

## Moving Images of Gandhi

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Mohandas Gandhi, it is reliably reported, had little or no interest in the moving images. Vijay Bhatt's *Ram Rajya* (1943) is the only film that Gandhi is said to have seen in his lifetime, a choice that would not surprise those aware either of the deep veneration in which he generally held Tulsidas's *Ramacaritmanas* or of his view that the chanting of *Ramanama* was calculated to bring solace and relief to the devotees of Rama. That Gandhi was, however, not unaware of the immense hold that cinema was already beginning to exercise over people is testified to by numerous circumstances, among them his suggestion to Bhatt, when he first met the filmmaker in 1940, that he train his camera on the renowned Gujarati saint, Narsi Mehta. Even more tellingly, in the midst of his hectic schedule on his last visit to London to negotiate over Indian independence in the aftermath of the march to Dandi, Gandhi found time to have a visit with Charlie Chaplin. 'I met him', wrote Chaplin many years later, 'in a humble little house in the slum district off the East India Dock Road.' Gandhi was being monopolized by a young woman, but then the way was paved open for Chaplin to assert his presence: 'I knew I had to start the ball rolling, that it was not up to the Mahatma to tell me how much he enjoyed my last film, and so forth – I doubted if he had ever seen a film.' At the conclusion of their conversation, Chaplin was to recall, Gandhi was joined by a handful of people in a prayer meeting. 'It was a curious sight': Gandhi and a handful of his friends and companions sat cross-legged on the floor, and Chaplin 'watched this extremely realistic man, with his astute legal mind and his profound sense of political reality, all of which seemed to vanish in a singsong chant.'<sup>i</sup>

It would not be unreasonable to suppose that Gandhi thought of films as frivolous entertainment, and there is a faint hint in his writings that he construed the cinema hall as a modern den of vice. Some commentators find Gandhi's alleged indifference to cinema suggestive of grave shortcomings in the Mahatma's character. Thus, one scholar, whose admiration for Gandhi's life and thought is palpable, nevertheless takes the view that there was something gravely deficient in Gandhi's disposition towards art in general. Gandhi 'either ignored or took a dim view of the intellectual, scientific, aesthetic, sensuous and other aspects of life', writes Bhikhu Parekh, and he further says of the Mahatma: 'He rarely saw a film, read a book of poetry, visited an art gallery, watched a game, or took any interest in history, archaeology, modern science, wildlife, unspoilt nature, and India's natural beauty.'<sup>ii</sup> Sweeping as is this indictment, by one who recognizes that for Gandhi the care of the soul was an all-consuming task, it pales before the unkind words of V. S. Naipaul, who after a reading of Gandhi's autobiography came to the conclusion that Gandhi was so self-absorbed that he could not see beyond himself. 'Though Gandhi spent three years in England,' avers Naipaul, 'there is nothing in his autobiography about the climate or the seasons, so unlike the heat and monsoon of Gujarat and Bombay'. Gandhi lived in London, and yet he did not – a life woefully incomplete, for 'no London building is described, no street, no room, no crowd, no public conveyance.'<sup>iii</sup> Never mind that Gandhi had enough to do in his lifetime, and one wonders whether the lives of scholars and writers who never picked up a broom, stayed in a village, consoled the victims of violence, experimented with low-cost toilets, or engaged in the countless other kind of activities that one associates with the life of Gandhi should also be considered incomplete or unfulfilled.

