

Mahatma Gandhi in Cinema

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By

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INTRODUCTION

The book *Mahatma Gandhi in Cinema* is an attempt to explore how much of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the tallest leader of the Indian freedom struggle, lives in Hindi cinema. Arguably the only book that analyses 100 years of Bollywood history (1913–2013), it will find how much of the Indian father of the nation – in person and through his ideals – is present on celluloid.

The book is an adaptation of the study the writer did for his doctorate from the Pacific Academy of Higher Education & Research University in 2017. The research was *ex post facto*, descriptive and qualitative, and the writer has permission from the university to publish the content in the form of a book. During the study, the writer came across many research papers and books that analysed various episodes of Mahatma Gandhi's life and also films based on his select epistemologies, but no research spanned the entire 100 years of Hindi cinema. This became the writer's *raison d'être*.

The book is the outcome of a few years of rigorous and painstaking research during which the writer not only read and reread hundreds of books on Gandhi but also watched close to three dozen films in full and select scenes from dozens of others chosen from the hundred years of Hindi cinema. The films pivoted around the Gandhian principles of truth, non-violence, untouchability, *Swadeshi*, and equality of religions. The author also did appraisals of films that were either biopics on Gandhi or portrayed his character in supporting roles.

Gandhi adapted 11 vows – namely, *Satya* (Truth), *Ahimsa* (Non-Violence), *Asteya* (Non-Stealing), *Brahamcharya* (Celibacy, Self Control or Sexual Abstinence), *Aparigraha* (Non-Possession), *Sharirshrama* (Bread Labour), *Aswada* (Control of the Palate), *Sarvatra Bhayavarjana* (Fearlessness), *Sarva Dharma Samantva* (Equality of all Religions), *Swadeshi* (Use Locally Made Goods), and *Sparshbhavana* (Remove Untouchability) to nourish and nurture his moral, political and spiritual self during his pursuit of Indian freedom from the British Empire.

Since most of these vows are interwoven into or involve adherence to *Satya*, *Ahimsa*, *Swadeshi*, Equality of Religions, and Removal of Untouchability, the writer has divided the entire cinematic history of Bollywood into four phases and picked films from each phase that best represent these principles on the silver screen.

The writer juxtaposes the reel with the real drawn from *The Story of My Experiments with the Truth* or *The Autobiography*, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (CWMG) and other books and research papers to ascertain how truly cinema has represented the Gandhian principles, and whether it portrays the transformations Gandhi underwent on *chaturvarna* (the four-caste system), inter-dining, inter-marriages, and even non-violence and religion in politics. He would cite from books, research papers, journals, and newspapers in support of his contentions. The attempt is to discover whether Bombay filmmakers have reinforced the stereotypes and myths prevalent about Gandhi, simply deified him without looking into the experiments/incidents that lent an extraordinary touch to an ordinary man, or tried to decode his epistemology on the five vows.

The book is divided into six chapters, beginning with an introductory chapter and a chapter examining Mahatma Gandhi's association with or rather disassociation from cinema.

During his lifetime, the only Hindi film Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi watched was *Ram Rajya*, a film based on his favourite epic *Ramayana*. Gandhi, then 74, saw the film in a special screening at Juhu in Mumbai on June 2, 1944 during his illness. Gandhi had agreed to see only select reels of the movie for 40 minutes but ended up watching the film for an hour and a half. Filmmaker Vijay Bhatt, a fellow Gujarati, later claimed that the Mahatma looked "cheerful" at the end of the showing. The same year, before *Ram Rajya*, Gandhi had been persuaded to watch *Mission to Moscow*, a Hollywood movie by Michael Kurtiz to promote the American alliance with the then USSR.

Gandhi looked down on cinema, believing it promoted immorality and other vices and corrupted young minds, and that watching films was a sheer waste of hard-earned money. The father of the Indian nation, in a letter addressed to T Rangachariar, the then Chairman of the Cinematograph Committee, called cinema a "sinful technology" when the latter placed before him a questionnaire to find out his views on cinema in 1937. Gandhi said in an interview published in the May 3, 1942 issue of *Harijan*, "If I began to organise picketing in respect of them (the evil of cinema), I should lose my caste, my Mahatmaship".

The third chapter of the book deals with biopics or films where Mahatma Gandhi's character is the pivot. These include *Gandhi*, *Gandhi*, *My Father* and *Making of the Mahatma*. Since the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) was the underwriter for *Gandhi* and the film was dubbed in Hindi and premiered in New Delhi, the writer has included the film in the list.

In the fourth chapter, the book appraises films like *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (2006), *Veer Savarkar*, *Sardar: The Iron Man of India*, *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero*, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, and *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar*, in which Mahatma Gandhi's character appears in cameos.

