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Bharat Nirman and the Aestheticization of Politics

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Abstract

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), popularly addressed as Mahatma strove hard to blur out the dialectics of the 'personal' (private) and the 'political' (public). Tridip Suhrud in *Rediscovering Gandhi* has argued that a divide between the 'political' and the 'spiritual' has been the hallmark of the entire academic scrutiny on Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. However, the 'personal' and the 'political' nuances of Gandhi have not been acknowledged within the Bombay Filmdom until the late 1990s. Gandhi was accorded a saintly status after independence and it became a formidable task to animate him on to the celluloid screen. Contrary to this, there has been an instantaneous enticement towards Gandhi in the 'multiplex era' which simultaneously coincides with the leadership of United Progressive Alliance and its endorsement of 'Bharat-Nirman' agenda. This paper will attempt to examine the ideologies behind the recent hype on Gandhi both as a 'subject' and 'pedagogue' in Bombay Cinema, and the possible nexus between mainstream politics and the cinematic imagination. More specifically, by carrying out a socio-political study of a set of select films, this paper would assert that an attempt has been made through the celluloid to aestheticize Gandhi which not only obliterate the ground realities of the Indian socio-democratic structure, rather more significantly do a disservice to Gandhi himself who was in favor of maintaining a 'dialogical' attitude towards the 'self' as well as with the 'others'.

Keywords

UPA, nation-building, democracy, multiplexes, dialogic

I

There has been no ‘open’ acknowledgement of Gandhi, the politico-historic persona and the national pedagogue within the Bombay cinema, until the onset of the liberal economic policy and the escalation of the Hindu-right in the 1990s.¹ The pioneer film-makers, lyricists, and screen-writers of Bombay cinema were either IPTA (Indian People’s Theatre Association) or PWA (Progressive Writers’ Association) activists or associates who were sharply critical of Gandhi and his politics and were much more fascinated with Nehru’s spectacular industrial modernism and his secular nation-building agenda.² Despite churning out a large number of child-centric, patriotic, and nationalist films in the fifties, the left-oriented film-makers completely elided Gandhi. Eulogy such as, “*Dey di hummey azadi bina khadag bina dhal, Sabarmati ke sant tune kar diya kamal...*” (*Jagruti*, Satyen Bose, 1954) delimited Gandhi. The song penned by Kavi Pradeep talked about Gandhi’s contribution towards the political independence of the nation, and his proficiency to inculcate the masses within the mainstream nationalist movement. However, the subtle nuances of Gandhi – both the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ remained by and large absent.

The Gandhi-Nehru discord and Nehru’s prioritization of the urban modernity might be looked down upon as one of the probable reasons behind the explicit denial of Gandhi, while paradoxically creating grounds for the wide idiomatic presence of the Gandhian currency within the Bombay filmworld.³ Despite several differences, Gandhi and Nehru worked as allies on the political front in order to set up an ideological challenge against the western colonial modernity. As Gyan Prakash has suggested, Nehru’s model of ‘state-centred’ development and industrialization tried to keep hold of indigenous traditions and culture of the nation. Within his planned urban growth Nehru tried to infuse the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘ethical’ dimensions of Gandhi. The pioneer film-makers were highly influenced by the Nehruvian model and prioritized the ‘urban’ while acknowledging its ‘rural’ other. However, the prioritization of the ‘urban’ relegated the Gandhian worldview, nearly for four decades.

¹ Shyam Benegal’s *The Making of the Mahatma* (1996), Mani Ratnam’s *Bombay* (1995), and Kamal Hassan’s *Hey Ram* (2000) resonated, Gandhi.

² The ideologies of the popular front and its role within the communist movements not always shared a one-to-one correspondence with Nehru’s socialist agenda. Complexities were immense, especially after the P. C. Joshi-Ranadive debate. For a better understanding refer to Sudhi Pradhan’s *The Marxist Cultural Movements in India* Vol. 1, 2, and 3.

³ Ravi Vasudevan in *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema*, 2010 has suggested that Raj Kapoor’s films such as *Awara* (1951), *Shree 420* (1956), and *Chhalia* (1960) expose the ‘urban’ as a site of evil and corruption to which the popular tramp-figure, a naïve simpleton, falls prey, and after a series of events contributes to the social reform on the Gandhian paradigms of ‘faith’ and ‘tolerance’.