Although Gandhi may have been oblivious to the cinema, it is just as palpably clear that India cinema has been unable to reciprocate this alleged indifference on his part. One might suppose, for example, that the interest in Gandhi – as manifested in such films as *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara* (2005), *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006), and *Gandhi, My Father* (2007) – among Indian directors aspiring to large audiences is rather recent, but as I shall suggest, popular filmmakers have always been sensitive to Gandhi's iconicity and are fully aware that Gandhi's name, more so than any other Indian name in the world, constitutes a unique form of cultural capital. However large the followings of megastars such as Shahrukh Khan, Amitabh Bachchan, Aishwarya Rai (Bachchan), and Akshay Kumar, there is but no question that Gandhi still remains the most universal and singular icon of India to the outside world. Similarly, however little the relation of Gandhi's teachings to the murky world of Indian politics, it is indubitably true that Gandhi is a global figure of political resistance: when Indian Malaysians, some constituted into a new political entity called Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), took to the streets in December 2007 to demand political rights and entitlements, they held aloft pictures of Gandhi (*Times of India*, 21 December 2007, p. 13), just as Tibetan protestors – in Delhi, Bangalore, San Francisco, London, and elsewhere – have galvanized around pictures of Gandhi and the Dalai Lama as they seek to bring awareness of Beijing's repressive policies in Tibet. Gandhi appears in the most unlikely places: prisoners at the Cebu City jail near Manila carried a huge picture of Gandhi as they danced to a song by Bonnie Tyler, 'I Need a Hero' (*Indian Express*, 27 April 2008, p. 5).

If Gandhi thus remains the supreme representative of India, so popular Hindi cinema is one of the great passions that animates Indian life. It is unnecessary, for the present, to be detained by just what 'Bollywood' means,<sup>iv</sup> or the multiple registers in which this word operates, but suffice to say that Bollywood is now India's most visible export to the wider world. And so to the question: just what has been popular Hindi cinema's treatment of the 'Father of the Nation', and in what ways has Gandhi's shadow fallen over the world of Hindi cinema? Even the early phase of Indian cinematic history is inextricably intertwined with the name of Mohandas Gandhi. Political documentaries of the 1920s and 1930s were resolutely focused on the Mahatma, by now a figure of considerable veneration around the world, and fragments of Gandhi's life have been captured in a substantial number of moving images produced by Fox Movietone News, Hearst Metrotone News, and other similar companies. A small figure, by no means remarkably photogenic, the bearer (some thought) of an awkward physical countenance, Gandhi nonetheless filled the frame. In 1919, drawing upon his experience of more than two decades in South Africa, Gandhi called for mass resistance to British rule in India and an end to the atrocities of the colonial state. But the moving camera was still in its infancy, and it is Gandhi's defiance of the salt laws in 1930 that would earn him worldwide fame. Numerous films captured the footage of Gandhi's 21-day march, the launch of the civil disobedience movement as Gandhi's act inspired hundreds of thousands of Indians to challenge the iniquitous laws governing the production, distribution, sale, and taxation of salt, and Gandhi's trip to London. Strict censorship laws in India initially prevented such films – among them, *Mahatma Gandhi's March for Freedom* (Sharda Film Co.), *Mahatma Gandhi's March, March 12* (Krishna Film Co.), and *Mahatma Gandhi Returns from the Pilgrimage of Peace* (Saraswati) – from having public screenings, but the passage of the Government of India Act in 1935, which was a de facto acknowledgment of the fact that Indian aspirations for independence would no longer remain purely empty dreams, eased the way for such films to be shown in public.

The second phase of Indian cinema's engagement with Gandhi can be dated to the second half of the 1950s and the early 1960s. The documentaries of the 1920s to the 1940s cast Gandhi as a predominantly political figure, but the filmmakers working in the aftermath of independence took Gandhi's place in the political life of India as a settled fact. In a document penned just a few days before his assassination, Gandhi stated that India had wrought political freedom, but the masses were still to gain economic, social, and cultural rights. The project of achieving and consolidating the nation-state had seen much encouragement, but filmmakers with a social sensibility recognized that Indian society was afflicted by a large number of social 'evils'. Most Indian farmers tilled the land under terribly harsh conditions; the practice of dowry remained widespread; child marriages were by no means uncommon; the education of girls was entirely unknown in some parts of the country; and, notwithstanding the legal sanctions attached to discrimination against Dalits, caste oppression held millions of Indians in a place of nearly insurmountable subjugation. The political controversies – Gandhi's support of the Khilafat movement, his difficult relationship with Subhas Bose, his critiques of patriots who were unwilling to abjure political violence, among many others -- that had surrounded Gandhi in his own lifetime did not interest these filmmakers; they were attracted, rather, by Gandhi's social teachings and his insistence that reform of self had a fundamental relationship to reform of society.

