Vol.04, (Special Issue) 2021, Pg. 01-11

Current Research Journal of Social Sciences

journalofsocialsciences.org

# Widowhood and Motherhood in Cinematic Imagination in the Historical Context

**JYOTI ATWAL**

Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

**Abstract**

This article engages with the question of how Hindi cinema sought to synergize and imagine the nation, community and land in independent India as the embodiment of widowhood. I suggest that this process of embodiment was the culmination of a long historical-political process. The focus of this chapter is a 1957 Hindi film by Mehboob Khan named Mother India. The film stands out as a powerful emotional drama. On the one hand, this film marked continuity with the Indian literature, painting, theatre and cinema of the colonial period,[1] on the other, Mother India influenced the culture of a new Indian nation after 1947. Within a decade after India attained independence from Britain, the Indian cinema became an undisputed site where the cultural engineering of a new nation could be enacted.[2]

**Article History**

Received: 09 November 2021

Accepted: 26 October 2021

**Keywords**

Gandhi; Hindi Cinema; Independence; Mother India; Nehru; Nation; Peasant; Widowhood.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the literary and cinematic representations were mediated by paintings. Representation acquired novelty when painters applied new art forms to contour physicality of the Hindu women. Tapati Guha Thakurta has looked at the production of certain kind of urban high class Hindu mytho-pictures in the Calcutta art schools which passed down to the arena of popular bazaar art production, thus homogenizing what she calls the 'mass visual culture'.[3] Some of these art studio pictures borrowed the European neo-classical painting styles, for example the biblical image of *Pieta* (Madonna and the dead Christ) provided inspiration for the figure of the grieving Savitri cradling Satyavan's body as she pleads for his life before the huge brawny personage of Yama. Secondly, these studios had a cross regional public as three languages—Bengali, Hindi and English—were used. Another artist, Raja Ravi Varma from Travancore gracefully collapsed the realistic and the mythic together to create a 'modern' Indian art. The last and the most crucial phase in iconography identified by Guha begins with the twentieth century, when such pictorial representations of women coincided with a new powerful set of equations made by nationalist discourse between 'tradition' and 'feminity', between 'nation' and the 'mother goddess'.

The early twentieth century fusion of European and traditional Indian forms of artistic expression produced patriotic iconographic representations

**CONTACT** Jyoti Atwal jyotiatjnu@gmail.com Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Enviro Research Publishers.

This is an Open Access article licensed under a Creative Commons license: Attribution 4.0 International (CC-BY).

Doi: 10.12944/CRJSSH.4.Special-Issue.01

perhaps indirectly inspired by the Western appropriation of the classical Goddess from ancient Rome and Greece. Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger have shown how in Europe of the nineteenth century, Germania, Britannia, Victoria and the Great Mother, Austria were dressed in iron helmets and visually represented the nation states whose names they bore. The concept of Bharat Mata did not emerge independent of its regional character. The undivided Bengal was painted by Abanindranath Tagore in 1905 as Goddess Banga Mata—Mother Bengal—to symbolize the unity of the country against the partition of Bengal. Perhaps a prototype of the independent India's Mother India, Abanindranath put into the four hands of the deity four symbols: a sheet of cloth, a sheaf of rice, a rosary and a book, signifying industrial,agricultural as well as religious and intellectual wellbeing respectively. These were some of the qualities that the bhadralok of Bengal felt themselves to be replete with. The goddess has appearance of a Vaishnava nun, associating the national deity with the new order of the Ramakrishna Mission, a reformatory Hindu organization founded by Swami Vivekananda. Soon the image took on the mantle of the Bharat Mata—Mother India. The process of imaging Bharat Mata needs to be studied as mediation, transmission and circulation of culture between the artist and the viewer or the receptor. David Freedberg initiated a challenge towards art history in the 1980s as it ignored the relations between images and people in history. Christopher Pinney envisages history in part determined by struggles occurring at the level of the visual.[6]

As in the paintings and iconography, in the films as well Mother India was without any male consort. The cinematic narration of Mother India downplayed her sexuality by mostly absenting the husband, thus projecting on to her a widow's status. The struggle of this widow has been made the central theme. The image captures the independent India struggling to achieve economic reforms and transform feudal social relations. Correspondingly, the old widow in various Hindi films is supported by her young son or sons. This representation is a metaphor for the Young India[7] supporting the 'old Mother India', who contributed her participation to the independence movement and then laboured to bring up her sons in free India.

