

Title of the Module:

Mehboob Khan and *Mother India*

The 1950s was a significant period as far as Indian cinema was concerned. Indian cinema went international during this period. Satyajit Ray's directorial debut, *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road, 1955) bagged The Best Human Document Award at the prestigious international film festival held in the French city, Cannes, in 1956. Indian cinema successfully crossed another international milestone in 1958 with Mehboob Khan's cinematic epic of emerging new India, *Mother India* by getting the first ever Indian nomination for Oscar award under the Best Foreign Language film category. While Satyajit Ray represented the art-house stream of Indian cinema, Mehboob Khan represented the commercial stream of Indian cinema.

Learning Objectives

To enable the learner to:

1. Follow a brief biography and filmography of Mehboob Khan
2. Understand the socio-political contexts within which the film *Mother India* can be understood.
3. Comprehend the various thematic layers of *Mother India*
4. Critically appreciate and respond to the movie *Mother India*.

Mehboob Khan (1907-1964) was born in Gujarat, but migrated to Mumbai (then Bombay) to work in his relative's business establishment which provided various logistical services to the Bombay's filmmaking 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 title 'Andaz' referring to 'style' endorses the view that being in style or embracing modernity, particularly by women, would have its consequences. The movie follows Nina, a woman who is educated abroad, mixes freely with men, and goes for horse rides and tea parties. Nina who is free spirited and independent faces criticism from her father in the name of her friendship with Dilip. Nina faces further conflicts when the friend turns to be a villain, and misinterprets her friendship as love. 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 film is set in the background of a royal family in India and divides the characters into good and evil. The lead actors include Dilip Kumar, Nadira, Premnath and Murad. The rivalry and conflicts within the royal family for becoming the heir, and the techniques used by a heroic, courageous villager to tame the arrogant princess, the sword fight between the courageous

villager and the vice member of the royal family places the movie as an archetypal Bollywood movie which is set to the standards of box office. It was the highest grossing movie of the time, and was released in different countries including UK and the US.

Amar (The Immortal, 1954) is another notable film by Mehboob Khan starring Dilip Kumar, Nimmi and Madhubala in the lead roles. The movie follows to a drama set in a village, and the protagonist Amar (played by Dilip Kumar) is a criminal lawyer. The well principled gentleman Amar rapes the village belle Sonia, which is shown as accidental as Sonia was wet in the rains and was hiding in Amar's library to escape from another man. Amar was engaged to an activist lady, played by Madhubala who is well educated and rich. The drama of the movie follows to the guilt faced by Amar who later agrees to marry Sonia. It can be seen that the rape scene in the movie later got reinforced as a stereotype, in Indian movies. The trauma of the rape victim and the violence of the rapist is justified by the storm and the rain which is set in the background. The movie can be seen as a patriarchal cultural rectification of rape by uniting him with Sonia in marriage. The movie was a failure in box office, probably because of the depiction of the protagonist as a man with grey shades.

Son of India (1962) is the directorial swan-song of Mehboob Khan. This film is typical musical genre and remembered mostly for its songs composed by Noushad. This movie can also be taken as a sequel to *Mother India*. This patriotic drama film features the song "Nanha munha hoom, desh ki sipahi hoon (We the little ones are the soldiers of the nation) which even today is rated as one of most popular Hindi film songs.

Except the conspicuous absence of a Dalit subtext with its assorted violence of untouchability, enslavement, and ghettoization, every other realities of Indian village life of the 1950s have been depicted in detail in Mehboob Khan's cinematic epic, *Mother India*. With such a political erasure by an avowed socialist filmmaker, *Mother India*, a cinematic representation of the newly independent nation, glorifies only the contribution of small-scale agrarian landlords in building the nation, by totally ignoring the hard manual labour with which the agrarian Dalit slave-work-force contributed substantially to the nation building process. By undertaking a meticulous amalgamation of the major underlying characteristics the twin proto-nationalist epics of India, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, Mehboob Khan, serves us *Mother India*, a cinematic political epic of the contemporary times. The central mother motif in the film functions as an agent of both subversion and conformity simultaneously.

The cinematic mother motif here, which unites the soil of the land and the body of the female protagonist, Radha, has been designed with multiple inputs from many an already existing Indian patriarchal construct of femininity: oriental feminisation of national landmass, impeccable chastity of Sita of the Ramayana, bewitching beauty of Radha of the Mahabharata, Lakshmi of prosperity, Kali of feminine wrath, Durga of destruction, and the ultimate success story of female perseverance. 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. This powerful realistic juxtaposition is followed by a series of scenes which depicts hectic mechanised agricultural and construction activities in

the village which is connected with electricity, motor vehicles, bridges, canals and roads. “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). In a way, amongst many other things, Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India* could be seen as a cinematic paean to the success story of independent India’s Green Revolution which modernised agricultural practices of the country and played a significant role in feeding the starving nation of the first half of the twentieth century. Ideologically, *Mother India* foregrounds a political blend of Nehruvian-Socialism and Gandhi’s Gram-Swaraj, the aims of which were adapting emergency developmental measures for poverty annihilation, rural empowerment, non-violence and planned growth through modernization of India’s industrial and agricultural sectors. Obviously, the Ambedkarite concerns of rural India finds no place in Mehboob Khan’s cinematic imagination probably because his socialist ideology could accept only the class question, not the caste question in the path of revolution.