Thus, to take one example, though Gandhi does not explicitly appear anywhere in V. Shantaram's *Do Aankhen Barah Haath* ('Two Eyes, Twelve Hands', 1957), it is very likely that most viewers would at once have recognized the film as suffused by a Gandhian ethos. The film is a fictional rendering of a 'great experiment' – after, we might say, Gandhi's own 'experiments with truth' as narrated in his autobiography -- conducted in a small part of India, where a jailor, having secured the permission of higher authorities, takes under his personal custody six men convicted of the most brutal crimes and seeks to render them into nonviolent and productive members of society. The film's supreme Gandhian moment comes towards the end: having resisted on many occasions the temptation to escape and even murder the jailor (now their mentor), the six men successfully labor to transform the inhospitable and dry land into a fertile expanse of vegetables. They propose to sell the produce at the local vegetable market at competitive prices, but the principal shopkeeper, who perceives a threat to his monopoly over the market, orchestrates a riot and has the six reformed men beaten to a pulp. The film presents the spectacle of 'twelve hands', who under an ordinary penal system would have been condemned to life in prison but have now been transformed into moral beings, taking the blows without any offer of resistance – a scene highly reminiscent of episodes from the civil disobedience movement, where volunteers trained in Gandhian satyagraha aimed to win over their oppressors through the force of love.

B. R. Chopra's *Naya Daur* ('New Era'), released the same year as Shantaram's *Do Aankhen Barah Haath*, offers a Gandhian perspective on 'development', progress, and the rise of the nation-state. Some of Gandhi's critics allege that he was unreasonably critical of modern industrial civilization, and the film's main plot, which revolves around the vexed issue of the displacement of human labor by machinery, directly takes on this subject. The film commences with a lengthy epigraph from Gandhi, so signifying its congruency with his views: 'there is no room', Gandhi had written, 'for machinery that would displace human labour and concentrate power in a few hands. Labour has its unique place in a cultured human family.' *Naya Daur* may appear to place machine-owning capitalists in simple

opposition to those who labor with their hands, but its portrayal of the consequences for traditional laboring communities when machinery is introduced is much more nuanced. 'Dead machinery must not be pitted against the millions of living machines', continues Gandhi's epigram, 'represented by the villages scattered in the seven hundred thousand villages of India. Machinery to be well used has to help and ease human effort.' The film, in its invocation of the epic struggle between the villagers and the city-retained entrepreneur who is keen to put India on the fast track to modernity, furnishes an incipient critique of the ideology of development – an ideology that, in the last analysis, surrenders the idea of the moral economy to the notion that people may be legitimately sacrificed in the name of development. In its explicit contrast of the village and the city, highlighted by the ditty 'Main Bumbai ka bau', where the 'daulat wallahs' of the city are set in contrast against the country's 'himmat wallahs', *Naya Daur* signifies its congruence with Gandhi's imagination of the village as the site of authentic if harried innocence.