The 'cinematic widow' also embodied the middle class notions of shame, honour and chastity. However, a peculiar feature inherent in this picture of the widow was the Nehruvian socialistic inspiration which propelled her to rebel against the feudal agrarian structure of the colonial past in rural India. A widow was visualized as poor, struggling and vulnerable. Her existence was a sheer test of her capability to generate economic resources for herself and the family without giving in to sexual politics of the overtly masculine world. The nation was personified as this widow, who was not to be vulnerable to corruption and lure. Economic development had to accommodate a reformed notion of an all-pervasive fructifying 'Mother', flexible enough to be easily moved into a spiritual domain as and when required, in the form of Kali or Durga. The cinematic 'Mother', was not derived from the religious domain alone, she belonged to an existing tangible and marginalized social category of the Hindu widow as depicted in numerous literary narratives as well as social reformist discussions and debates of the nineteenth and twentieth century.[8]

The four main film makers of the years between 1950 and 1960 were Bimal Roy,[9] Mehboob Khan, Guru Dutt and Satyajit Ray.[10] They portrayed the struggle of a new nation coming into its own. Depicting Indian women became central to films like Aurat (1940);Maa (1952); Mother India (1957);Sujata (1959, interestingly about a Harijan girl); Parineeta (1953) and Pyaasa (1957). While cinema provided an opportunity to escape one's real-life struggles, it simultaneously created a unique world of emotions and sensitivity where real issues, both within and outside the home, could be negotiated. A collectively imagined nation was one of the most emotive images purveyed by Indian cinema. Kiran Chandra Bandhyopadhyay's play 'Bharat Mata' (Mother India, 1873), represented nation as a dispossessed woman, often a widow, or a woman deranged by suffering.[11] In the anthology of the patriotic songs, Bharat Gan (India Songs, 1879) and in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's 1882 novel Anadamath, a mother was rescued by her brave sons.

Jawaharlal Nehru was conscious of the power of the visual to impress the ordinary people. He noted in 1930s

It is curious how one cannot resist the tendency to give an anthropomorphic form to a country. Such is the force of habit and early associations. India become Bharat Mata, Mother India, a beautiful lady very old but ever youthful in appearance, sad eyed and forlorn, cruelly treated by aliens and outsiders and calling upon her children to protect her. Some such picture rouses the emotions of hundreds of thousands and drives them to action and sacrifice.[12]

Mahatma and Nehru both guided the imagination of the intellectuals in the cinema industry, which had itself been a product of the colonial times. The cinematic representation of the women in independent India needs to be understood in terms of the problematic post-colonial discourse[13] which expresses the rationale of the contemporary groupings in a common past and dreamt the future that was nothing but a utopian one. This is where one must ask the question: do men and women share the same singular experience of the post-colonial condition. The answer perhaps lies in recovering the imagery of the anti-colonial Mother India which was transformed into that of the Mother India of a suffering yet recovering nation in post-colonial India.

The cinematic imagination of the 1950s was quick to adopt the popular and powerful imagery of Mother Indiaas portrayed in nationalist discourse. Cinema, history and gender negotiated respective discourses in a most complicated manner after independence. Compared to Bengal, this image evolved rather late in the Hindi speaking region. It was not before the early twentieth century in north India that we see the notion of Bharat Mata in print, calendar art and iconography. Within cinema the construct of Mother India was much more than just a conscious effort to figuratively represent the superiority of a divine cultural force presiding over the affairs of an emergent nation. Through the metaphor of Mother India, the family and the nation could be emotionally bonded together by a whole gamut of social relations. These social relations could in turn be shaped by the redefinition of the nation. The gender relations underwent a degree of social transformation because the women had been partners in the freedom struggle and in economic reforms in independent India. Any form of modernity had to incorporate and reflect on this contribution.

Interestingly, by the 1930s, India as a geographical entity also could be imagined in a new image form due to the map of India. The temple of Bharat Mata at Benaras was built in 1936 by Shivprasad Gupt, who was a nationalist and an Arya Samajist. The temple was inaugurated by Gandhi and had no image of god or goddess but only a marble carving of the map of India. The Mata here was conceptualized as a sovereign territory. The author suggests that the use of Mother India in a temple freed Hinduism of its dogmas and gave it a political rhetoric.

The women's movement also popularized the iconography of Bharat Mata. There is evidence from the United Provinces that the iconography of Mother India (Bharat Mata) was popularized by both satyagrahis and the revolutionary women. The satyagrahi categoryunder the leadership of the Nehrus and Zutshis, who promoted charkha and khadi; made salt at home and did prabhat pheris or picketing of liquor shops. The middle class women who embraced the second category participated in various ways from assisting men procure arms (in Kanpur and Kakori) to directly making bombs.[14] In the 1920s, UP was the centre of widespread peasant unrest. It was here for the first time Nehru encountered the peasantry who surrounded him while shouting the slogan: Bharat Mata ki Jai. This is how Nehru explains this encounter in Discovery of India

Sometimes as I reached a gathering, a great roar of welcome would greet me: Bharat Mata ki Jai- 'Victory to Mother India'. Bharat Mata, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people, and victory to her meant victory to these people. You are part of this Bharat Mata, I told them, you are in a manner yourselves Bharat Mata, and this idea slowly soaked in to their brains, their eyes would light up as they had made a great discovery.[16]

Over time, three images of Bharat Mata were contesting with each other: one rooted in religious imagery, the second linked to cows in the context of Hindu–Muslim relations and the third linked to dharti or territory. It was this third image which was promoted as well invoked by Mehboob Khan's film. The secularization of Mother India attracted intellectuals as well as ordinary people. Thus the

ideological template of the film was created by drawing upon the Nehruvian idea of dharti mata and combining it with the utopian image of the widow as articulated by Gandhi.