Mother India has many cinematic flashbacks within the main flashback. The main flashback starts when Radha, the “gaav ki ma” (mother of the village) is received with a floral garland to open the newly built water canal of her village. The fragrance of flowers leads Radha to reminiscence of things past, through a cinematic transition of slow dissolve; to the fragrance of the floral garland which she was wearing as the young bride, probably about 20 years back. Story-wise, *Mother India* is about the conversion of a young bride from a nondescript village in India into a pan-Indian mother-figure representing the troubles, experiences, resurgences, aspirations, perseverance, and progress the young nation achieved, especially always adhering to the political philosophy of non-violence. “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 village portrayed by Mehboob Khan in *Mother India* has been kept unnamed, thereby making it representative of all villages in India. The microcosm of the nameless village, later gets converted visually into the macrocosm of India, the political state, through the creation of a cinematographic cartography with fixed borders within which its citizens toil to take the nation to the next stage of development. Creation of a nationalist iconography through the patriarchal political practice of “mothering” the land could be seen as one of the cultural functions very emphatically achieved by the film *Mother India*.

Radha (played by Nargis) arrives the nameless, remote, poor, not-so-fertile agrarian village after her wedding with Shamu (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. To escape from debt trap, the family attempts to make more land cultivable by clearing huge granite rocks, one of which falls on Shamu’s hands leading to the amputation of his hands. Utter helplessness, ridicules and his own male ego prompt Shamu to desert the village and his family at night accepting his death by starvation soon. Death visits the family too frequently. With Shamu’s suggested death, Radha witnesses three more deaths: mother-in-law’s and her two infant sons’ due to starvation and illness. To save her youngest child from death, though once Radha was almost near to yield to the sexual advances of Sukhilala, her faith in God coupled with her expectation of Shamu’s return, empowers Radha not to trade her chastity with the life of her infant son. A devastating flood and storm makes a visitation to the village prompting almost all families to migrate.

However, Radha's and her two surviving sons' passionate persuasion stops the villages from fleeing and their collective effort convert the soil cultivable again. From this moment onwards, Radha's journey towards the village's motherhood begins.

The second section of the film primarily depicts how Radha handles her two grown-up sons with two entirely different temperaments. Her eldest son, Ramu (played by Rajendra Kumar) obeys his mother and the customs of the village, including the exploitative practices of Sukhilala. However, Radha's youngest son Birju (played by Sunil Dutt) grows into an embittered rebellious rule-thwarting bohemian angry young man. The only target of his anger and rebellion is Sukhilala, who represents the exploitative, suppressive, feudal Establishment of Indian villages. All his violent and illegal attempts to recover his mother's pawned bracelet from the Sukhilala fail, leading to his deportation from his village. He becomes a bandit who raises a gang of his own men. He raids the village to kill Sukhilala and to kidnap his nagging daughter, Rupa. As per Indian village custom, any kind of sexual relationship between men and women of the same village is a taboo. Radha could not digest this moral digression, and violent methods of Birju. Therefore Radha shoots down Birju while the latter was kidnapping Sukhilala's daughter on horseback. 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. *Aurat* features almost all characters of *Mother India*. However, the endings of these two films are slightly different. In *Aurat*, Radha and her family are banished from the village, for the moral digression of Birju. She regains the family honour by killing Birju. However, in *Mother India*, her pre-emptive killing of Birju, prevents the social boycott which was threatening the family. The misogynist message of woman's body as the bearer of family's and nation's honour is rampant throughout the film, though overtly it depicts heroinism. The mythologised *Mother India* gives birth only to sons! By killing Birju, Radha actually commits an honour killing. 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 has to be read in connection with Gayatri Chatterjee's attribution of Oedipal complex in Birju which is primarily materialised in the film through Birju's insistent infatuation with the retrieval of his mother's pawned bracelets from the custody of Sukhilala. A woman's bracelet is traditionally suggestive of the female genital organ.

Mother India received in abundance both popular appreciation and critical analysis. Both in box office revenue and in academic intellectual attention, *Mother India* even now holds the topmost position. Cinema scholars have analysed closely *Mother India* from almost all possible perspectives, including political, feminist, psychoanalyst, cultural nationalist, religious, philosophical etc. 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.

Brigitte Schulze of Dept. of Media Studies, Trier University, Germany, says that Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* is a cinematic discovery of India. He makes the following comment on *Mother India*. "*Mother India* is a hymn of sacrifice and suffering, reminding one of the visual aesthetics, film rhythm and ethics of Aleksandr Dovzenko. Idealising the struggle of India's hard working rural population it represents subsistence as a selfless strive, thus creating the economic basis, and above all the necessary moral foundation for the blossoming of the young 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). “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 taken as a cinematic reply to the anti-Indian racist book, *Mother India*, written by Katherine Mayo, an American fundamentalist female historian, in 1927. Her book, which is a racist slur on India and the Hindu way of life, opposed India’s independence from the British colonialism. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of India, rejected Katherine Mayo’s book in sharp terms describing it as 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. Naushad’s music compositions are immortalised by the vocal renderings of iconic singers like Manna De, Lata Mangeshkar, Shamshad Begum, Asha Bosle, Usha Mangeshkar and Mohammed Rafi. Mehboob Khan’s *Mother India*, ever since its release, functions as a cultural glue which integrates the diverse sub-cultures of India with that of the larger, macrocosm of an all-inclusive Indian culture.

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Web Links:

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