If in *Do Aankhen* and *Naya Daur* Gandhi has an unseen but viscerally felt presence, in Bimal Roy's *Sujata* (1959) Gandhi is seen as the inheritor of the Buddha's worldview and his life is offered as a parable for our times. The story revolves around an untouchable girl adopted, though not by design, into an upper-caste family. *Sujata* is brought up alongside Rama, who is the biological child of Upendranath and Charu Choudhury. Rama's marriage with the handsome Adhir, also a Brahmin, had long been discussed; but Adhir has set his eyes on *Sujata*, who feels not only that the caste barrier may well be insurmountable but that she would be viewed as an ungrateful wretch by her adoptive mother if she were to reciprocate Adhir's love and so jeopardize Rama's prospects. In a touching moment, Adhir narrates to *Sujata* the story of one of the Buddha's disciples, who in his wanderings felt thirsty and stopped by a well from where a low-caste woman was drawing water. She is afraid of giving the Buddhist monk water from her hands, lest he be polluted; but, as he explains to her, water which quenches thirst is always blessed. *Sujata's* doubts are nevertheless not so readily resolved: there may have been men in the past who were above caste feelings, but are such men to be found in the present? This leads Adhir to tell her about a contemporary mahapurusa [great man], 'a champion of the untouchables, Mahatma Gandhi.' Thereupon Adhir narrates the story of how Gandhi, who had set himself up at the Sabarmati Ashram, from where he would launch the struggle for Indian independence, was nearly compelled to shut down the Ashram after he had decided to accept into his community an untouchable woman. Suddenly, many of his benefactors withdrew their support, and were it not for an anonymous donor who came forward at the last moment with a generous gift, Gandhi's experiment might have been short-lived.<sup>v</sup>

In this phase of the popular Hindi film, then, we do not see any representations of Gandhi as such, but his teachings are viewed as having left a lasting impression on common people. Moreover, the films very much rest on the idea that Gandhi's life and teachings were so much a part of the fabric of everyday knowledge that lengthy explications of his worldview were not necessary. Whatever moral presence Gandhi may have exercised, the generation that had shepherded India's fortunes after independence was beginning to disappear by the early to mid-1960s, and Gandhi is scarcely present in popular Hindi cinema of the 1960s through the mid-1980s. Nehru died in 1964; his successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, passed away less than two years later. Politicians had become habituated to garlanding Gandhi's statues, and the canonization of Gandhi as the 'Father of the Nation' signified that debate on Gandhi was neither required nor desirable. In the Hindi film, the sheer normalization of

Gandhi came across in the portrait of Gandhi that, in countless films, was shown hanging on the walls of police stations, perhaps peering down on the police clerk or sub-inspector who rather nonchalantly was negotiating a fat bribe for himself. To be sure, the iconic representation of Gandhi could vary once in a while: thus, in the landmark *Deewar* ('The Wall', 1975), the dock worker Vijay takes a decision to resist the extortionist demands of the gang that controls the docks while seated at a table over which hangs the portrait of the defiant Gandhi of the salt march with his staff.

One can well argue that, commencing in the mid-1960s, a time which also saw India locked into battle with Pakistan, Gandhi's ideas were beginning to seem remote to a generation, disenchanted as much by the general oblivion into which India had fallen in the world community except for its reputation as a place of spiritual repose as by the failure of the Indian state and economy to generate growth, that craved for India's rapid integration into the world economy. Nevertheless, the omission of Gandhi from the popular film is not entirely explicable. One is tempted to say that this generation did not tear the halo around Gandhi to shreds, rather condemning him, as T. S. Eliot might have said, to the more unfortunate place of limbo, worthy of neither excessive praise nor blame; and yet it is in the mid-1970s that both the grass-roots swelling of discontent, reaching its apogee in Jaiprakash Narayan's Gandhian-inspired calls for 'total revolution', and Indira Gandhi's proclamation of emergency, furnished possibilities for rescuing Gandhi from those who had packaged him as a khadi-clad prohibitionist and prophet of the simple life. Gandhi was slowly poised to re-enter into the political streams of Indian life, now as something more than a postage stamp, totem of goodness, or prescient social reformer, but there remained uncertainty about how Gandhi's thoughts could be marshaled in the interest of progressive social and political agendas.