An angelic status was bestowed on Gandhi immediately after the independence and it became a formidable task to write and depict him. The problematic facts about Gandhi have been forgotten by the nation. The best writings about Gandhi including the ones by him are in Gujarati. Even the original Gujarati version of his autobiography is more open about the sexual subject vis-à-vis the sanitized English version by Mahadev Desai. The dearth of Gandhi's 'open' presence onto the celluloid during the early decades of the post-independence could also be ascribed to this sanitization of the Mahatma. In the post-liberalized multiplex-era, there has been an instant inducement towards Gandhi and his ideologies, especially during the last decade which roughly coincides with the United Progressive Alliance's (UPA) leadership and its 'Bharat-Nirman' agenda.

II

The coalitional government of the United Progressive Alliance was formed on 22nd May, 2004 with the Congress as its 'national' hub. The Hindutva politics of the Bhartiya Janta Party was replaced by the secular force of the Congress in 2004. UPA evolved a system of 'National Common Minimum Programme' in order to develop a consensus across its fourteen coalitional groups. Again in the Lok Sabha elections of 2009, UPA occupied the seat of governance. However, the ten years of UPA's governance (2004-14) have been extremely paradoxical. On the one hand, Congress tried to pose for itself a Gandhian legacy, while on the other side its governance and the council of ministers have been persistently suspected for bureaucratic corruption, accumulation of Black Money, and the failure of the party in its socio-political agendas. Although, the UPA chief Mrs. Sonia Gandhi declined the office of the Prime Minister and appointed Dr. Manmohan Singh as the Prime Minister for both the tenure of UPA-I and UPA-II, she constituted a 'National Advisory Council' presiding over it as the chairman. This subjected her to the allegation that UPA has harnessed the 'dual centers of power'. The parliamentary system only permits the 'Council of Ministers' to hold the 'executive powers', whereas Mrs. Sonia Gandhi has created an "extra constitutional center of power". Moreover, it has been alleged that despite the external support of the Communist parties the foreign and the economic policies of UPA are completely flawed, as they are pro American, and cater to the good of the entrepreneurs.

The other side of the picture recommends that the UPA government with Congress as its centre posed a legacy of the Gandhian spirituality and the Nehruvian socialism for its developmental agendas and political programmes. One may recall here, the television advertisement for the 'Bharat Nirman' project during the campaign for the 2014 Lok Sabha

elections that advocated for an ideal national development on the grounds of Gandhi-Nehru principles, as undertaken during the tenure of UPA-I and UPA-II. The 'Bharat Nirman' project was implemented by the UPA government in 2005 to release the masses from the widespread poverty. 'Bharat Nirman' along with its other flagship programmes focused on the improvement of social infrastructure as its nonexistence was looked down upon as the root cause for the rural poverty. The project especially paid attention on the up gradation of the rural infrastructure involving, but not limited, to housing, telecommunications, irrigation, water supply, roads, and electrification. Its flagship programmes such as 'National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme' (NREGP), 'National Rural Health Mission' (NRHM), 'Sarva Siksha Abhiyan' (SSA), and several others were oriented towards the rural development, and the eradication of poverty in the rural parts of the nation.

Indian democracy has been shaped by the Congress party. Soon after the independence, the Congress as a political party adopted many of the administrative and the political tools of the British, such as, those of vote-gathering, ensuring sound socio-political and economic administration, bargaining in rural areas, and adopting a patronizing attitude towards the subaltern groups and the downtrodden. As Achin Vanaik has suggested, "The story of Indian democracy, of its travails, its strengths and weakness is therefore also in large measure the story of the Congress's post-independence evolution of its strengths and weaknesses, its rise and decline, its changing character" (Vanaik 347).

This particular decade of UPA's governance coincides with the persistent churning out of a large number of films on Gandhi. On the one hand, there are films in which Gandhi emerges as a politico-historic subject, while in others as a national icon and pedagogue, and some overlap both. The recent hype for Gandhi within the Bombay filmworld is an indication of the probable nexus between the mainstream politics and the cinematic imagination. The organization of a march in 2005 to mark the completion of the seventy five years of Gandhi's 'Salt Satyagraha', and Rahul Gandhi's participation within the march (alongside Gandhi's great grandson, Tushar Gandhi), the 2008 Reserve Bank of India's decision to launch a five rupee coin to commemorate the platinum jubilee of 'Dandi March', and the exemption of the entertainment tax for *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (2006), by the then chief minister of Delhi, Mrs. Shiela Dixit are some of the instances that can be calculated as UPA's pretence for the Gandhian legacy. The UPA government sustained a liberal attitude on the churning out of a large number of films on Gandhi, regardless, of some revealing the complex aspects and the flipside of Gandhi, as they enhanced, the Congress's political project of fabricating the

secularism and the national integrity, and winning over the masses through sentimentalizing, the Gandhian ideologies and principles.⁴



Fig. 1. Congress president Sonia Gandhi participating in the commemoration of the 75 years of Mahatma Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha. *Frontline*, April 23 – May 6 2005.

III

Jahnu Barua's *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara* (2005), on the surface narrates the story of a man's sickness and a daughter's commitment, to find the cure for her father's disease. The daughter, ultimately finds the cure through the help of a psychiatrist who attempts to divulge the demented world of the father, and enable him to confront his illusionary guilt, that of killing Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation. The film attempts to juxtapose the two entirely disjoint events. First, that of a middle class household located in the metropolis of Mumbai, striving hard to realize and accept that the family head, Prof. Uttam Chaudhary (Anupam Kher), a retired Hindi professor is now affected with a psychological disorder, dementia, and second the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Prof. Uttam Chaudhary's illness and the diagnostic measure applied on to him, help reverberate and evoke Gandhi. Through the protagonist's trajectory within the film, several issues are forced to permeate into the spectator's consciousness, and raise serious question, as to our failure, to adequately implement and emulate Gandhi's ideas, principles, and practices. Professor's persistent and

⁴ Due to the constrain of space and for better accomplishment of my hypothesis, I have studied here only three feature films - *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara*, *Gandhi my father* and *Lage Raho Munnabhai*. However, *Road to Sangam* and *Gandhi to Hitler* are the other two major Gandhian films of the period, worthy of analysis.

infuriated abjuration that he has not killed Gandhi, “*Maine Gandhi ji ko nahi mara*” is ultimately turned into a decree, where he accuses all the Indian citizens for killing Gandhi, each and every day, “... *Gandhi ji ko... hum sab ne mara hain... jis khoon ke liye main jail me kaid hoon woh hum sab karte hain, rooz karte hain*”. Towards the denouement, Professor, bemoan the loss of the ‘real’ Gandhi within the human hearts, “...*ab main logon ke dillon mein nahi rahata, baki sab jagah rahata hoon, rajnitik partiyon ke offico mein, sarkari daftaro mein, adalton mein, yahan tak ki, is desh ne mujhe, sikko aur noto par bhi, chaap rakha hai, sab jagah hoon, lekin, logon ke diloon me nahi hoon, kyunki tumhari aaj ki duniya mein, jis ke dil mein Gandhi hai, ussey, sabko khatra hain...*”. The dialogue echoes Tridip Suhrud’s arguments and qualms, regarding, as to which Gandhi do we need to emulate, whether the ‘iconic’ or the ‘mythic’ one. Paradoxically, the narrative of the film, falls short, to explain that we require a ‘dialogic’ Gandhi, “tentative, prone to self-doubt, experimental and still assured of his faith. Both ‘*Vaishnava jana to*’ and the ‘*Sermon on the Mount*’ moved this Gandhi equally. He experimented with fasting and feasting, with walking, with prayer and silence” (Suhrud). His dialogue was “manifold, with the self, with the traditions that he had inherited and invented, with the community of co-workers and co-inhabitants, and with those he opposed but wished to redeem” (Suhrud). This dialogue can only be harnessed by an awareness of the self. Only, by knowing oneself, one can be truthful and fearless, and gain ‘*swaraj*’ - control over the self, and retain the capacity to admit the essential humanity of others.



Fig. 2. Prof. Uttam Chaudhary’s dementia bemoans the loss of Gandhi, *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Maara*, 2005.

This ‘aestheticization of politics’ again finds the fertile ground in Feroz Abbas Khan’s *Gandhi my father* (2007). Although, the narrative of the film is woven around Gandhi’s strained relationship with his eldest son, Harilal Gandhi, and the film critically expose the flip side of Gandhi, the promotional strategies for the film attempts to mythologize Gandhi. For instance, one of the DVD covers for the film by the Eros Multimedia Private Limited put up the slogan, “*To the People... he was a Father. To his son... he was a Father he never had*”, only on the inner flap, while the outer surface reads, “*One family’s tragedy was the price of a nation’s freedom*”, occupying a safer side to avoid the censors, and perhaps to gratify those inhabiting the seat of the legislature.

