vidya summons the courage to speak out and expose the evil that has hoodwinked everyone since the beginning.

## **Maya**

Maya is a femme fatale who falls in love with Raju.



(Vidya and Raju in the most famous shot from the film)



(stamp showing Raj Kapoor, in the centre, as Raju in *Mr 420*)



(The hapless Raju, more hobo than hero, arrives in the big city)



(Raju with Maya, the temptress)



(Sonachand, left, with an associate)