It is not until 1982 that a filmmaker would attempt to capture Gandhi on celluloid. Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* would go on to have a huge success worldwide, but it does not appear to have generated any interest in Gandhi among Hindi filmmakers. Its hagiographic portrait of Gandhi did not sit well with the Indian middle classes, who while immensely pleased that Gandhi brought India some recognition in the wider world were nonetheless firm in their belief that the Gandhian outlook had to be decisively jettisoned if India was to become a strong modern nation-state. By the late 1980s, Hindu nationalists, once banished to the margins, had succeeded in inserting themselves into public debates about the direction being taken by India. Proponents of Hindutva orchestrated, as is well known, a large public agitation demanding the removal of Ayodhya's Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque that they viewed as having defiled the birth site of Rama. The mosque, in one of the most dramatic moments in modern Indian history, was destroyed on 6 December 1992, and Hindu nationalists capitalized on popular sentiments to consolidate their gains in the political sphere. It is no accident that the next phase of Gandhi's representation in the popular Hindi film commenced shortly after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 1998. The extreme Hindu right had always been wary of Gandhi, but the assassination of Gandhi on 30 January 1948 by Nathuram Godse, a Pune Brahmin with strong links to such organizations of Hindu supremacy as the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh ('National Volunteer Corps'), had put Hindu organizations on the defensive. Once the BJP had come to power, both Hindu nationalists and other critics of Gandhi felt emboldened to puncture the pious representations of Gandhi that had so far prevailed in the Hindi film world.

In the post-1998 period, then, the two films that first come to mind are *Hey Ram* (O God!, 2000) and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002). Gandhi is neither wholly central nor peripheral to either film, and both films consider Gandhi from the point of view of his critics. In *Hey Ram*, the prominent critical voices are of Hindu ideologues, as well as of those who, having suffered the loss of dear ones and their property in the riots and killings that accompanied the birth of Pakistan, held Gandhi responsible for the partition of India. *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, as the title of the film amply suggests, is focused on the revolutionary figure whose popularity at one time matched that of Gandhi at nearly the helm of his fame. One might say that it is those who had invested all their hopes in Gandhi who experienced the most bitter disappointment: some thought that Gandhi's intervention could have saved the life of Bhagat Singh, who was sent to the gallows for his part in the assassination of a British official, just as more than fifteen years later others firmly believed that Gandhi did precious little to prevent India's partition. Even as the two films come at Gandhi from opposite ends, positioning him between critiques of nonviolent resistance both from those who thought that nonviolent resistance had strengthened the hands of Muslims and from those who held to the view that only armed revolutionary socialism could emancipate the nation, the films also suggest that Gandhi's antagonists must not always be understood as ideologues but rather as people whose sentiments often arose from the depth of their experience and conviction.

*Hey Ram* is set largely in the period between 16 August 1946, when the Muslim League leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared 'Direct Action Day' in Calcutta to press forth demands for an independent nation-state for Indian Muslims, and the assassination of Gandhi on 30 January 1948. The archaeologist Saket Ram is tormented by the sexual brutalization and murder of his own wife as Jinnah's call for 'Direct Action' sends Muslims into the streets; in the insane and frenzy-ridden hours that follow, he joins the mob in the hunt for victims of the opposite religion. He runs into the Brahmin ideologue, Ram Abhyankar, who describes 'Barrister Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi' as the man who, having betrayed his own community and appeased the Muslims, must be held solely responsible for the mayhem on the streets. Ram Abhyankar cajoles Saket Ram into joining him and others in a plot to murder Mohandas Gandhi, but Saket Ram's chance encounter with an old Muslim friend, Amjad, resurrects within him the awareness of the humanity of the Other. Arriving at Birla House on January 30<sup>th</sup>, Saket Ram is not the perpetrator of the murder of Gandhi but rather a witness to it as the Mahatma, with the words 'Hey Ram' allegedly on his lips,<sup>vi</sup> is laid low by three bullets from Godse's gun. One man pulled the trigger, but many were responsible for the assassination, and still more willed it: the conspiracy to murder Gandhi was much larger than any court would have been prepared to admit. Though, in the last analysis, *Hey Ram* may justifiably be seen as critiquing Hindu nationalist readings of Gandhi, it is nevertheless the case that its Gandhi is a bit uncertain, full of humor if at times cranky, more a picture of frailty and fallibility than one might suppose from the received versions circulating since his death.

