

**GENDER AND CASTE: GANDHIAN CONNOTATIONS IN
*MOTHER INDIA AND SUJATA***

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Abstract

This paper attempts to scrutinize the Gandhian overtones, idiomatically subsistent within the early post-independence Bombay Cinema, through a reading of two representational classics - Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957) and Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959), vis-à-vis the prisms of gender and caste respectively. Though, Gandhi had been denied the explicit representation in the Bombay Cinema during the early decades following independence, the probable reason being the enchantment of the left-oriented filmmakers with Nehru's socialist model of development¹, Gandhian currencies of gender and caste registered throughout within the nationalist imaginary, also had had an idiomatic sustenance within the popular cinematic imagination.

Keywords: Nation Building, Swadeshi, Purity, Chastity, Untouchability.

I

Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957) narrates the tale of an unfortunate Radha (Nargis), who is faced with the challenge of defending her honor and virtuosity against several odds – flood, famine, and the lecherous landlord, Sukhilal. Radha, the peasant woman, has to undergo several crises articulated in the form of dilemmas – her choice between being an ideal spouse (respecting the 'suhaag' by refusing the advances of Sukhilal), and a dedicated mother (bound to feed her children); and later between being a loving mother (trying to protect her son, unconditionally), and a loyal village woman (defending the honor of the community soiled by Birjoo's kidnapping of a community girl). On the surface, the film illustrates a Nehruvian model of nation-building as the defeat of the feudal lord, Sukhilal, and his tyranny becomes an allegory of the "triumphant emergence of a new India from both feudal and colonial oppression" (Thomas 253). One of the final sequences depicting the tableau of power stations, dams and bridges, and Radha, the old peasant woman being asked to inaugurate the irrigation project highlights the nation-building agenda on the Nehruvian lines. However, the Gandhian currency vibrates across some of the major thematic concerns of *Mother India*, such as the concept of *bhakti* (salvation through selfless dedication), and the notion of potent femininity challenging the two sets of male

¹ Refer to my paper "Bharat Nirman and the Aestheticization of Politics". *postScriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies* Vol.3.2, 2018.

behavior as represented by the son and the villain. The Gandhian imagery posits the feminine, non-violent, and spiritual energy, as stronger, than the masculine and violent physical strength. *Mother India* upholds this by explicitly denying the essential role played by Birjoo in the violent killing of Sukhilal, and the conscious sacrifice he made of his own life. Though Birjoo's potency is denied, Radha's virtuosity is celebrated. Birjoo is destroyed while Radha and her law-abiding son Ramu are saved.

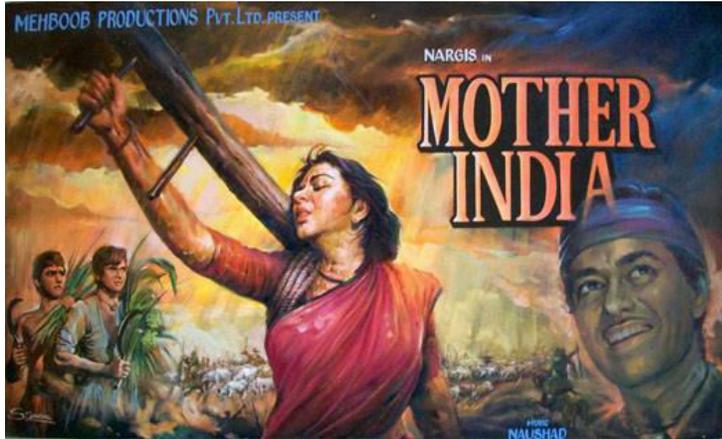


Fig. 1. A publicity poster for *Mother*

India, 1957. The film though structured on Nehruvian lines, thematically connotes the Gandhian ideas. Gandhi saw “psychological fear” inflicted by the cultural institutions as one of the basic reasons for the female oppression. Gandhi argued that if women want to be free, they had to be ‘fearless’. He suggested that “bravery and courage were not the monopoly of men”. However, for Gandhi, the strength of woman was her ‘purity’ and ‘chastity’, not the physical valor, so a woman must strive hard to defend her ‘chastity’, which is the core of her virtue. Thus in a way Gandhi, in line with the “age-old patriarchal bias”, equated rape with the loss of woman’s virtue. (Kishwar 1691). Gandhi stressed the moral and spiritual courage of women vis-à-vis men’s physical strength in order to assert the superiority of women’s self-suffering. He suggested that women must develop the courage to say ‘no’ even to their husbands for their sexual gratification. Women have the right over their bodies even after marriage. Ironically, it hints at Gandhi’s idea “of a noble woman as a sexless being and legitimate sex as only that which is meant for the purpose of procreation” (Kishwar 1692).

Unlike the nineteenth century reformers who saw women as passive subjects in need of “enlightened male effort” for their amelioration, Gandhi saw women as ‘self-conscious subjects’, “could become arbiters of their own destiny”, and might as well play an active role for the progress of other marginalized groups (Kishwar 1691). Gandhi knew from his discord with Kasturba on accepting the untouchables, residing within the ashram as family members, that much could not be done for the amelioration of the oppressed groups without the support of womenfolk, as domesticity is more a woman’s sphere. Thus he argued for the crucial role of women in the removal of untouchability, and equated it with motherly devotion. Gandhi, very tacitly co-opted women for the cause of ‘swadeshi’. He was well aware that men have “no control over children” (it again being a “women’s sphere”), so it would be better to fire women with the spirit of ‘swadeshi’. In order to rally the whole family towards ‘swadeshi,’ women’s active participation was essential. For Gandhi, non-violence was a more superior weapon which

“could put the mightiest weapons to shame”. He saw the entry of women into the movement “as a life preserving and humanizing force which would prevent the movement from getting dissipated by senseless and self-destructive violence”. Gandhi’s aim was not only to gain independence, rather more significantly, to construct a society free of “coercion and violence” (Kishwar 1695). This Gandhian imagery of constructing a nation free of coercion has been connoted in Radha’s triumph against Birjoo and Sukhilal.