The study of *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* aims to find out whether Rajkumar Santoshi's film was unfair to Mahatma Gandhi, as alleged by the then CBFC Chairman Vijay Anand. Anand defended cuts in the film on the ground that "Gandhi's portrayal is very weak. He does not even hold his head high. I told the filmmakers he was the father of the nation. Don't let him look like a cow". The review also helps to ascertain whether the film is right to accuse Gandhi of not doing anything to get Singh's sentence commuted. Likewise, the juxtaposition of Jabbar Patel's *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar* with the available written content on Mahatma helps us know whether the differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar were irreconcilable.

The next chapter examines five films based on the principles of truth, non-violence, Swadeshi (use of indigenous goods), untouchability, and equality of religions in its five sub chapters. The first of these sub chapters explores *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), *Phir Subah Hogi* (1958), *Shriman Satyawadi* (1960), *Satyakam* (1969), and *Satyagraha* (2013) to test how much they abide by truths enunciated by the apostle, while the next scrutinizes *Dr Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani* (1946), *Do Aankhen Barah Haath* (1957), *Hum Dono* (1960), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), and *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara* (2005) on the parameters laid down by the father of the Indian nation for Ahimsa, or non-violence.

The scrutiny of *Lage Raho Munnabhai*, for instance, ascertains whether Raju Hirani trivialized the message of the Mahatma by emphasizing his ideals through tragic-comic situations. Similarly, it is interesting to see whether the films on non-violence reflect Gandhi's evolution on non-violence. In his lifetime, non-violence was not always the victor. The Mahatma himself became an admirer of Subhas Chandra Bose's efforts to liberate the country from foreign rule through the use of force and supported Indian military action against Pakistani mercenaries in Jammu & Kashmir in 1947. In his book *India Wins Freedom: The Complete Version*, Maulana Abul Kalam writes that

in discussion with him (Gandhi), I felt that he was becoming more and more doubtful about an allied victory. I also saw that Subhas Bose's escape to Germany had made a great impression on Gandhiji. He had not formerly approved many of his (Bose's) actions, but now I found a change in his outlook. Many of his remarks convinced me that he admired the courage and resourcefulness Subhas Bose had displayed in making his escape from India.

His admiration for Bose unconsciously coloured his view about the whole (2nd World) war situation.

This is followed by a sub chapter in which the writer scans films like *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946), *Naya Daur* (1957), *Manthan* (1976), *Swades: We the People* (2004), *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (2001), *Achhut Kanya* (1936), *Sujata* (1959), *Ankur- The Seedling* (1973), *Jaag Utha Insan* (1984), and *Shudra* (2012) to test whether cinema conformed to Gandhian principles on *Swadeshi* and untouchability. This helps the writer ascertain whether filmmakers have taken into consideration the evolution of the Mahatma on these principles.

Gandhi, for example, was against inter-dining, inter-caste and inter-religious marriages before 1930, so much so that he prevented his second son Manilal from marrying Fatima, a Muslim girl, in South Africa in 1926, and made his other son, Devdas, wait for five years before he could marry Lakshmi, the daughter of C Rajgopalachari, a Brahmin, in June 1933. By then, Gandhi had changed his views on inter-dining and inter-caste marriages, saying, “Restriction on inter-dining and inter-caste marriage is no part of the Hindu religion... Today, these two prohibitions are weakening Hindu society.” This statement is in contrast to what he had said in 1920: “Prohibition against intermarriage and inter-dining is essential for rapid development of the soul.”

In the last sub chapter, based on scrutiny of films, the writer analyses *Padosi* (1941), *Hum Ek Hain* (1946), *Train to Pakistan* (1998), *Road to Sangam* (2009), and *Hey Ram* (2000) to check whether they promote Gandhi’s epistemology on the equality of religions.

This is followed by a final chapter or denouement where the writer has placed his findings and conclusions, buttressing them with references from books and research papers.

CHAPTER I

CINEMA, A ‘SINFUL TECHNOLOGY’

During his lifetime, the only Hindi film Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi watched was *Ram Rajya*, a film based on his favourite epic *Ramayana*. Gandhi, then 74, saw the film in a special screening at Juhu in Mumbai on June 2, 1944, during his illness.

Gandhi had agreed to see only select reels of the movie for 40 minutes but ended up watching the film for an hour and a half. Filmmaker Vijay Bhatt, a fellow Gujarati of Gandhi, later claimed that the Mahatma looked “cheerful” at the end of the show.

That same year, before *Ram Rajya*, Gandhi was persuaded to watch *Mission to Moscow*, a Hollywood movie by Michael Kurtiz filmed to promote the American alliance with the then USSR (Rajmohan, 2007).¹

Like many of his contemporaries in the Indian freedom movement, Gandhi did not think very highly of cinema. He believed Hindi as well as foreign films promoted immorality and corrupted young minds.

When T Rangachariar, the then chairman of the Cinematograph Committee placed a questionnaire before him to know his views on cinema in 1937, the father of the Indian nation described cinema a “sinful technology” (Jain, 2009).² Gandhi considered cinema a waste of resources and time.