*The Legend of Bhagat Singh* takes a more stern if predictable view of Gandhi's failings. Many commentators who have long argued for an alternative interpretation of the freedom struggle, one that would shift the focus from the Gandhi-led Congress to the small splinter groups that advocated armed resistance, 'revolutionary socialism', and workers' uprisings, saw Gandhi as a reformist whose accent on nonviolent resistance led him to easy

accommodations with both colonial and indigenous elites. The film purports to set up a debate between Gandhi and those who are keen on demonstrating that armed resistance played a vital role in the liberation of India from colonial rule, but its unabashed celebration of Bhagat Singh's ideas occludes any real possibility of a meaningful dialogue with Gandhi's worldview. Both Gandhi and Bhagat Singh were, in their respective ways, formed in the cauldron of the fire that stormed over India when General Dyer's troops perpetrated a massacre of innocents at Jallianwala Bagh in April 1919: Bhagat Singh witnessed the incident as a young boy and at once became a sworn enemy of the British, while Gandhi, who understood the law and the discursive nature of colonialism as well as anyone else, penned the masterful report of the Congress on the massacre and other atrocities committed in the Punjab. Yet, in its barely disguised disdain for Gandhi's supposed pusillanimity, the film supposes that there is only one kind of valor and that resistance in the Gandhian mode was inevitably bound to lead to capitulation.

In its view of Gandhi, *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* stages a two-pronged attack on the confabulations surrounding the life of the Mahatma. One of the early scenes in the film, which dramatizes an encounter between Gandhi (and his entourage) and the supporters of the now-martyred Bhagat Singh (and his compatriots Rajguru and Sukhdev), dwells on Gandhi's inability, or pointed refusal, to intercede with the Viceroy to save the lives of the three young revolutionaries. Gandhi declares his admiration for Bhagat Singh's patriotism, even while he insists that he cannot be a party to violence. Eager to sign into place an agreement between himself, as representative of the Congress, and the British Government, Gandhi made only the feeblest gestures to save Bhagat Singh's life. This was, the film suggests, the kiss of death. The central Gandhian tenet of attentiveness to means, rather than ends, is never allowed to question Bhagat Singh's actions, and thus the filmmaker squanders an opportunity to present the two men as engaged in a dialectical and dialogic quest for the truth. The film's other principal tack is to regurgitate the old canard, which one suspects will survive as long as the fetish for violence remains, that a certain permissiveness on the part of the British allowed Gandhi to survive. Faced with the prospect of armed revolutionaries striking at British institutions, the film suggests, the British much preferred the gentle ways of Gandhian nonviolence. As if hinting at the frivolity of nonviolent resistance, the British 'tolerance' for Gandhi is conveyed during a ball dance and dinner where British officials and the ladies surmise that hunger striking by Bhagat Singh and his fellow inmates has gone well beyond the fasts that Gandhi frequently staged.

If the political ascendancy of Hindu nationalism in 1998 perhaps paved the way for cinematic interpretations of Gandhi less hospitable to him than the work of early filmmakers, we should not be surprised that the BJP's removal from power following their electoral losses in 2004 should have facilitated yet another round of films on Gandhi. In the interim period, let us recall, many of Gandhi's critics might have been chastened by the pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat that took over 2000 lives, predominantly Muslim. That Gandhi's own native state, which has been aggressively pursuing 'development' and the hedonism of wealth, should have been the first to have entirely abandoned his teachings suggests how hard Gandhi had to labor among his own people to introduce the ethos of nonviolence and a principled politics. Stung perhaps by the view, stated with brutal candor by Nathuram Godse, that Gandhian nonviolence had emasculated Indians and was calculated to produce an effete people who would not be able to survive in the harsh world

of realpolitik, Gandhi's fellow Gujaratis, in particular, have been determined to render Gandhi into a dim memory of the past.

Jahnu Barua's *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara* ('I Did not Kill Gandhi', 2005), Rajkumar Hirani's *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* ('Keep At It, Munna Bhai', 2006), and Feroz Abbas Khan's *Gandhi, My Father* (2007) occupy a rather different space than any of the films we have considered so far. For filmmakers such as Shantaram, an engagement with the political history of the nation was barely necessary: the nation was an accomplished fact and Gandhi's place in that history was beyond dispute. Four decades later, the conventional political narrative appeared to filmmakers as inadequate: some sought to resurrect Hindu nationalism, others aimed at producing revisionist accounts more hospitable to other nationalists – among them, Bhagat Singh and Sardar Patel – or such hostile critics of Gandhi as Babasaheb Ambedkar. Gandhi may have forged the nation, but how accommodating was the nation to Gandhi? And if the nation aimed at integration, whose identity was being pressed forth as the template for others to follow? Just as significantly, if a liberal humanist conception of democracy claims our assent, could Gandhi's views be at all reconciled with such a conception of democracy? Did Gandhi's authoritarianism strengthen the resolve of those who stood for the most retrograde views?

The recent film, *Gandhi, My Father* (2007), poses some of these questions while gesturing at others. What to speak of other Gujaratis, even Gandhi's oldest son appears to have wanted to exorcise his father; and, yet, as the film movingly suggests, it is only those who are closest to us whom we seek to exorcise or banish from our lives. Told in good measure from the perspective of Harilal, Gandhi's oldest son with whom he had an estranged relationship, the film is scarcely reticent in putting forth the view that Gandhi – otherwise known in India as Bapu or the Father of the Nation -- may have been quite inadequate as a father to his own sons. One of the film's most poignant moments comes towards the end: having been retrieved from the gutters, a grievously sick and drunk Harilal is brought to a hospital. When he is asked his father's name, he replies in a whisper, 'Bapu'. Everyone has a bapu (father), and the doctor persists with his questioning: Bapu who? It is the supreme irony that Harilal shares Bapu with everyone, but is himself bereft of bapu. Did Gandhi, like many others who may be of saintly disposition, find that he could be a father figure to millions but that fathering his own children posed challenges to which he was not equal? Can the necessity of Harilal be affirmed with the observation that Gandhi, who was perhaps more insistent on disowning his Mahatmahood than others were in stripping him of the veneer of the saintly one, nevertheless needed to be reminded of the limits of power and the frailty of authority? In the grand epic that was the life of Mahatma, there were heroic struggles that could not be wholly subsumed under the sign of the political.

*Munna Bhai Lage Raho* (2006) commences with an uncommon plot. Munna, a common but loveable hoodlum, is mesmerized by the voice of Jhanavi, a female radio talk-show host. When Jhanavi announces a quiz on the occasion of Gandhi's birthday on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, Munna engineers the abduction of a number of professors and so wins the grand prize. This sets up a meeting between Munna and Jhanavi, the woman of his dreams, but posing as a professorial expert on Gandhi throws up new problems for Munna. Poring over books on Gandhi in a library which has not been visited in years, in preparation for a talk that Munna must deliver at Jhanavi's request at an old age home, Munna is startled to find Bapu appearing before him. Inspired by Bapu, Munna arrives at a radical understanding of the



essence of Bapu's teachings. In a moment of epiphany, Munna relates to his audience that Gandhi has been honored in nearly every imaginable way – his statues stand at important street corners, his face is stamped on banknotes and postage stamps, his portrait adorns principal office buildings, countless institutions have been named after him, and politicians swear by his name. He is everywhere -- except in the hearts of men and women. Becoming an avid proponent of 'Gandhigiri', Munna slowly reforms himself and seeks to persuade people to live the ethical life; however, as Bapu gently reminds him, he has no right to Jhanavi's affections until he has divulged the truth of his identity to her. The imperfections of others are but one's own, Munna finds, and in that moment of truth he triumphs over all adversity.

*Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara* is melancholy to the same degree to which *Munna Bhai Lage Raho* approaches its subject with deft comedy. It is again the spectre of Gandhi that looms large over the life of Uttam Chaudhary, a renowned professor of Hindi literature now living in retirement with his daughter Trisha. Professor Chaudhury's daughter attributes his increasingly erratic behavior to dementia with which he has been diagnosed, but when his inexplicable behavior appears to jeopardize her marriage prospects Trisha becomes sufficiently alarmed that she begins to seek both family and professional help. Professor Chaudhury has a habit of running away and taking shelter under a large statue of Gandhi, and slowly it dawns on her that he labors under the conviction that he assassinated Gandhi. The psychiatrist suggests an ingenious plot to free Professor Chaudhury from the demons that haunt him: if the learned professor could be put on trial, and acquitted of the heinous charge that weighs him down, he might after all become sane. There is yet more to this seeming madness: however unlike each other, Gandhi and his assassin Godse were also fundamentally similar in their abstemiousness, love of the nation, and reverence for the Bhagavad Gita; they were also bound together by the institution of the political trial. Godse's trial for Gandhi's assassination would rather uncannily mirror Gandhi's own trial on charges of sedition in 1922.

The mock trial unfolds and Professor Chaudhury is deemed innocent of the charge of assassinating Gandhi; and, yet, even as the trial appears to have succeeded, he still takes responsibility for the murder of Gandhi. The soliloquy that follows is equal parts of contrition, chastisement, and catharsis. Professor Chaudhury had known all along that it was Godse who fired the bullets that fateful evening of January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1948. '*Maine Gandhi Ko Nahi Mara*': I did not kill Gandhi, and yet those bare words of seeming innocence disguise ugly truths. The murder of Gandhi was a permissive assassination: we permitted that act of desecration because too many of us thought of the old man as a spent force whose injunctions to live the ethical life were a hindrance to those seeking the advantages of wealth and power. Men like Gandhi have to be assassinated repeatedly: they may not live in the flesh, but their spectre hovers over us. Those whom we banish from our thoughts come back to haunt us. As the camera remains resolutely focused on Chaudhury, the viewer cannot but think that the 'mad' professor is much less mad than those who have conspired in the loud silence that has fallen over Gandhi in the land of his birth. Little did Nehru know that it is not a madman who took Bapu away from 'us', but someone who was if anything too sane and calculating. Who, in the film's haunting tones, will save us from the pathology of rationality?

If the popular Hindi film represents something of the pulse of the nation, then there can be little question that Gandhi is supremely part of the national imaginary. He filled the lives of Indians in more ways than can be contemplated. I have suggested that popular culture in India has often expressed a certain ambivalence towards Gandhi, but nonetheless the presence of other elements, such as the folk, has helped to steer the popular, especially insofar as it has been defined by the middle class, towards a less antagonistic relationship with Gandhi. Gandhi's admirers may be full of the misgivings to which Munna and Professor Chaudhury give eloquent expression, but the Hindi film shows why, and how, Gandhi is inescapably stitched into the warp and woof of the Indian sensibility. Indeed, we might say that Gandhi has been present even in his absence. The film *Lagaan* (2000), directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, is supremely illustrative of this tendency: though the narrative is pitched as a series of oppositions, between Indian nationalism and British colonialism, between the letter and spirit of the game of cricket, between a properly attired team and a team comprised of ragged individuals drawn from the poorer segments of Indian society, *Lagaan* can be read almost effortlessly as a Gandhian moral fable for our times. One suspects that in *Gandhi* the Hindi film has found the epic material to which it is inescapably drawn.

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<sup>i</sup> Charlie Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964; Cardinal Books, 1966), 371-74.

<sup>ii</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001 [1997]), 119.

<sup>iii</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 102-103. Naipaul, ever the expert sociologist, is certain that Gandhi was quintessentially Indian, insofar as the Indian ego is dangerously underdeveloped.

<sup>iv</sup> See Vinay Lal and Gita Rajan, 'