

## Title of the Module

### Richard Attenborough and his film *Gandhi*

Richard Samuel Attenborough (1923—2014) requires little introduction to cinephiles around the globe. Richard Attenborough was a British film director, actor and producer. As a director his most tremendous achievement goes with the 1982 film, *Gandhi*, which bagged eleven nominations for Academy Awards, out of which it won eight awards in 1983. These Academy Awards include: Attenborough bagged two awards: for Best Picture and for Best Director. Ben Kingsley, who played the titular role, won the Academy Award for Best Actor. The cinematographers of the film *Gandhi*, Billy Williams and Ronnie Taylor; the Editor of the film, John Bloom; Costume Designers John Mollo and Bhanu Athaiya; Screenwriter John Briley were also among the eight winners of the Academy Award for the film *Gandhi*.

#### Learning Objectives:

To enable the learner to:

- a) understand a brief career history of Richard Attenborough as a film director
- b) comprehend the socio-political background of the film *Gandhi*
- c) follow various aspects of cinematic adaptations followed in the biopic on *Gandhi*, and
- d) critically respond and appreciate the film *Gandhi*

Richard Attenborough was an alumnus of the English Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) from where he graduated in the year 1942. From 1941 onwards he started acting in theatre. His cinematic acting debut was in 1941 war movie, *In Which We Serve*, directed by the famous British playwright and filmmaker Noel Coward and David Lean. In Steven Spielberg's science fiction films, the *Jurassic Park* Trilogy, Richard Attenborough's acting excellence was raised to a new height. He played the role of John Hammond, the billionaire who becomes the financial sponsor for creating the sprawling wildlife park in a remote fictional island Nublar. It's not with his film *Gandhi*, Attenborough's Indian connections began. Previously, in Satyajit Ray's 1977 movie, *Shatranj ke Khilari* (*The Chess Player*), a film made with the background of 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, the role of General James Outram was immortalized by the acting brilliance of Richard Attenborough.

*Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969), a musical comedy satire on the political events of the First World War, was Richard Attenborough's directorial debut. This anti-war film, which intermittingly made use of the theatrical and cinematic techniques, especially those of documentary tradition, is critically appreciated for its fresh mise-en-scene and the new narratological method used. Attenborough's filmography as a director include: *Cry Freedom* (1987), *Chaplin* (1992), *Shadowlands* (1993), *In Love and War* (1996) etc. The film *Closing the Ring*, released in 2007, is the directorial swansong of Attenborough. *Closing the Ring*, a romantic drama, largely narrated in a flashback, is about the intricate relationship between Ethel and her just dead husband Chuck who was a US war-veteran. Attenborough passed away in 2014, at the age of 90, seven years after the release of his last film, *Closing the Ring*. However, he had the rare privilege of a posthumous archival audio appearance in the third part of the *Jurassic Park* trilogy, *Jurassic World*, directed by Collin Trevorrow and released in 2015, a year after Richard Attenborough's death.

Attenborough's film *Gandhi* is his cinematic magnum opus, for which he spent twenty-years in preparation. *Gandhi* is joint collaborative production venture of International Films Investors, Goldcrest Films International, Into-British Films Ltd., and National Film Development Corporation of India.

British imperialism in India and its most violent repressive apparatuses, global racism and its apartheid practices, elitist national political movements of the time with their disconnect with the ordinary masses, right-wing nationalism and its murderous schemes, religious fundamentalism with its argument of majoritarianism in the formation of a nation, nonviolence and its frequent failure for immediate response, and the resurgence of a colonised country into freedom are the various political sub-texts featured in the film.

Journey, territorial movement spanning from the local to the global, is the most frequently used leitmotif in Attenborough's *Gandhi*. Considering the further accelerated global scale transference of the Gandhi cult in the contemporary political context, the film can be considered as a work in political prediction that foregrounds the strength and dilemma of oriental nonviolence as an alternative political and spiritual philosophy.

The film *Gandhi*, which is entirely delivered in a flashback, begins with a couple of late-evening wide-angle shots of, an unspecified, but set to suggest the time of the 1940s, banks of the Ganga, the river in which Gandhi's cremation ashes were finally disposed of. The crimson setting sun in the horizon, a few resting boats in the water, a few men washing their clothes on the river bank, and a few homeward cowering crows in the twilight skyline makes Ganga, the focus of the shot, look sad. The first long-shot dissolves into another long shot, but closer than the first, which makes the boats larger, the people more visible, the song they sing more audible and the setting sun more reddish. The folksong evokes a sense of sad ending of something. These two shots suggest the end of the day, and the end of an era with the end of the man, Gandhi. Then the following words are superimposed on the riverbank shot: "No man's life can be composed 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 man..." The final shot of the film, which depicts the disposal of Gandhi's cremation ashes in the Ganga in an early morning, with a rising sun in the background suggesting a sunrise of the Gandhian ideals, completes the cinematic circle composed meticulously by the director. The final sequences, where also water predominates, are overlaid with the following words of Gandhi: "When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of love and truth has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fail. Think of it. Always."

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was essentially a man of elements; and the film *Gandhi* succeeds in bringing together the natural elements of water, air, earth, fire and space to its cinematic body very effectively at various times. The water of spatial movements, the air of political changes, the earth of contestations, the fire of violence, and the vast abstract space of Indian spirituality are seamlessly interconnected in this highly complex bio-pic on Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, one of the the most readily recognizable human figures in the history of human civilization.

