

## ***Mother India* : A Cinematic Discovery Of Indian Sentiments**

**Susmita Barman**  
Independent Researcher

### **Abstract**

The present essay discusses the socio political sentiments of Indian people in Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957). *Mother India* is a melodramatic account of the eponymous character Radha and the hardships of her life is beautifully drawn through the story. The film offers to its audience a feminist agenda through the portrayal of a sentimental yet a determined woman who prioritize moral values over her son. The paper concludes with how Indian people relates the theme with their own cultures and societies.

**Keywords:** Indian cinema, melodrama, feminist film, motherhood ,Mother India

### **Introduction**

In terms of Indian cinema, the 1950s were a major decade. During this time, Indian cinema became internationally popular. *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road, 1955), Satyajit Ray's directorial debut, won The Best Human Document Award at the prestigious international cinema festival held in the French city of Cannes in 1956. The cinematic epic of the newly emerging India, *Mother India*, by Mehboob Khan, which received the first-ever Indian nomination for an Oscar under the Best Foreign Language Film category, helped Indian cinema successfully cross another international milestone. Mehboob Khan represented the commercial stream of Indian cinema, whereas Satyajit Ray represented the art-house stream.

Mehboob Khan (1907–1964) was born in Gujarat but moved to Mumbai (then Bombay) to work for a relative whose company offered different logistical services to the Bombay cinema industry. Soon, Mehboob started working as an assistant in the production of silent films. Mehboob Khan's directorial debut was *Al Hilal* (The Crescent Moon) in 1935 under the banner of Sagar Movietone. Apart from his cinematic magnum-opus, *Mother India*, the following are the major films directed by Mehboob Khan.

*Andaz* (Style, 1949) stands out as one of the first Hindi films which depicted a 'love triangle'. The film has Nargis, Dilip Kumar and Raj Kapoor in its lead roles and its music composer was Naushad. The word "Andaz," which means "style," supports the idea that being fashionable or embracing modernity will have repercussions, especially for women. The main character of the film, Nina, is an educated lady who interacts openly with men, enjoys horseback riding, and attends tea parties. Nina, who is independent and free-spirited,

is criticised by her father because of her friendship with Dilip. When the buddy turns out to be a villain and views their friendship as love, Nina is forced to deal with new challenges. Later, the married Nina is seen begging to her husband for seeking pardon from him for her friendship with Dilip, and confesses that it was her mistake to freely interact with Dilip. Later, Nina has to shoot Dilip to prove her innocence, for which she is sent to jail for life imprisonment. The movie was a success in the box office and is still remembered for its story line. Modern critics review the film as a morality tale which warns women against modern lifestyle and how it can affect their personal life. Though Nina's trauma in handling the friendship is reflected in the movie, it is not solved anywhere in the film and the film offers the death of the third person as the solution.

*Aan* (Pride, 1952) is India's first technicolour film directed and produced by Mehboob Khan. The characters are split into good and evil in the movie, which is set against the backdrop of an Indian royal dynasty. Dilip Kumar, Nadira, Premnath, and Murad are among the leading actors. The rivalry and conflicts within the royal family over who will be the heir, as well as the methods used by a heroic, brave villager to subdue the haughty princess and the sword fight between the brave villager and the vice royal family member, establish the film as a prototypical Bollywood film that is made to meet box office expectations. It was released internationally, including in the US and the UK, and it was the highest-grossing film at the time. Another noteworthy film by Mehboob Khan is *Amar* (The Immortal, 1954), which stars Madhubala, Nimmi, and Dilip Kumar in the key roles. The plot of the film is a drama that takes place in a village, and the lead character, Amar (played by Dilip Kumar), is a defence attorney. The village belle Sonia is raped by the well-mannered Amar in an incident that is depicted as accidental since Sonia was running away from another man and hiding in Amar's library when it was raining. Amar was betrothed to an educated, wealthy activist woman played by Madhubala. The drama of the film is based on Amar's guilt, who later consents to marry Sonia. It is clear that the movie's depiction of rape perpetuated a stereotype that later appeared in Indian films. The storm and rain that are playing in the background serve to justify the trauma of the rape victim and the violence of the rapist. The marriage between him and Sonia in the film can be interpreted as a patriarchal cultural correction of rape. The film's box office failure was likely caused by the protagonist's portrayal as a guy with grey shades. Mehboob Khan's final film as a director was *Son of India* (1962). This film falls under the typical musical genre and is most famous for the Noushad-penned songs it contains. This film can also be seen as *Mother India's* follow-up. The song "Nanha munha hoon, desh ki sipahi hoon (We the small ones are the soldiers of the nation)" is featured in this patriotic drama film and is still considered to be one of the most well-known Hindi film songs. With the exception of the glaring omission of a Dalit undertone with its diverse atrocities of untouchability, enslavement, and ghettoization, all other aspects of 1950s Indian village life are vividly portrayed in Mehboob Khan's epic film, *Mother India*. *Mother India*, a cinematic portrayal of the newly independent country, glorifies only the contribution of small-scale agrarian landlords in building the nation by completely ignoring the hard manual labour with which the agrarian Dalit slave-work-force contributed significantly to the nation-building process. This political erasure was carried out by an avowed socialist filmmaker..