In a prayer meeting in a village on December 27, 1947, Gandhi asked,

Why do you need a cinema here? Instead of this, you can perform the various plays and stage dramas known to us. The cinema will only make you spend money. Then you will also learn to gamble and fall into other evil habits. Those addicted to alcohol, ganja and bhang should give up these addictions. (CWMG, 1947–1948)³

Gandhi said in an interview published in the May 3, 1942 issue of *Harijan*, “If I began to organise picketing in respect of them (the evil of cinema), I should lose my caste, my Mahatmaship” (Tripathi, 2015).⁴

The Mahatma even refused to invoke cinema for education.

I have never once been to a cinema and refuse to be enthused about it and waste God-given time in spite of pressure sometimes used by kind friends. They tell me it has an educational value. It is possible it has. But its corrupting influence obdurates itself upon me every day. Education, therefore, I seek elsewhere. (YI, 1926)⁵

Gandhi found it suffocating to sit in a theatre and threatened to shut cinemas given the chance. In answer to “Why do you oppose the growth of industries in our country through machinery?” on May 27, 1947, he said

With so much leisure on hand, the people get busy in mischief, for, as the saying is, an idle mind is the devil’s workshop. Or they waste their time in cinemas and theatres. Many people argue with me and try to convince me that the cinema has an educative value. But the argument doesn’t appeal to me at all. For one thing, sitting in a closed theatre one feels suffocated. I had been in such a theatre only once, when I was a small child. If I had my way, I would see to it that all the cinemas and theatres in India were converted into spinning halls and factories for handicrafts of all kinds.⁶

He further said in the same breath

And what obscene photographs of actors and actresses are displayed in the newspapers by way of advertisement! Moreover, who are these actors and actresses if not our own brothers and sisters. We waste our money and ruin our culture at the same time. If I was made Prime Minister of the country, these would be the first things I would do: I would close all the cinemas and theatres, though I might, as an exception, permit exhibition of pictures of educational value or showing scenes of natural beauty. But I would stop the sale of gramophone records. That is, I would suggest to the Government that it should impose heavy taxes on all such life-killing activities. Similarly, harmful drinks and drugs like liquor, tobacco and tea should be heavily taxed so that their consumption would automatically decrease. (CWMG, 1947)⁷

A great proponent of celibacy, the Mahatma believed that cinema could break a person’s vow for self-control. “You will avoid theatres and cinemas. Recreation is where you may not dissipate yourself but recreate yourself”, he said in the preface to his book *Self-Restraint vs. Self-Indulgence* (CWMG, 1927).

Gandhi felt bad about being accused, wrongly, of promoting a film production house.

Today my withers are unwrung even though a German friend tells me that a German paper accuses me of having promoted a film company. The innocent writer does not know that I have never once been to a cinema and refuse to be enthused about it. (CWMG, 1926–1927)⁸

When labourers organized a theatrical performance and wanted to give him the proceeds in Rangoon on March 10, 1929, he remonstrated with them.

You grown-up people may regard yourself as immune from the insidious effects of the theatre on yourselves, but you ought to have regard for your little children whose innocence you expose to an unconscionable strain by asking them to questionable performances. Look around you. We are situated in the midst of a raging fire. The cinema, the stage, the race-course, the drink-booth and the opium den – all these enemies of society that have sprung up under the fostering influence of the present system us on all sides. Is it any wonder, then, that I have not hesitated to call the present system Satanic? My advice to you therefore is, beware of pitfalls. (CWMG, 1929)⁹

On the Silver Jubilee of the Indian cinema in 1938, when Gandhi was requested to send a message for an official souvenir, his secretary's response was

As a rule Gandhi gives messages only on rare occasion and this is only for cause whose virtue is never doubtful. As for the cinema industry, he has the least interest in it and one may not expect a word of appreciation from him. (Kaul, 1998)¹⁰

In 1939 Khwaja Ahmad Abbas wrote an open letter to Gandhi, pleading with him to accept the positive contribution of cinema to entertainment and its utility as a tool to further the cause of Indian freedom movement. But it had no impact on Gandhi. Similarly, the request of Baburao Patel, editor of *Filmindia*, failed to move him from his stated position. Patel wrote once

Let this champion of *Daridra Narayan* come down and meet us and we shall try to convince him, or be convinced. Surely as workers in the film field, we are not worse than the poor untouchables for whom the old Mahatma's heart so often bleeds. And if he thinks we are, the more reason why he should come to our rescue.

On another occasion, Patel argued, "Gandhi, the apostle of truth believes cinema to be an evil but has yet to see our films. He can't know the truth unless he experiences it himself. Will he begin with *Achhut?*" (Patel, 1940).

It appears that Indians, particularly the ones born before the country gained independence from the British, and even two decades later, were not that fond of the cinema. In fact, they considered the dancing and singing depicted in motion pictures a source of corrupting youth.

This was even more applicable to the idealistic leaders the Indian Independence movement produced.