II

In Bimal Roy’s *Sujata* (1959), the protagonist Sujata (Nutan) is an untouchable girl adopted, and brought up by a middle-class, upper caste Brahmin couple. She is a constant victim of bias and neglect by family, friends and relatives. As the years pass, a distant aunt arranges a match for the couple’s daughter Rama (Shashikala) with Adhir (Sunil Dutt), her grandson. However, Adhir falls in love with Sujata. After a series of trials and tribulations, it is proved that all humans are alike, irrespective of the class or caste differences and the untouchable Sujata gets wedded to the Brahmin boy.

In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi valorized the Indian villages as the microcosm of ancient Indian culture. The presence of untouchability worked as an obstacle in his agenda to revive the ancient culture or the valorization of village. Gandhi, therefore, brought the matter of caste to the nationalist or the Congress agenda. He condemned “untouchability as impurity”, and argued that it obstructs national integrity and the struggle for independence (Coward 44). Gandhi, as a benefactor of the ‘untouchables’ and a pedagogue in matters of caste oppression, has been persistently evoked within the film. Ironically enough, Ambedkar, the first Dalit leader of the nation who strived hard for the legal and economic emancipation of the untouchables, is not even mentioned within the narrative of the film. Two sequences within the film deserve to be highlighted:

1. On being grown up, when Sujata’s foster-mother relates to her that she is an untouchable, and hence a burden on family’s name and honor, Sujata decides to commit suicide. Utterly disheartened, she moves toward the Bapu Ghat on the banks of the river Ganga where a huge wooden carving, depicting events from Gandhi’s political life, stands. As Sujata, aligned against the wall, cogitates, the camera slowly lingers upon the wooden portfolio. Suddenly, a heavy downpour takes place, and as Sujata is on the verge of ending her life by jumping into the river, her sari gets struck in a box placed immediately below the portfolio revealing Gandhi’s words, “*Mare kaise? Atmahatya karke? Kabhi nahi, avasakta ho to zinda rehne ke liye mare*”. After reading Gandhi’s words, Sujata turns back, and the camera is focused on the carving with a close shot of Gandhi. While the rain drops fall on the carving, mediating through Gandhi’s eyes, it seems as if Gandhi himself is crying at the sorry state of affairs and the continued practice of caste oppression, and hierarchy within the nation, almost, a decade after gaining political independence.
2. On the night when Adhir, relates the story of Chandalika to Sujata – a tribal low-caste girl whose self-pride was restored through the philosophical wisdom of Bhikshu Anand, Lord Buddha’s disciple, Sujata retorts back by suggesting that such incidents are matters of the past, and in modern times, the ‘purity-pollution’ norms are strictly observed. Then Adhir illustrates the case of Gandhi, and his struggle to fight against such norms. As

Adhir speaks, the camera lingers upon the same portfolio along with the background musical tune of “Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram”.



Fig. 2. Sujata aligns against the portfolio of Gandhi, and cogitates. *Sujata*, 1959.



Fig. 3. Sujata reads the quote from Gandhi, looks at his figure and drops the idea of suicide. *Sujata*, 1959.

Initially, Gandhi and Ambedkar were appreciative of each other and mutually supported the activism of the other for the untouchables' cause (Vaikam Satyagraha, 1924 and Mahad Satyagraha, 1927). However, the discord between the two was ignited by the First Round Table Conference, 1930, when Ambedkar put forward his demand for the separate electorates for the untouchables. Gandhi had sensed that the political division between the Touchables and the Untouchables would “result in increasing violence and discrimination by the Touchables on the Untouchables” (Coward 50). Ambedkar realized that the Congress approach towards the caste issue was highly paternalistic, and the gulf widened between him and Gandhi. Despite his defiance of caste taboos and the stigma of untouchability, Gandhi was unable to envision any agency for the untouchables. Gandhi asked untouchables to stay passive and adopt hygiene in personal habits, while he persuaded the caste Hindus to alter their evil and sinful ways. Though Gandhi was highly critical of the practice of untouchability within the Hindu religion, he was never apologetic about caste formulation, and its visceral links with Hinduism. Even when Gandhi was critical about caste, he was proud to be a Hindu. Unlike Ambedkar, who sought to annihilate the caste division as the greatest peril of Hindu society from the socio-political and economic dimensions, Gandhi focused only on the religious dimension of caste and tried to defend it on the organic notion of Sanatani Hinduism (Coward 54). He never realized that the untouchables should have an agency to speak for themselves. Discourse of rights was alien to Gandhi. He looked forward to ‘spiritual democracy’, and not ‘the material egalitarianism’.

However, Gandhi was the pioneer in bringing untouchability into the domain of public discourse. Despite the sharp, polemical attack on caste hierarchy practiced within the Hindu fold, the film fails to recognize the possibility of the self-determination of an untouchable girl, Sujata. The ‘form’ of Bimal Roy’s film reverts back to Gandhi’s introspections on caste matters, and unfortunately imbibes its limitations.

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