**Mother India as the 'Widow'**

Mother India, a 1957 Hindi movie, is an interesting social text of its contemporary time. A striking characteristic of this movie is its syncretic significance. It was directed by Mehboob Khan, and Nargis plays Radha, the main protagonist. The director and the actor successfully weave deified image of a Hindu woman caught in the trials and tribulations of agrarian poverty in the background of a newly independent India. Mehboob Khan himself belonged to a Gujarati family with agrarian roots and had produced Aurat (1940) prior to Mother India in which a woman was the central character. The themes were inspired by Pudovkin's socialist realist adaptation of Maxim Gorky's Mother (1926).[17]

The film begins with an old widow Radha (Nargis) being requested by the village locals to inaugurate a new dam. Reluctantly Radha agrees to do so and while inaugurating she reminisces her past life. The story moves back and forth in flashback. She recalls her wedding day when Shyamu, (played by Rajkumar)her husband, brought her into his home. The young charming Radha plays a devout wife to Shyamu as she is shown touching his feet on their first day together. In almost all the following scenes she is shown attending to the household chores—cleaning, cooking, and taking care of her three sons. She is shown working in the fields shoulder to shoulder with her husband. Incidentally, this film also effectively makes a strong visual case for the reinterpretation of the notion of women's labour both inside as well as outside the household.

Radha's family deals with the village money lender, Sukhilala, (literally 'a happy man' but used satirically in the film to connote the contradictory relationship between happiness and wealth) who comes to collect his share of the produce every time there is a harvest. The family pays an exorbitant interest rate on the money they had borrowed from him. However, each time Sukhilala cheats them because none from the family or the village can read the account ledgers. The awareness of being cheated builds up in the entire family and in a bad season when there was no harvest, Sukhilala threatens that he will confiscate all of their belongings if they do not pay back the money they owe. Out of pressure, Radha convinces Shyamu that they will together clear a 5 biga (acre) land in order to pay their dues. Unfortunately, the land turns out to be rocky and difficult to clear and while lifting one of the huge rocks, Shyamu loses both his hands. The family then slides into utter poverty. Radha does not give up and borrows money from Sukhilala who repeatedly insults the family for not having paid him back. Radha somehow continues to feed her husband, her children and her mother-in-law. Sukhilala meanwhile takes away their oxen and the family is left without any resource.

The family's economic condition deteriorates and eventually Shyamu leaves the home out of shame that he cannot provide for his family. Radha is left alone withher children. When Shyamu leaves home he wipes off Radha's vermillion mark whilst she is asleep. This marks the onset of Radha's 'widowhood' and the audience is unsure what becomes of Shyamu. The remainder of the film is about the transformation of a peasant woman—a Hindu widow—into Mother India. Through various filmic devices she is transformed from an individual into a metaphor for a struggling nation. In fact it is after she becomes a widow that she is faced with weighing her chastity, her loyalty to her 'dead' husband against her crippling poverty.

A huge flood destroys her remaining resources but she does not leave the village. She also pleads with other people to stop them leaving. She and her children then battle to survive. Her newborn perishes. Sukhilala then visits her and offers to feed her remaining two children who are starving to death, on the condition that she sleeps with him. She is faced with the acutest dilemma of her life. She initially resists, but then for her children's sake decides to give in. But she finally decides against compromising her dignity and honourfor food. The director successfully captures this extremely delicate moment of ambivalence. What follows is a scene where Radha is seen talking to the image of a Hindu Goddess Luxmi.[18] Radha blames the goddess for her misfortun. Interestingly, Radha does not pray for protection and mercy. She in fact relates the goddess with her own body and addresses the goddess as if she also had a womb, children and the related matrix of emotions. Radha manages to

escape from Sukhilala's house and gets back to feeding her children. Shecooks some wild muddy mushrooms for them. The rest of the film is about the travails of a lone mother bringing up her infants through physical hard labour.

Most of the scenes of the film centre around Radha tilling the land, first alone, then with sons. The director carefully portrays the figure of a sweating, sober, and patiently suffering Radha in the fields. Radha's pain and suffering become an allegory for the newborn nation after the trauma of partition.[19] The movie underlines the two most crucial phases of life which an Indian woman had—one as a wife; the other as a mother. She is initially a consort, a companion and a partner to her peasant husband. During this period she remains docile and more or less an appendage to her husband. Later on, once she is rendered widow, under the pressure of circumstances she transforms into an independent, powerful entity waging a determined struggle against all odds. It is significant that this transformation happens only after she becomes a widow, displaying a traditional Hindu woman's strength with a completely new interpretation. She is no longer an 'abala'but a 'sabala'.[20] The strength displayed here violates the traditional gender roles. The notion of a mother's nurturing function here is made to coexist with her taking upon the man's traditional role of providing for the family.