There was always a puritanical streak in the Indian freedom movement, which was repelled by the colourful costumes, the love stories and the song-and-dance routines of popular films. After Independence, some puritans assumed high office from where they spoke out against an industry they did not like. (Guha, 2007)¹¹

But there were also freedom fighters, like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai, who not only encouraged Indian filmmakers to make films but also fought against censorship. Even Congress' national leader and independence activist from Madras, S Satyamurthy, was aware of the power of the mass medium. Before the civic elections in Madras in 1934, he filmed an appeal and had it screened in a number of cinema houses (Baskaran, 1981).¹²

Sarojini Naidu and Jawaharlal Nehru were also not averse to promoting a good film. The latter watched *Achhut Kanya* at the bidding of Naidu and even sent his good wishes to the Indian Motion Pictures Congress held in 1939 in Bombay. His message read

Motion pictures have become an essential part of modern life and they can be used with great advantage for educational purposes...I hope that the industry will consider now in terms of meeting the standards and of aiming at producing high class films which have educational and social values. (FI, 1939).¹³

Sardar Patel did not shy away from taking advantage of the medium to create awareness against prohibition and about the freedom movement of the Congress party either. In 1939, at the request of Vinayak Damodar Karnataki, the maker of *Brandy Ki Botal* (1939), he recorded a message against prohibition. The message was incorporated in the film as its opening scene.

The first Indian home minister secured a smuggled copy of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's *Azad Hind Fauj* at the Bombay port. The print was first played by Congress leaders at the Regal Theatre and later, after footage of Congress leaders was added, was screened all over the country (Kaul, 1998).¹⁴

Subsequently, Patel, with the aid of the Indian Motion Pictures Producers' Association (IMPPA), prepared a documentary on *Netaji Subhash*, which included the smuggled footage. The first deputy prime minister of India also inaugurated *Achhut*, a movie directed by Chandulal Shah, in 1940 and in his speech on the occasion stressed the vital role cinema played in the life of a nation.

Though Gandhi understood and made use of news media, he disregarded the film medium to promote his cause. Gandhi distributed ten thousand

green pamphlets to newspapers and leaders of political parties during his visit to India on colour prejudice in South Africa after his return from there. He also published *Indian Opinion* (IO) and refused to shut it down, even when its publication hurt the publishers financially. "The aim of journalism is service, not commerce", he emphasized while announcing the cuts he'd made in his lifestyle expenses to keep the newspaper afloat.

Tripathi finds it puzzling and weird that Gandhi, despite being aware of the role of media in reaching the masses and the government, was against the cinema.

To me, it seems inexplicable and bizarre to a certain extent that a man who understood and created symbols out of everyday life and made them into potent totems, like the charkha (spinning wheel) or his simple dressing, never attempted to use such a powerful medium to spread his message. One could assume that this stemmed from his opposing standpoint on things modern and on technology as a whole, despite being born in an era of progressive evolution of communication technology. (Tripathi, 2015)¹⁵

Like the majority of cultivated Indians, Mahatma Gandhi and his followers looked down on films as an inferior form of entertainment. Unlike other freedom movements – for example, in Russia – the National Congress had no use for the cinema. (Nochimson, 2010)¹⁶

Rachel Dwyer, professor of Indian Studies and Cinema at the School of Oriental and African Studies, who has written extensively on Hindi cinema, claims Gandhiji expressed his contempt for cinema when he told the Indian Cinematograph Committee in 1927–1928

Even if I was so minded, I would be unfit to answer your questionnaire, as I have never been to a cinema. But even to an outsider, the evil that it has done and is doing is patent. The good, if it has done any at all, remains to be proved. (Dwyer, 2010)

Gandhi considered cinema a vice, like betting, gambling and horse racing (Ganti, 2013).¹⁷

Gandhi was not even interested in meeting Charlie Chaplin, whom he called "a buffoon", and was only persuaded to see him after Kingsley Hall Community Centre manager Muriel Lester described the Hollywood actor as somebody whose art was "rooted in the life of working people" (Lester, 1932).¹⁸ The two met on September 22, 1931 during Gandhi's visit to England for the Round Table Conference.

Donn Byrne writes in his book about the “the Mickey Mouse of India” (Gandhi was given the nickname during his stay in England because his ears stuck out like those of Mickey Mouse) that he

never went to cinema and had not even heard of Charlie Chaplin. He only agreed to meet him when he heard that Chaplin has come from a poor family in the East End, where Gandhi himself had stayed for a time when he first came to England as a student and where he was now staying once again. (Byrne, 1984)¹⁹

Interestingly, such was Gandhi’s power that within that one meeting, he left Chaplin tremendously impressed and converted him to his cause against machinery. Chaplin’s movie *Modern Times* (1936)

echoes the sentiment that machinery should benefit humanity and not throw it out of work, a point much removed from his earlier stance where he believed that machinery could release man from the bondage of slavery. (Tripathi, 2015)²⁰

Hindi cinema was at a nascent stage during Gandhi’s lifetime. It was not the Bollywood of now, the largest industry producing films in the world, over two times more than China and almost four times more than Hollywood.