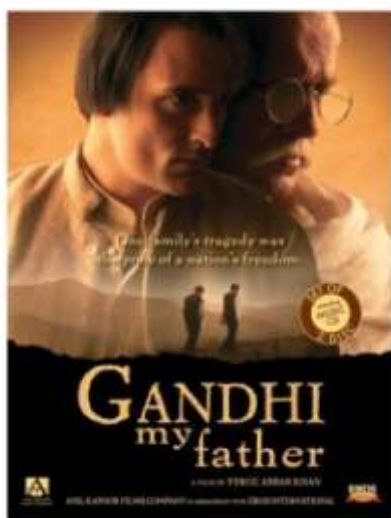


Fig. 3. The outer flap of the DVD Cover for *Gandhi my father*, 2007, Eros Multimedia Pvt. Limited.

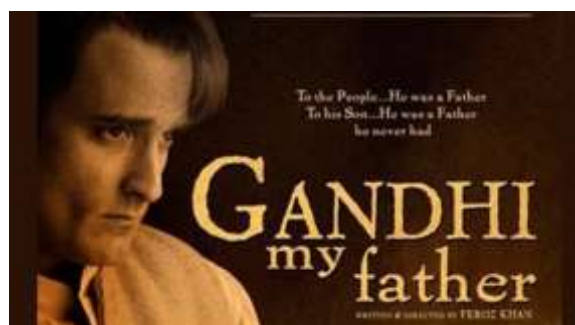


Fig. 4. The inner flap of the DVD Cover for *Gandhi my father*, 2007, Eros Multimedia Pvt. Limited.

The narrative unfolds in a flashback where we find Harilal (Akshay Khanna) moving away apart from his father, Gandhi (Darshan Jariwala) after his rejection to send Harilal on a scholarship to study law in England. Harilal adapts a path completely against the idealistic principles of his father. Harilal in order to seek out an instant road to success cheats the moneylenders under his father’s virtuous name, visit brothels, gets converted to Islam, and is finally doomed. He dies all alone in a municipality hospital in Bombay in wretched conditions, just five months after the death of his father in June 1948. Within the film, the character of Gandhi accepts his inability to understand Harilal, and blames himself for generating the distance that estranged the two. Chandulal Bhagubhai Dalal’s text, *Harilal Gandhi: A Life* has depicted much candidly Gandhi’s personal life. Dalal has traced how

Gandhi's guilt about his sexual desires and a sense of loss to miss his father during his last moments, resulted in his later neglect of his eldest child, Harilal. While Gandhi lavished affections on his cousins, he neglected Harilal, as he "resented his first born as a reminder of his lustful ways" (Desai 50).

Mahatma strove hard to blur out the dialectics of the 'personal' and the 'political'. His whole life was an attempt and an experiment to de-stabilize the binaries, amidst the personal, the social, and the political. He posited his own daily activities and political ventures as symptomatic emblems to be emulated by the others, be it the case of women emancipation or the cause of the untouchables. In his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi himself admitted that after the years 1927-28, his life (personal) has been so public (political) that no attempt was required to incite it. Gandhi portrayed 'self-purification' as a symbol for a society carving for change and trying to hold grips with the modern world. Gandhi took upon himself as a vanguard, to reform Hinduism and liberate the nation. 'Self-purification' in order to be taken at a mass level had to get public, to be articulated within the political realm. His social reform was just "another mode of doing politics" (Nigam 42). Gandhi always staged an 'ontological drama' in order to ensure the wider participation of the masses into the mainstream nationalist movement, and it subsequently accorded him the status of a 'quasi-charismatic' leader and mentor.

An attention-grabbing feature of the Bombay Cinema of the contemporary period is that, its highly technocratic experiments, and the amplified commercialism, mediating through the multiplexes has also created grounds for the formidable subjects such as Gandhi, to be appropriated and explored by the mainstream film-makers. Yash Raj Banners sponsoring *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Maara*, a popular star of Bombay Cinema, Anil Kapoor, producing and financing *Gandhi my father*, and the avowal of a large number of media and brand partners before the titles in *Lage Raho Munnabhai*, are some gestures of the ongoing transformations within the sociology of the Bombay Cinema. One of the prominent contemporary film-makers states, "Films are now either being made for masses and classes, or only for the classes. Films were earlier made for either the masses or the classes, or if your subject did not go that way then you would say, let's stick with the masses, but now it's gone the other way around" (qtd. in Ganti, 315). Film-maker, Tarun Kumar here highlights that the multiplex-era sideline the proletariat audience and focus on the new middle-classes and the intelligentsia who now frequent the cinema-halls in large numbers.

In Rajkumar Hirani's *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (2006), Munnabhai (Sanjay Dutt) is a Mumbai based criminal don who along with his friend, Circuit (Arshad Warsi) also works for

the real estate agent, Lucky Singh (Boman Irani) in the illegal acquisition and the sale of properties. Munna completely unaware about Mahatma Gandhi in order to win over Jhanvi (Vidya Balan), a female radio jockey pretends to be a Gandhian working as a History Professor in a college. Later, Jhanvi's unpredictable demands compel him to study the works of Gandhi in a public library. He falls under the hallucination that Gandhi visits him, and helps and supports him while in distress. After a series of events he resolves to get back the bungalow, an orphanage, for the old people occupied by his boss, Lucky Singh. He launches a fight against Lucky Singh almost on the Gandhian ideals and principles and ultimately succeeds. Gandhi is appropriated by Munna within the 'tapori' world and fresh meanings and connotations are applied to Gandhi. Gandhi reverberates across the narrative, the structure, and the thematic of the film. The need to reinvent and resuscitate Gandhi is the major pre-occupation of the film. The Gandhian gestures of offering another face on being slapped on one, offering roses to one's adversary, speaking truth without fear, being gentle to the lowest, and humiliating one's adversary to persuade and reconcile him for the common good are the attempts to re-appropriate Gandhi.



Fig. 5. Munna, the 'tapori' reads Gandhi. *Lage Raho Munnabhai*, 2007.

Gandhi tried to resolve a fundamental contradiction between the hypotheses and the performance of 'liberal' democracy, i.e. "affirmation of the freedom of the individual in the so-called private sphere of morality" and its "curtailment in the allegedly amoral or purely technical public or political sphere" (Pantham 166). Gandhi tried to bridge this gap through the notion of 'satyagraha', by integrating morality with politics, so to speak. 'Liberal' democracy holds that man is a selfish and brutish being and cannot ensure social order without the aid of political machinery. Gandhi held hope in "man's potential for rationality and goodness" (Pantham 176), that can restore order in society. Gandhi distinguished his optimism from the western pessimism, socialism and communism of the West are based on

certain conceptions which are fundamentally different from ours. One such conception is their belief in the essential selfishness of human nature. I do not subscribe to it for I know that the essential difference between man and the brute is that the former can respond to the call of the spirit in him, can rise superior to the passions that he owns in common with the brute, and therefore superior to selfishness and violence, which belong to the brute nature and not to the immortal spirit of man. That is the fundamental conception of Hinduism (qtd.in Pantham 177). The film aims to transmit the Gandhian ‘liberal democracy’. In the epilogue, Munna like Prof. Uttam Chaudhry of *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara*, pleads to reinstate Gandhi within the human hearts.

IV

As the new letters written by, and specifics about Gandhi, are constantly being excavated,⁵ giving fresh insights, and the new sorts of contradictions and chaos keep emerging within the liberal-democratic structure of the nation,⁶ a need arise to redefine the ideologies and rework the structure, the form, and the thematic of the Bombay Cinema, to accommodate the subtle changes, across the re-discovery and the re-defining of Gandhi on the newer grounds. Gandhi still needs to be de-mythologized on the newer tracks. Although, post-liberalized Bombay Cinema of the multiplex-era has made deliberate attempts to de-mythologize Gandhi, the efforts, the methods, and the tropes have been insufficient and inadequate. In deifying Gandhi and negotiating the subtle nuances of his ‘personal and ‘political’, the film makers not only falsify Gandhi, but also simplify the larger gamut of socio-political problems through the allegory of Gandhi. The deification of Gandhi caters to a disservice to the ‘Mahatma’ who advocated ‘dialogism’, and was always prepared for self-criticism and self-doubt. Anne Friedberg suggests that Cinema’s temporal displacement and conflation of various temporalities lead the discourses to be considered as history. i.e. ‘representation’ as ‘perceptions’. Since cinema owes a larger responsibility than the socio-historic discourses, much sincere efforts need to be made by the film-makers to politicize Gandhi.

⁵ For instance, the biography, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*, 2011 by Joseph Lelyveld talks about and gives evidence of Gandhi’s homoerotic bonding with the German architect, Hermann Kallenbach.

⁶ Especially, the non-violent strain of Gandhian politics, as initially adapted by Aam Admi Party, and the subsequent political events in the recent past.

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