In the next stage of her role as a mature mother of adult sons, she reintroduces herself to the audience as a new Hindu widow displaying a strong virtuous character. One of her two sons, named Birju, grows up to be a rebel, who internalized the injustice done to his family by Sukhilala. He was convinced that only violence will serve the cause of justice. The other son was aware that Sukhilala had wealth that also made him powerful in many other ways. Although injustice had been done, it could not be settled through violent means. He was also optimistic like his mother and believed in better times ahead. In a way, the Indian National movement was a contest between the two approaches—one violent revolt to solve the zamindari problem and the other peaceful mobilization to solve rural India's problems of poverty and exploitation. Here the director conflates the historical process with the individual characters in order to make them microcosms for the macrocosmic Indian National movement.

Moreover, it is rather striking that Radha does not protest against Sukhilala in the film again. She extends her notion of self-respect and dignity (which characterized her as a wife in the first half of the film) to that of the village community. This particular community is partly an imagined one because it extends beyond the caste and class of the character. Through the idiom of community the director was addressing the problems of the newly emerging nation,a nation that was being addressed by Radha. The non-violent Radha was perhaps a Gandhian construct. Radha evolves when her aggressive son, Birju kills Sukhilala and kidnaps his daughter on the day of her marriage. His motive is toreclaim his mother's bangles from her which Radha had had to mortgage. On this question of violating the dignity of a woman, Radha almost disowns him, detaching her 'motherhood' from Birju and breaking the figurative umbilical cord. She threatens him and tells him to set the girl free because Sukhilala's daughter's laj was the entire village's laj. She refuses to allow Birju to play with it. When Birju does not listen to Radha, she shoots him. The community's honour is upheld even at the cost of a great sacrifice. This scene of filicide forms the climax of the film.

It is noticeable that the film is about a widow's struggle but it goes far beyond dealing with 'widowhood' alone. Her strugglesare also due to a cauldron of economic pressures of a feudal, rural, peasant society where colonial 'modernity' was not a feasible option. The expressions of this unique protest had to be derived from a metamorphosis of traditionalmythical symbolism and the Gandhian Hindu middle class version of resistance and respectability. Radha has not been portrayed as a pitiful and helpless individual as was done in the cinema of the 1970s and 80s, where Amitabh Bachhan often played protective son to a suffering widowed Hindu mother.

Apart from being an exploited peasant woman, Radha was also a young, sexually vulnerable widow. The image of this victim-widow has been a popular subject for novels and short stories in India (details have been discussed in the chapter on literature in this book). In Hindi cinema, certain films have stood above the others in addressing the question of the young widow. The next section discuses Prem Rog (literally 'Love disease'), a 1982 mainstream Hindi movie remembered most

for its powerful reformist subtext. The other Hindi movie under discussion in this chapter, 'Water',[21] is more contemporary and reviews the inner world of widow homes in north India. Various movies (Hindi as well as regional) have been made on the theme of widowhood since independence and widows are visible in certain roles in films. I chose to integrate only these three movies mentioned above into my narrative on representations. The reason behind selecting the above three films was they are all Hindi mainstream cinema and were watched by a large number of audiences. Secondly, these films were not based on novels or stories by writers of the day. They were professionally written for cinematic audiences. Mother India was written by Wajahat Mirza and S.Ali Raza, who had also written Aurat in 1940. Prem Rog was written by Kamna Chandra, who again did not belong to the literary field. Water was written by Deepa Mehta, who was the director and producer herself. I have built my arguments on the assumption that it was basically Mother India which was most relatable to the Indian people and provided templates for how gender relations ought to be in the context of an emerging nation.

The title Mother India also has a genealogy of its own. It was originally a title of a book that an American, Katherine Mayo wrote in 1927. The book created a widespread controversy amongst the nationalist circles which included both men and women.[23]

**Notions of Honour and Social Protest**

The cinema in twentieth century colonial India began as an audio-visual corollary to the nineteenth century painting and literature. It incorporated certain new technical forms from the West. Historically, the Indian cinema had audiences from different social classes in colonial India but it was not before the 1940s and 50s that notions of the 'popular' were produced. Ravi S. Vasudevan has suggested that though art cinema produced a 'social difference', simultaneous dissolution of identities also happened when cinema created a popular culture.[24] The cinematic journey of the widow (portrayed as young or old) has alsoprovided an encounter for the audiences with the discourse of honour. For the old widow honour is kept intact within the family as long as she was able to inculcate a senseof morality in her son. For him, her life must become a message. To do so, she had to first show her knowledge of socio-moral religious texts and their relationship with daily life. She would have to lead a life of devotion to these texts. The younger widow within the family must undergo symbolic de-sexualisation by wearing only a white sari, removing her vermillion and/or by shaving her head. She must be seen as living the life of a genuine widow evoking pity and sympathy.