Bollywood has been the top producer of films for several years. In 2002, in comparison to the 739 films produced in Hollywood, it produced 1013 films and enjoyed a growth rate of 12.6 percent compared to Hollywood’s 5.6 percent (NFPE, 2002).²¹ In 2011, Bollywood was estimated to have grossed 93 billion, a growth of 11.5 percent from 2010 (Shukla, 2014).²² In 2012, it produced 1,602 films compared to the 745 and 476 films made in China and America in the same year, respectively. Bollywood sold 2.6 billion tickets against the 1.36 billion sold by Hollywood in 2012 (McCarthy, 2014).²³

Hindi cinema used Gandhi’s name to sell its wares, even during the Mahatma’s lifetime and not just after his death. Such was Gandhi’s popularity in the 1930s and 1940s that many film hoardings would put life-size pictures of him over the photographs of heroes and heroines.

Several films boasted that they were a “helper to the cause of Mahatma Gandhi” and inspired by “the ideals of Mahatma Gandhi”. Even the Hollywood film *Mission to Moscow*, which Gandhi watched in 1944 in Mumbai, tried to exploit his name by sponsoring an advertisement which claimed, “Mahatma Gandhi sees the first talking picture *Mission to Moscow*” (Chowdhry, 2000).²⁴

In India, Ajanta Cinetone's *Mill (Mazdoor)* (1934), written by Munshi Prem Chand, was promoted as "the banned film" (its theme portraying the labour-capital conflict and exploitation of workers was rejected by the censors) and one which vindicated Gandhi's principles (Rangoonwala, 1975).²⁵

It was first banned then released under a new title, *Seth Ki Ladki*, and then prohibited again in March 1935 because

There is running throughout the film the idea of the conflict of capital and labour, that much of the film depicts the squandering by members of the capitalist class of money earned by labour, in contrast with the squalid conditions under which labour lives; and that it is a direct incitement to discontent in labour circles. (Vasudev, 1978)²⁶

A year later, it was released as *Daya Ki Devi* after all references to the nationalist movement had been deleted.

Wrath (1931), a film produced by the Imperial Film Company and directed by R S Chaudhary, had a character modelled after Mahatma Gandhi called Garibdas, who fought against untouchability. The Bombay censors cut out many of its scenes and renamed it *Khuda Ki Shaan*. Vinayak Damodar Karnataki's *Brandy Ki Botal* (1939) portrays demonstrations against liquor through the exhibition of the Congress flag, *charkha*, slogans emphasizing independence, and references to Gandhi and Patel. It refers to Gandhi as *Azadi ka Devta* (Angel of Freedom).

Diamond Queen, a film directed by Homi Wadia and produced under the banner of Wadia Movietone, which was censored when elections for the formation of an interim government in India were scheduled, had a poster proclaiming, "Fighting for democracy wiping out illiteracy."²⁷

During the Second World War, Indian filmmakers, inspired by the nationalistic fervour sweeping through the country, started portraying the symbols of the Congress and Mahatma Gandhi. Though more often than not these symbols had no direct relation to the story, they still evoked enthusiasm in the filmgoers.

Film producers now took to the casual introduction of Congress symbols into films. On the wall, in the background, one would see the Gandhian motif, the spinning wheel, signifying defiance of the economic pattern of the empire. In a store, there would be a calendar with Gandhi's portrait; in a home, a photograph of Nehru, on the sound track, the effect of a passing parade, with a few bars of a favourite Congress song. Often such symbols had no plot reference; but in theatres they elicited cheers. As war began, British censors ordered the scissoring of such shots. After 1942, when Gandhi was again imprisoned—along with a number of Congress leaders—

no photograph of Gandhi was allowed on screen, no matter how incidentally. (Kasbekar, 2006)²⁸

After his assassination, a good number of songs were composed to emphasize on the ideals of truth and non-violence and celebrate Gandhi's contribution to India's freedom struggle.

Mohammad Rafi gave voice to a private song, *Suno-suno ae duniya waalon Babu ki ye amar kahani* (O people of the world, lend an ear to Babu's immortal story), which told the story of Gandhi – '*De di hamme azadi bina khadag bina dhal, Sabarmati ke sant tune kar diya kamal*' (You gave us freedom without sword and shield. Sabarmati's saint you did magic). More recently, *Lage Raho Munnabhai's Bande mein tha dum...Vandematram* (The man had power...hail the motherland) was on peoples' lips for a long time.

During Gandhi's lifetime, Indian cinema did not quite have the kind of potential to shape minds it acquired a few decades later, after independence. It appears to the researcher that Mahatma Gandhi was so deified in his lifetime that no Hindi filmmaker or literary figure had the gumption to question his ideals, evaluate his life, principles and beliefs objectively, or put his relationships with his father, wife, brothers, sons, and other political contemporaries under the scanner.