In the movie *Gandhi*, Attenborough compresses the real time of 52 years in the life of Mahatma Gandhi, from 1893 to 1945, into a reel time of 190 minutes. What is, if not change, the central theme of the film? The sweeping personal, domestic, professional, spiritual, political, spatial, and physical changes the filmic protagonist Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) undergo, or are subjected to form the fundamental emphasis of the film. Revolution could be another synonym for change. There are many a Gandhi in the film at different stages. However, by the end of the film those different streams of Gandhi, merge into the last Gandhi, the martyr. Gandhi, the devout husband of Kasturba Ben; Gandhi, the agitated young attorney in South

Africa; Gandhi, the mass leader who sought and fond his people in India; Gandhi, the political activist who preached and practiced an alternative political ideology to that of the Western value system; and Gandhi, the spiritual icon criss-cross Attenborough's filmscape with amazing diversity, tremendous determination, tenderest emotions and with a childlike innocence throughout.

After the initial river-banks shots, the viewers are taken to the Birla House (Gandhi Smriti) on 30 January 1948, in an early winter evening. Through a top-to-bottom pan shot with blurred images of shining leaves of a tall tree, a close-up shot of a young man's head from back is shown. When he turns about, a grumbled face is seen. Here, the director, introduces Nathuram Vinayak Godse in a close-up shot, even before the protagonist Gandhi was introduced. Then the two collaborators of the assassin are also introduced. A few minutes later Gandhi was introduced though a long shot, arriving at the prayer stage in the garden, making him scarcely distinguishable in a crowd. Then the most infamous murder in the history of India was depicted.

In the middle of the official funeral procession, of the 78-year-old slain leader, which was slowly marching towards the camera in daytime; through a sudden flashback jump-cut, of reverse direction, the areal shot of a swiftly passing train away from the camera, at night, in another country, in another winter evening was shown. This sudden transition very effectively registers a spatial remoteness and temporal reverse motion; from New Delhi, in India, on 31<sup>st</sup> January, 1948, to Pietermaritzburg railway station in South Africa, on 07 June 1893. The 23-year-old young Gandhi's experience of racial discrimination and apartheid at Pietermaritzburg was the most enduring epiphanic moment which brought in a trajectorial shift in the life of the protagonist of the film, from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a business lawyer, to Gandhi the political activist.

Richard Attenborough's film Gandhi is not entirely a docu-drama based on facts alone. Many fictional elements, for the sake of making the film dramatic and emotionally charged, and on the demands of the film industry, were employed by the director. On this insertion of fictitious events in the movie, Hay Stephen elaborates: "Both exaggeration and invention characterize the fictitious scene where Gandhi persists in burning his own and other Indians' registration certificates despite three terrific baton blows from a (Johannesburg) policeman. Gandhi was never beaten by police, and he describes the occasion as a meeting of 2,000 Indians (not the few dozen shown in the film), on the grounds of the main mosque, with some English reporters present. No policemen, let alone policemen beating Gandhi, are mentioned. Equally fictive is the dramatic charge by mounted police on the peaceful procession of volunteers and strikers at the site of a mine, the charge being halted by the horses themselves, who rear up rather than step on the marchers kneeling together in front of them. This scene might have been inspired by Gandhi's report that thousands of laborers struck work, whereupon 'mounted military policemen chased the strikers and brought them back to their work', while others threw stones at the police (many of whom were wounded by gunfire and some killed), and still others returned voluntarily'. Gandhi was miles away at that time" (88).

Gandhi's inception into active Indian politics is another important episode in the film. His arrival to India in 1915 at the Mumbai port and the mass reception he was given in the presence of Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel was followed by the shortest ever public speech by Gandhi. Later on, realising that Indian freedom movement at the time was not in connect with the ordinary Indians living in thousands of villages across the vast country; Gandhi undertakes a 'discover India journey across the breadth and length of the nation. This discovery of India by Gandhi is very effectively depicted in the film. From this depiction onwards, India's struggle

for freedom comes out of the luxurious living rooms and gardens of the indigenous elite nationalist politicians to the open space of political battles waged in thousands of villages and hundreds of cities in India. Gandhi's intervention made the fight for freedom pan-Indian, inclusive and literally national. Of course, such reductive filmic representations of a larger, wider, diverse political struggles onto a single person will invite genuine criticisms in large quantity. However, appreciations of the following kind are also showered on Attenborough's biopic on Gandhi. Akhil Gupta says, "With good reason, Attenborough chose to tell the story of Gandhi as a political leader. Though the film touches on domestic matters that have no overt significance, it is the important political events of Gandhi's times that occupy the viewer's attention over most of the film's three hours. Some events, like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, are only incidentally connected to Gandhi himself: they are mainly important in establishing the mood of the period-forming the canvas on which Gandhi's portrait is painted. In this respect, Attenborough has zoomed in unerringly: Gandhi's importance to history lies in his role as a politician" (Akhil Gupta, 22)

The film also raises questions on political correctness of selecting a white skinned European to play the lead role of a brown skinned Indian political leader. Ravishankar and George Fenton's music, and John Bloom's editing along with the precise and effective cinematography by the duo Billy Williams and Rony Taylor, contribute significantly to the directorial brilliance of Richard Attenborough in making this movie a classic one.

#### References:

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#### Web Links:

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<https://www.historytoday.com/archive/richard-attenboroughs-gandhi>

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