### **Mother India : A case study of mother motifs**

Mehboob Khan presents us *Mother India*, a cinematic political epic of the contemporary day, by meticulously combining the main underlying elements of the twin proto-nationalist epics of India, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. The film's fundamental mother motif serves as an agent of both revolt and conformity at the same time. The Ramayana's Sita's perfect chastity, the Mahabharata's Radha's bewitching beauty, the Lakshmi of prosperity, the Kali of feminine wrath, the Durga of destruction, and the ultimate success story of female peasants all contribute to the cinematic mother motif that unites the soil of the land and the body of the female protagonist, Radha. All male characters in the film exist and find their meaning of existence only within the physical and spiritual periphery of the mother centre. Right from the opening sequence onwards, unification of the female body with that of the national soil has been recurrently shown. Just like the soil which is exposed to varying weathers of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter; Radha's bodily changes over a period of time are visibly brought to the attention of the spectator. *Mother India* opens with a close-up shot of Radha, now an aged grandmother figure, holding up a handful of fertile mud in the field, which is then juxtaposed with her parched neck. A sequence of scenes showing frantic mechanised agricultural and construction activity in the community that is connected to electricity, motor vehicles, bridges, canals, and highways follow this potent realistic juxtaposition. "Mehboob Khan's poetic realism is evident in *Mother India* which sees India moving from an exploitative feudal system to the age of independence and freedom, with the construction of an irrigation canal in the village symbolizing progress and the beginning of a new era, not just for Radha, the protagonist, but the entire nation" (Sommya et.al. n.p).

Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* could be viewed in some ways as a cinematic ode to the success story of independent India's Green Revolution, which modernised agricultural practises throughout the nation and significantly contributed to feeding the famished population of the first half of the 20th century. From an ideological standpoint, *Mother India* emphasises a political fusion of Gandhi's Gram-Swaraj and Nehruvian Socialism, whose goals included adopting emergency developmental measures for poverty eradication, rural emancipation, non-violence, and planned growth through modernization of India's industrial and agricultural sectors. Mehboob Khan's cinematic imagination clearly had little room for the Ambedkarite worries of rural India, maybe because his socialist philosophy could only accept the class question and not the caste question as obstacles to revolution. Within the primary flashback of *Mother India*, there are other cinematic flashbacks. The primary flashback begins as Radha, the village's "gaav ki ma," is welcomed with a floral garland to open the community's recently constructed water canal. Radha is prompted to recall past events by the scent of flowers through a cinematic transition of gradual dissolve. She is reminded of the floral headpiece she wore when she was a newlywed, possibly 20 years ago. The plot of *Mother India* is around the transformation of a young bride from a plain Indian hamlet into a mother-figure who symbolises the struggles, triumphs, aspirations, perseverance, and advancement the fledgling country made—especially by always upholding the nonviolent political ideology. "While fairly melodramatic, its gritty honesty and affirmation of social values touched a chord—the film was a big hit and won India's first Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film in 1958" (Shedde 27). The unnamed village that Mehboob Khan portrayed in *Mother India* serves as a stand-in for all villages in India. The creation of a cinematographic map with set borders, within which its citizens toil to advance the country to the next stage of development, later visually transforms the microcosm of the unnamed village into the macrocosm of India, the political state. One of the cultural functions that the movie *Mother India* very emphatically accomplished was the development of a nationalist

iconography through the patriarchal political practise of "mothering" the land. After getting married to Shamu, Radha (played by Nargis) travels to the unnamed, impoverished, distant, and sparsely fertile rural village (played by Rajkumar). Their grand marriage was conducted with a loan of rupees five hundred taken by Shamu's mother Sunder-Chachi from the village moneylender and usurer Sukhilala (played by Kanhaiyalal). Filed crops lead to breach of loan agreement and the family loses a substantial portion of their cultivable land, bulls and three quarters of all future crops produced by the family. Shamu's hands were amputated when one of the enormous granite blocks that the family was clearing fell on them when they were trying to cultivate more land in an effort to escape their debt trap. Shamu abandons the community and his family at night, knowing that he will soon die of malnutrition as a result of his complete helplessness, taunts, and male ego. The family experiences too many deaths. In addition to the death mentioned by Shamu, Radha also observes the malnutrition and illness-related deaths of her mother-in-law and her two infant sons. Though at one point Radha was on the verge of giving in to Sukhilala's approaches for sexual purposes, her faith in God and her anticipation of Shamu's homecoming provide her the strength to decide against doing so in order to rescue her youngest child from death. The community is visited by a terrible storm and flood, which forces practically all of the families to leave.

The impassioned persuasion of Radha and her two surviving sons, however, prevents the villagers from running away, and through their combined efforts, they make the earth arable once more. Radha's journey to becoming the village's mother starts at this point. The second part of the movie mainly shows how Radha manages her two adult boys, who have quite different temperaments. Ramu, her oldest child, is obedient to his mother and the local traditions, especially Sukhilala's exploitative ways. Ramu is portrayed by Rajendra Kumar. However, Sunil Dutt's portrayal of Birju, Radha's youngest son, shows him maturing into a resentful, rule-breaking, bohemian young man. Sukhilala, who stands in for the exploitative, repressive, feudal Establishment of Indian villages, is the only object of his rage and resistance. He gets expelled from his town as a result of all of his aggressive and unlawful attempts to retrieve his mother's pawned bracelet from the Sukhilala. He turns into a bandit and trains a group of his own soldiers. He conducts an attack on the community in order to kill Sukhilala and abduct his whiny daughter Rupa. Any type of sexual contact between men and women from the same village is prohibited under Indian village custom. Radha found it difficult to accept Birju's harsh tactics and moral lapse. As a result, while Birju was riding his horse and robbing Sukhilala of her daughter, Radha killed him. Radha kills her own son to protect the moral virtue of her village. In Mehboob Khan's filmography, *Mother India* had a kind of cinematic prequel. Or, it can be seen that *Mother India* is a remake of Mehboob Khan's own film, *Aurat*, which was released in 1940. Nearly all of *Mother India*'s characters can be found in *Aurat*. The conclusions of these two movies, however, differ slightly. Radha and her family are expelled from *Aurat* due to Birju's moral transgression. By slaying Birju, she restores the family's honour. However, *Mother India* stops the social boycott that was threatening the family by killing Birju on the spot. Even though the movie clearly shows heroism, the sexist notion that a woman's body is the bearer of her family's and country's honour permeates the entire picture. *Mother India*, a legendary figure, exclusively produces sons! Radha actually commits an honour killing by killing Birju. Or was she trying to prevent an incestuous brother-sister marriage, as she was at one moment in the film, almost ready to lie with Sukhilala. This needs to be understood in light of Gayatri Chatterjee's claim that Birju has an Oedipal complex, which is primarily manifested in the movie by Birju's obstinate obsession with getting back his mother's pawned bracelets from Sukhilala's care.

The female genital organ is typically suggested by a woman's bracelet. Both general praise and critical commentary were lavished upon *Mother India*. *Mother India* continues to keep the top spot in both box office income and academic intellectual attention. Scholars of cinema have carefully examined *Mother India* from nearly every angle, including political, feminist, psychoanalytic, cultural nationalist, religious, and philosophical. Therefore, providing a new reading of the film has become a really challenging critical task. A small survey covering a few major critical responses to *Mother India* is attempted below. Mehboob Khan's *Mother India*, according to Brigitte Schulze of the Department of Media Studies at Trier University in Germany, is a cinematic exploration of India. The following is what he says about *Mother India*. "*Mother India* is a hymn of sacrifice and suffering, reminding one of the visual aesthetics, film rhythm and ethics of Aleksandr Dovzenko. The hard-working rural populace of India is idealised in this portrayal of subsistence as a selfless endeavour, laying the economic and, more importantly, moral groundwork for the development of the new Indian nation.. Mehboob re-invented in his mega film icons of national martyrdom, metaphors and symbols of the nation which are suggested to the public as archetypal constellations - a subject that had preoccupied nationalist authors, painters and dramatists since the end of the 19th century. Ever since *Mother India*, filmmakers have been adapting and reproducing its national iconic imagery and emotional set-up albeit as the same scenario of the individual sacrificing for the collective" (73). Salman Rushdie, the internationally acclaimed author of Indian origin makes the following comment on Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* in his fictional work *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995).

## Conclusion

"In *Mother India*, a piece of Hindu myth-making, directed by a Muslim socialist, Mehboob Khan, the Indian peasant woman is idealised as a bride, mother and producer of sons; as long suffering, stoical, loving, redemptive, and conservatively wedded to the maintenance of social status quo" (qtd. in Mishra, 62). To Vijay Mishra, "*Mother India* is, of course, a cultural artefact, and ... a pervasive one too. It occupies a central place in Indian cinema history, especially in the variety of cinema— Bollywood cinema... But because of its centrality, especially in the North Indian cultural imaginary the film takes up directly to a key issue of cultural representation: cultures, after all, use their artistic forms to represent themselves (as said by Edward Said)"(65). Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* has been interpreted as a cinematic rebuttal to Katherine Mayo, an American fundamentalist female historian, who wrote the anti-Indian racist book *Mother India* in 1927. Her work opposed India's freedom from British oppression and is a racist insult to India and the Hindu way of life. The father of India, Mahatma Gandhi, vehemently condemned Katherine Mayo's book, calling it a "report of a drain inspector sent out with one purpose of opening and examining the drains of the country to be reported upon". In *Mother India*, the running time of which is almost three hours, the Brechtian epic breaks, achieved through the 42-plus-minutes-long 12 songs of the movie, carry the narrative forward seamlessly with occasional flashbacks within the main flashback. The vocal interpretations of legendary singers like Manna De, Lata Mangeshkar, Shamshad Begum, Asha Bosle, Usha Mangeshkar, and Mohammed Rafi have immortalised Naushad's musical compositions. Since its publication, Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* has served as a cultural glue that unites the various subcultures of India with the larger, more inclusive Indian culture.

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