This is something India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, cautioned Richard Attenborough against when the latter visited him to get approval for a biopic on Gandhi. In 1963, when Attenborough turned up in New Delhi to seek Nehru's approval for his project, the Indian prime minister's advice to him was, "Whatever you do, do not deify him – that is what we have done in India – and he was too great a man to be deified" (Attenborough, 1982).²⁹

Nehru even told Attenborough that Gandhi "had all the frailties, all the shortcomings. Give us that. That's the measure, the greatness of a man" (Crossette, 1981).³⁰

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CHAPTER II

MISSING MAHATMA IN MOVIES AND HIS RESURRECTION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By 1969, there were around a dozen Hindi films that greatly celebrated and reinforced the Gandhian principles of truth, non-violence, *Swadeshi*, the equality of religions, and untouchability (*Do Aankhen Barah Haath*, *Naya Daur* (1957), *Phir Subah Hogi* (1958), *Sujata* (1959), *Shriman Satyawadi*, *Hum Dono* (1960), *Satyakam and Sachchai* (1969)), but there had been no attempt to make an honest appraisal of Mahatma Gandhi's principles and experiments through a biopic.

The first major attempt to decipher his life through a biopic was made in 1968 when the Gandhi National Memorial Fund, in cooperation with the Films Division, produced a five-hour documentary called *Mahatma: Life of Gandhi* on the great man. The film contained animation, live photography and old prints to provide an integrated image of his life. The story itself is mostly narrated using Gandhi's own words.

There was a lull for close to a decade and a half after this. From 1960 to 1980, Hindi cinema seemed to have forgotten about the proponent of peace. Rachel Dwyer, a professor of Indian Cultures and Cinema at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in University of London, was intrigued by "the case of the missing Gandhi in Indian Cinema" (Dwyer, 2011).¹

Dwyer, who has written extensively on Hindi cinema, claims in a book *Filming the Gods: Religion and Indian Cinema* that Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* remains the only introduction for many young Indians to the "father of the nation". Apart from the documentary *Mahatma: Life of Gandhi*, she may not be factually incorrect.

It is a fact that there are only a few films about Gandhi and his role in the freedom struggle made in Indian languages. Yet, Gandhi's moral ethos served as a guide, spiritual light, source of self-identification and a strong sense of patriotism in many of the films between the 1950s and the 1980s, like *Nashtik* (1983), *Do Aankhen Barah Haath* (1957), *Naya Daur* (1957),

Mother India (1957) all set in pre-independence or post-partition period, but none of the films directly represented him (Raj, Sreekumar, 2013).²

There could be two reasons why Hindi filmmakers have kept away from Mahatma Gandhi and, to a greater extent, other icons of the First Indian War of Independence in 1857 and the country's subsequent freedom struggle.

Firstly, there is no guarantee that such films would succeed. In fact, many of the ones filmed between 1940 and 1955, including *Veeangana* (1946), *Maharani Jhansi* (1952), *Jhansi Ki Rani* (1953), and *Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh*, failed to score at the box office. The first three, directed by Nandlal Jaswantlal, Jagdish Gautam and Sohrab Modi, respectively, told the story of Jhansi queen Laxmibai while the fourth was Gautam's first attempt to put the young revolutionary Bhagat Singh on the big screen. Modi's wife Mehtab played Rani Jhansi in the film. *Jhansi Ki Rani* was released in English as *The Tiger and the Flame* after dubbing and partial editing in English.

Secondly, historical films more often than not are very expensive to produce and create controversy, something Hindi filmmakers wanted to avoid after the failure of the four above-mentioned movies and the controversy over *Jhansi Ki Rani*. Sanjit Narwekar, writer and filmmaker, says

The box-office failure of Modi's magnum opus seems to have put an end to other films on the freedom struggle. Also, Hindi filmmakers began to shy away from such films because of the inevitable controversy it (*Jhansi Ki Rani*) raised. (HCFS, Narwekar)³

Modi spared no money or effort filming his magnum opus. It was the first film shot in Technicolour in India, and Modi hired Hollywood colour consultant George Jenkins and Oscar-winning American cinematographer Ernest Haller (of *Gone with the Wind* and *The Flame of the Arrow* fame) to shoot it.

"In those days, it cost something like a crore. Even if everybody in India had seen the film, it would not have made its money back," says Mehelli Modi, the director's son, who runs the Second Run DVD label for arthouse films in London (Ramnath, 2019).⁴ The film's failure proved to be a major financial disaster for Sohrab Modi and his Minerva Movietone. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru obliquely pointed towards this in his statement in Rajya Sabha in December 1963.

The production of a film on the life of Gandhiji was too difficult a proposition for a Government department to take up. The Government was

not fit to do this and they had not got competent people to do it. (Tripathi, 2015)⁵

This was also the year when *Nine Hours to Rama*, a British film based on Stanley Wolpert's book by the same name, a fictional account of the nine hours before Gandhi's assassination, was released. The narrative spans nine hours in the life of Mahatma's killer, Nathuram Godse.