Thusthe discourse of a woman's 'honour' was spontaneously introduced in the Hindi cinema. In Mother India, Radha, who is a peasant woman, has a strong urge to 'protect' and 'reclaim' her honour (laj). The cultural idiom of laj works as an ideal to guide a Hindu woman in general, as the idiom also had the capacity to cut across classes and homogenize the Hindu feminine virtue.

In Prem Rog, safeguarding the young widow was tantamount to guarding her sexuality and became a question of honour for her upper caste and wealthy Thakur family. Here the women of the household share responsibility with their male counterparts in monitoring her social activities and guarding her social space. The widow refuses to shave her head and this causes a furor within the male elders of the family who act as interpreters of moral codes within the extended Hindu family and the immediate community in the neighbourhood.

Within the widow home (vidhwa ashram) in Water, the director introducesa subjective aspect to the concept of honour. While all other widows in the Home were tonsured, one of the youngest and the prettiest of them all, a young widow, was spared. This young widow was sent out by the head of the ashram to perform sexual favour to one of the richest zamindars of the city of Benaras. However, when this girl falls in love with a young man and they decide to get married, the head of the ashram tells her that she has gone mad and widows do not remarry. Her marriage would bring nothing but shame to the ashram.

Historically, the upper caste idea of honour itself was double-edged. Reformists argued for widow remarriage primarily because they thought their honour was at constant risk, while some castes feared losing honour if they remarried their widows. The reformation of widows was therefore possible within certain cultural limitations. The Hindi cinema borrowed this complexity from the socio-reformist

activism of the nineteenth century. The cinema audience which came largely from the middle class in independent India inherited thecultural nuances of this dichotomy. The perception that younger widows were more prone to forming illegitimate relations convinced the Hindus across all castes that her sexuality must be relocated within the institution of marriage. In case of the elder widows, ashrams and modern old age homes could relocate them. The state also introduced certain reforms by passing the 1955–1956 Hindu Marriage and Property Acts. This was presumably done to address the question of economic vulnerability of the Hindu women in general and was result of a long drawn battle waged by the Indian women's groups since the 1930s and 40s. In independent India, the Nehruvian socialism uniquely combined with Gandhian moral reformism sought to furnish a renewed moral code. In the context of nation in the making, both Ernest Gellner[25] and E.J.Hobsbawm[26] have laid emphasis on the element of artifact, invention and social engineering. Nations may not just bring together people to be citizens of a post revolutionary state, such as the French state.Nations bring citizens together in the context of a particular stage of technological and economic development also. Nation making was a phenomenon in which citizens' 'view from below' was important. It was equally important to know whether a particular discourse was being accepted or not. In this sense, Nehru had realized the strength,emotional intensity and appropriateness of the Gandhian approach and had woven it with his policies during his prime ministerial days.

This peculiar ideological amalgam opened up the options for social change through a regulated mode of social protest and simultaneously narrowed the options for a social rebellion. Nehru in one of his interviews to R.K.Karanjia observed:

Class struggle is always there. One cannot deny or put it aside. But the solution need no longer be one of violence or struggle or hatred: and that's where Gandhiji's peaceful approach, friendly and constructive approach comes in….Marx was conditioned by his times where there was no democracy or franchise, no working class movement and well, simply no means of resolving inequalities and equalizing society other than struggle.[27]

Gandhian discourse on the possibility of creating a strong moral and ideal Indian had a tremendous impact upon the cinematic 'imagi-Nation'.Gandhi introduced multidimensionality into the meaning of honour during the freedom movement. How can a woman save her honour? According to Gandhi, either she herself could save it or her male relatives could protect her. To women he advised that:

When there is a non-violent atmosphere, where there is the constant teaching of ahimsa, woman will not regard herself as dependent, weak or helpless. She is not really helpless when she is really pure. Her purity makes her conscious of her strength. I have always held that it is physically impossible to violate a woman against her will. The outrage takes place only when she gives way to fear or does not realize her moral strength. If she cannot meet the assailant's physical might, her purity will give her the strength to die before he succeeds to violate her.[28]

An anti-widow remarriage correspondent from Bengal expressed his anxiety about the scarcity of bridegrooms which might result should the practice of widow remarriage become commonplace. Would not unmarried girls then commit all sins which are committed or which are presumed to be committed by widows, if there be no provision to keep more than one wife by a Hindu? What would then happen to love (prem), the saintly grihastha life, and the pativrata Dharma? The correspondent further compared the moral status of Hindus with the Muslims. He cited the example of Muslims having no restrictions on widow remarriage yet there being provision for a man to marry up to four wives. Likewise, he argued, should the Hindus also start practicing polygamy?[29]

Gandhi remarkably defended the Muslim morality by replying that though polygamy was permitted amongst Muslims, they generally had one wife. Hindus in the 'highest circles' had been known to marry more than one wife. The prohibition of widow remarriage was limited to higher classes and no untoward consequence had taken place in the lower castes which remarry their widows. Gandhi found the suggestion that young widows would take up all young men and leave none for unmarried girls to be most absurd of all, as it betrayed a woeful want of sense of proportion.

Nehru's biographer Frank Moraes, in a laudatory tone, writes that Nehru was less doctrinaire than Gandhi whose ideas weresupposed to have shaped Nehru's beliefs. Nehru would bend his ideas but not do away with them. Within their flexible framework Nehru accommodated and reconciled Gandhi's non-violence, his love for the 'small man and acceptance of the small machine', his simple democracy where the gulf between the rich and the poor would not be marked, his gospel of the charhka and village India. Nehru envisaged for India a type of economic life distinctive in itself, conditioned to its own ways of living, and identified neither with the laissez-faire economics of the nineteenth century nor the totalitarianism of Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany.

Theorists of cinema have sought to scrutinize the nature of the relationship between cinema and society as it is embedded in cinematic representations. Madhava Prasad has argued that the Hindi cinema as an institution is part of the continuing struggles within India over the form of the state. Scholars have also debated the role of religion and class in the making of popular Indian cinema. Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel[32] claim that the norm of the film immediately after the independence had been urban, upper caste north Indian Hindu. Characters from non-Hindu regions have been shown as the 'other'. The screen presence of Hindu widowhood waspart of a broad project led by the Indian film makers through which gender relations were transmitted to a growing middle class audience. Ironically in the case of Mother India, the film maker, lead actress, writer, and music director were all Muslim. Vijay Mishra views this attempt by Mehboob as a 'secular ethos' of combining nation and sectarianism. He adds that in Mother India there is excessive insistence upon dharma, the law of culture, and an excessive valorization of genealogy so that Sita may be granted a central position in Indian consciousness. Mishra's argument simplifies the study of phenomenon of representation itself. Mother India represents a monumental problem of the definition of 'mother', Sita-ness, and Otherness in Indian culture.[33] Mishra, however, overlooks the multidimensionality of this 'Sita-ness'. The idea of 'purity' of a woman as a virtue has evolved in different historical times and spaces.[34]

Valmiki's notion of 'Sita-ness' was different from the Gandhian notion of 'Sita-ness'. Gandhi wrote in a particular letter (found in a fragmented state): 'In no country are widows insulted as much as they are in our county. But I place widows in the category of spiritual rishis'.[35] He felt no hesitation in advising the women of his ashram to organize themselves and see that widows are allowed to be present on auspicious occasions, or if restrictions are imposed on their diet or dress, the same rules apply to widowers. If a wife voluntarily makes a sacrifice on the death of her husband, the rigidity of such a social custom had to be broken.

Moreover, there are numerous examples of the cinematic struggle with the idea of how a male partner could be chosen by an adult widow. The white sari-clad widows in the Hindi cinema have been central to several scenes of the colorful festival of Holi. Sholay, the blockbuster of the late 1970s displayed a young widow, who was mostly depicted as sad but in control of herself. The Holi scenes were necessary because it was against the background of a colorful festival that her sadness and misery could be best contrasted. Traditionally Hindu widows did not participate in this festival as it connotes sexual playfulness. The act of putting colour on her, signifies a negation of her widowhood and an acknowledgement of her worldly existence. The visual rupture of the notion of 'honour' takes place when the male hero colours the widow. It is the best form of manifesting a cultural discontinuity because it is acceptable to the audience.

In Water, all the widows celebrate Holi within the ashram premises. The presumption was that making the celebration visible would invite dishonour and would create unnecessary suspicion. Moreover, one of the oldest inmates of the Ashram, who often reminisces about her days of marriage and craves for sweetmeats, cannot ask anyone for them or buy them herself. Doing so would break her social code of self-abnegation. Nevertheless, just before she dies, the youngest widow, Chuhiya, steals a piece of sweetmeat and feeds her.

In Prem Rog, Manorama and Deodhar ride together on a bicycle in various romantic scenes. In fact, the promotion poster of the film showed this white sari clad widow and her lover together on the bicycle. In another scene, Manorama has been shown as resentful and violently protesting when the family barber comes to tonsure her as part of

the widowhood ritual. More than any other aspect of deprivation of a widow's life, it was this de-sexualisation that she feared the most.

**Conclusion**

What strings together these three films is the fact that in all of them the widow is represented as an extremely powerful character who can overcome suffering and misery or can suffer to preserve family and community honour. At the same time, she could also stage a personal/social protest against her victimhood. It is necessary to be aware of the danger in attributing cinematic imagination entirely to the ideological-political struggle of the times. In the context of the film Mother India, Gayatri Chatterjee has pointed out that the hammer and sickle insignia of the Mehboob Production Company intimated the socialist leanings of the director. Turkey had in fact banned Mother India as a communist film.[36]

What was most crucial about 19th century social reform debates was that since the nineteenth century the space of the 'Hindu family' had been opened to public scrutiny. Gandhi had to sanitize this space for a committed non-violent freedom struggle. His strategy was not only to simply designate an ancient glory to the unit of 'family' but also to acknowledge an individual's protest against his or her own family. Units of biologically related individuals with strong attachment to family could not possibly devote themselves seriously to a 'national' struggle. For this Gandhi had to reappropriate various spheres of activity—both traditional and modern—where kinship sentimentality could be inducted into a new political sphere. Sujata Patel has suggested that Gandhi did not break and dismiss the assumptions of 'separate spheres', a notion which originated with the nineteenth century reformists who were middle class men and women.[37] When women joined the national movement the spheres came to overlap.

To sum up, the representation of widowhood in Indian cinema, as has been shown above, was a coming together of several historical processes. As far as gender relations are concerned the permeation of this picture in popular culture is exemplary.

This article has tried to underline some fragments of the politico-cultural imagination which formed the subtext of the national movement—from its infancy to post-colonialtimes and to present day.[38] The debate on Katherine Mayo's Mother Indiain the 1930s had left behind certain sedimented memories and Mother India, the film, where a new powerful woman was recreated in cultural imaginationacted upon those memories. This cultural imagination was nurtured and transformed by invoking the Gandhian views on widowhood. This in turn generated a new energy and enthusiasm desirous of developmental aspirations.

**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Prof Bhagwan Josh (ex faculty JNU) for his valuable suggestions and for going through three drafts of this paper.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Conflict of Interest**

The authors do not have any conflict of interest.

## References

1. Reproductions, oleographs and calendars with representation of Mother India flooded the market from the beginning of the twentieth century. It was the first Indian film to be nominated for the Oscars in 1958. Scholars have dealt with the birth of Indian cinema and its teething problems in the late colonial period. Some examples are: Chowdhry, Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema. Chowdhry investigates the colonial market's reaction against certain ideological formations and its impact on production processes as well as British policy formation as regards empire films.
2. This article is a version of a chapter from authors published doctoral work on Real and Imagined Widows: *Gender Relations in Colonial North india* (2016)
3. Tapati Guha Thakurta, 'Women as "Calendar Art" Icons: Emergence of Pictorial Stereotype in Colonial India', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 26 October 1991, pp. WS-91-99.

4. Neumayer and Schelberger, Bharat Mata. Their work is considered a good example of a visual turn in modern Indian studies where patriotic art has assumed a new visibility.
5. Freedberg, *The Power of Images.*
6. Christopher '*Photos of the Gods*'.
7. It is perhaps not accidental that Gandhi called his journal by this name.
8. The image of the struggling peasant woman became significant in the light of rural indebtedness and poverty that India was faced with in the initial years of independence.
9. For Shyam Benegal, Roy's Do Bigha Zamin (1955) was a watershed in the history of Indian cinema. A certain tradition of acting became less and less theatrical and had slowly acquired a 'humane tendency' because of the liberal background from which Bengali cinema had emerged. Shyam Benegal, 'Bimal Roy: A Film Maker's Perspective', in *The Man Who Spoke in Pictures: Bimal Roy,* Rinki Roy Bhattacharya ed., Delhi: Penguin, 2009, pp. 59–66.
10. In 1955 he made a Bengali film called *Pather Panchali* and followed it up as a trilogy, where he focused on the social changes in independent Bengal.
11. The pioneer of the Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke began with the historical and religious themes in Raja Harischandra (1913) and Lanka Dahan (1917). Themes of colonial ambivalence resonate when one contrasts the cinema on life histories of Hindu saints (Sant Tukaram, 1936), with cinema on encounter with Western modernity in Bilet Phirat or 'England Returned' (1921).
12. Jawaharlal Nehru, *AnAutobiography,* Delhi: Penguin, 2004, p. 448.
13. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post Colonial Literature,* London: Routledge, 1989. Robert Young, *White Mythologies,* Oxford: Routledge, 1990.
14. Suruchi Thapar Bjorkert, *Women in the Indian National Movement',* Delhi: Sage, 2006. She argues that by contributing to the national movement Indian women 'domesticated the public sphere' and 'politicized the domestic sphere.'
15. In the context of agrarian reforms an dismantling of zamindari see: H. D. Malviya, 'Agrarian Unrest After Independence', in *Rural Sociology in India,* A. R. Desai ed., Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969, pp. 390–4.; A. R. Desai, 'Indian Kisan: Their Principal Movements Before Independence; in *Rural Sociology in India*,Bombay: Popular Prakashan.pp. 389–90.;Yogendra Singh, 'The Changing Power Structure of the Village Communities: A Case Study of Six Village in Eastern UP', in, *Rural Sociology in India*, A. R. Desai ed. pp.711–23. The other development of this period was that All India Kisan Sabha was under the Communist influence in post Independent India. (It led Telangana movement in the South; the Tebhaga in the East). Kumar, 'Rural Women in Oudh' pp. 337-369. Also Kumar, *Congress and Classes;* also Siddiqi, Agrarian Unrest in North India.
16. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India,* Delhi: Penguin, 2004 (first published 1946), pp. 53–4.
17. The twin figures of peasant exploitation - the money lender and the zamindar, are familiar characters in the narratives of Indian cinema. In the context of Asian peasant societies, Scott deployed the concept of'moral economy' of the peasant to delineate the ideology of survival and reciprocity, which depended on traditional rationality rather than on classical economics. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia,* Yale: Yale University Press, 1976. Some examples of Indian scholarship on question of peasantry are : D. N. Dhanagare, *Peasant Movement in India 1920–1950,* Delhi:OUP,1983; Kapil Kumar, *Peasant in Revolt: Tenants, Landlord, Congress and the Raj in Oudh, 1886-1922*, Delhi: Manohar,1984; Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi: Duke University Press, 1983. Gyanendra Pandey, 'Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh 1919–1922', in Subaltern Studies I, Delhi: OUP, 1982.; Mridula, Mukherjee, 'Peasant Resistance and Peasant Consciousness in Colonial India: "Subalterns" and Beyond', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 8 Oct. and 15 Oct. 1988; Also Mridula Mukherjee, *Peasants in India's Non Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory,*

New Delhi: Sage, 2004.

18. The Goddess of Wealth and prosperity.
19. In a song in the movie Mother India, Radha urges those villagers who are leaving the village after the devastating flood, not to leave.
20. Literally meaning 'without power' and 'with power' or 'empowered' respectively. Abala continues to be used to this day as a synonym for a 'woman'.
21. Dubbed and subtitled in English.
22. The detailed stories of both these films is contained in Appendix 5.1
23. The book and the responses to it have been discussed below under the theme 'Family, Nation and Politics of Renunciation.'
24. Ravi S. Vasudevan ed., 'Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities: The Hindi Social Film of the 1950s as Popular Culture', in *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema,* Delhi: OUP, 2000, pp. 99–121.
25. Ernest Gellner *Encounters with Nationalism,Cornell* :Cornell University Press,1983.
26. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge: CUP, 1990.
27. R. K. Karanjia, *The Mind of Mr. Nehru*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960, pp. 76–77.
28. 'A Sister's Question', Harijan, 1 Sept. 1940, quoted in M. K. Gandhi, *Women and Social Injustice*, Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1942, p. 105.
29. Suppressed Humanity', Young India, 19 Aug. 1926, quoted in M. K. Gandhi, *Women and Social Injustice*, p. 110.
30. [1]Frank Moraes, Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1956, p. 438.
31. [1]M. Madhava Prasad, Ideology of the Hindi Film, p. 6.
32. [1]Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, Cinema India: *The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*, London: Reaktion Books, 2002.
33. Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire,* New York and London: Routledge, 2002.
34. Renuka Singh, *Womb of Mind: A Sociological Exploration of the Status Experience of Women* in Delhi, Delhi: Vikas Publishing, 1990, p. 125. Singh, a sociologist observes that Sita consciousness operates in the lives of women even today. Her study is about the depths of women's relationships with men and the rediscovery of the meaning of the image of Sita, which has somehow survived despite the 'accumulated dross of centuries'.
35. 'Fragment of a letter', 14 November 1947, in Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi,* vol. XC, p. 31.
36. Chatterjee, Mother India, Delhi: Penguin, 2005. Nevertheless she argues that Mother India was cultural construct more than a political one. About five years after India's independence the nationalist slogan that allegorised the nation as the mother/goddess was still a living memory. The film works on these two levels, which is as both an individual drama and an epic struggle that has a nationalist mythical/historical resonance.
37. Sujata Patel, 'Construction and Reconstruction of Women in Gandhi', in *Gender and Nation,* Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2001, pp. 313–56.
38. The other two films discussed above—Prem Rog and Water, are not about formulating widows as icons or mothers, but as subjects of reforms, rather as subjects of failed reforms. What is remarkable is that while these two films project failure of nineteenth century reformism; association of widows with the Gandhian styled freedom movement is never shown as problematic. In Water, which has been made by Deepa Mehta, (who has experimented with feminist themes in Fire and Earth), the child widow is handed over to a Gandhian who appears to be most trustworthy to Shakuntala. She does not even think once about handing Chuhiya over to the priest towards whom she is respectful and who feels sympathetic towards all the widows. The triumph of Gandhian memory over cinematic imagination is clear.