In 1982, Richard Attenborough finally completed his dream project, a film on Gandhi. The biographical film won eight Oscars, including best director for Attenborough and best actor for Ben Kingsley, alias Krishna Bhanji, a man born to an Indian doctor and an English model, who portrayed the character of Gandhi. Kingsley's ancestors reportedly lived in the same village where Gandhi was born.

It was only in the 1990s that Indian filmmakers really started exploring the legacy Mahatma Gandhi left behind. A half decade (2000–2005) produced over half a dozen commercial movies, beginning with Kamal Hasan's *Hey Ram!* in 2000.

It was after the 1990s that a strong appearance of Gandhi and his ideologies began to excel in commercial movies like *Lagaan: Once upon a time in India* (2001), *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), *Swades: We the People* (2004), *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara* (2005) and the most popular of all, *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (2006). These were the daring attempts of film-makers to capture the philosophies rather than the biased biographies of martyrs. (Raj, Sreekumar, 2013)⁶

It would not be wrong to say that that the last two decades and a half have been the most prolific when it comes to Hindi cinema referring to Gandhian ideals directly or indirectly, including *Lord Mountbatten* (1986), *Sardar: The Iron Man of India* (1993), *Jinnah* (1998), *Babasaheb Ambedkar* (2000), *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara* (2005).

Lage Raho Munnabhai (2006), in particular, re-established the morals Mahatma Gandhi practiced and prescribed during his lifetime. The sequel of *Munnabhai MBBS*, which ironically had nothing in common with the original except for Sanjay Dutt and Arshad Warshi and Mumbai's tapori language, set the trend for "gandhigiri", a new style of Gandhian protests across the country. According to newspaper reports, the film caused an increase in the sale of books on Gandhi, and several schools organized group screenings (Zeeshan, 2006 in Paranjape, 2105).⁷

The resounding success of the film forced many other filmmakers from the world of fantasy to commence making movies on the Mahatma. Film critics took note of this and called Gandhi the flavour of the season in

Bollywood after the release of the LRM and other films on the father of the Indian nation.

Guess who's the flavour of the season in Bollywood right now? No, it's not the scrumptious King Khan, nor is it AB's beautiful Baby. The man who's got several film makers firmly in his thrall is none other than a thin, *dhoti*-clad, a freedom fighter who was shot dead more than 50 years ago. Yes, it's Mahatma Gandhi we're talking about, a national icon who is often regarded as someone who's been largely forgotten by the young today... Suddenly, a clutch of films is being made on Gandhi, films that look at the man and his ideals from different standpoints. One was released last year and at least four more are in the works... That makes for a veritable outpouring of films on the father of the nation. (Ramachandran, 2006)⁸

Another film critic wrote over a year later on the release of *Gandhi, My Father*,

When Richard Attenborough made Gandhi many years ago, no one would have thought of Gandhi as a good bet for success in Bollywood. But times have changed and so have the average Indian filmmaker's perceptions about Indian history. Gandhi seems to be omnipresent in many Indian films in terms of ideology, metaphor, and essence if not in terms of physical presence. (Chatterji, 2007)⁹

About two months after the release of LRM, when Union Health Minister A Ramadoss paid a visit to AIIMS in New Delhi to inquire about dengue patients, resident doctors welcomed him with flower bouquets and Get Well Soon cards. The doctors alleged that the health minister ignored the premier institute and was too busy settling a personal score with AIIMS director, P Venugopal (Ruhani, October 26).¹⁰

About a fortnight before this, over a thousand farmers in Patanbori (Yavatmal district in Vidarbha) resorted to Gandhigiri by garlanding and washing the feet of a State Bank of India branch manager who refused to extend fresh loans to them to buy seed and fertilizers in the sowing season (Maitra, 2006).¹¹

The film spawned at least a couple of websites on Gandhigiri – www.gandhigiri.org and www.gandhigiri.co.in – and inspired many Indian and foreign writers to analyse the term.

The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond, a book by Martin Webb and Kathryn Spellman-Poots in 2014, states that the first website sanctified the interchangeability of the term dadagiri with Gandhigiri in 2013 after the Supreme Court sentenced Sanjay Dutt to jail for receiving illegal weapons from an underworld don.

The website www.gandhigiri.org subsequently sanctified the interchangeability of dadagiri and Gandhigiri, noting that Sanjay Dutt, the film star, following his conviction for the possession of semi-automatic weapons, would be housed in the very same jail (Yerwada in Pune) that Gandhi had formerly occupied. (p. 87)¹²

The book argues that LRM “brilliantly demolishes the empty ‘statist’ Gandhi” when Munna advises the removal of Gandhi’s statues and his name plates from roads and buildings and instead the internalization of his teachings in response to a question from an inmate of the Second Innings home.

Even around 13 years after its release, the runaway success of the LRM continues to spawn Gandhigiri protests across India.

In December 2015, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal asked his party volunteers to give roses to violators of phase I of his “odd-even” scheme for the Delhi roads (Angre, 2015). Subsequently, in April this year, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the main opposition party in the national capital, decided to replicate Kejriwal’s idea to protest against the second phase of the odd-even scheme. The district administration in Mathura recently used the idea to name and shame people who defecate in open in the holy city (HT, 2016).¹³

Suddenly, every move by Mahatma Gandhi – his life, ideals, practices, principles and beliefs, espousal of truth, sexual oddities, and celibacy – is being dissected, debated and decoded in the worlds of politics, spirituality and literature. His legacy of non-violence and civil disobedience is being celebrated all around the world. His birthday – October 2nd – is commemorated as *Gandhi Jayanti* in India while worldwide it is observed as the International Day of Non-Violence.

Rai was surprised by the omnipresence of Gandhi in Hindi cinema at the beginning of the 21st century.

It does not explicate why has there been an intensified reception to Gandhi in the realm of popular Hindi cinema. In other words, despite Gandhi’s disdain, popular Hindi cinema has become a significant assimilatory space. (Rai, 2011)¹⁴

Endnotes

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<http://publicculture.dukejournals.org/content/23/2/349.abstract>
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CHAPTER III

COMPARATIVE STUDY: GANDHI, THE PROTAGONIST

Gandhi opens with the assassination scene and then travels back to Pietermaritzburg railway station in the capital of KwaZulu-Natal where Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi came face to face with the colour prejudice legalized and promoted by the British empire in its colonies for first time.

The voiceover by Edward R Murrow, an American broadcaster, makes it apparent that the film is dealing with a man “who made humility and simple truth more powerful than empires”, about whom scientist Albert Einstein said

Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.

The over three-hour-long movie makes it clear in its very first scene that it is going to tell the story of the extraordinary man who led India’s struggle for independence from English rule. It is the story of a man who refused to budge from his principles of truth, non-violence, equality of religion, untouchability, and *Swadeshi*. Its opening statement

No man’s life can be encompassed in one telling. There is no way to give each year its allotted weight, to include each event, each person who helped to shape a lifetime. What can be done is to be faithful in spirit to the record and try to find one’s way to the heart of the man¹

conveys director Richard Attenborough’s profound respect for the father of the Indian nation.

In its first few minutes it puts Mahatma Gandhi on a pedestal, and then goes on to reinforce his position through his dialogues with English priest Charlie Andrews and other Europeans who came in contact with him during different stages of his life. The scene where Judge Broomfield, in whose court in Ahmedabad Gandhi is tried for sedition, rises from his chair respectfully when the Mahatma enters the courtroom and then expresses hope that his sentence will be curtailed bolsters that image.

Gandhi stresses non-violence when he restrains Father Charlie from reacting to abuse heaped on them by white boys in a street by asking him, “Doesn’t the New Testament say if your enemy strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the left?” It is further underlined when Gandhi tells Tyebe Mohammed, an Indian in South Africa, that “I too am prepared to die ... But, my friend, there is no cause for which I am prepared to kill”. Gandhi’s statement “An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind” ends the debate.

Mahatma Gandhi’s belief in truth was unshakeable. This is fortified in the film when the “little brown man” tells American journalist Walker, “If you are a minority of one, the truth is the truth” after the latter reminds him that he is a very small minority to take on the Government – and the empire. Gandhi also confesses to Mirabehn (Madeline Slade, daughter of an English admiral) in the second half that “when I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won”.

The film has numerous scenes where Gandhi is heard emphasizing Hindu-Muslim unity. The protagonist even tells Walker how a priest in his town would read from the Hindu Gita and the Muslim Quran, moving from one to the other as though it mattered not at all which book was read as long as God was worshipped. He tries to convince Mohammad Ali Jinnah against seeking the partition of India by reminding him that the Muslim and Hindu are the right and left eyes of India. “No one will be slave, no one master”, he declares.

The film makes a statement against untouchability as well when Gandhi insists Kasturba, his wife, must rake and cover the latrine, saying, “In this place there are no untouchables – and no work is beneath any of us!” In another speech, Gandhi exhorts, “There must be Hindu-Muslim unity – always. Secondly, no Indian must be treated as the English treat us so we must remove untouchability from our lives, and from our hearts”.

Kasturba also partakes in her husband’s fight against foreign clothes.

When Gandhiji and I were growing up, women wove their own cloth. But now there are millions who have no work because those who can buy all they need from England. I say with Gandhiji, there is no beauty in the finest cloth if it makes hunger and unhappiness,

she says, which followed by her husband’s assertion, “English factories make the cloth – that makes our poverty”.

The best thing about Attenborough’s film is that it expresses Gandhi’s ideals without beating around the bush, in a style which is direct and plain. Gandhi did not bother much about reactions as long as he spoke the truth.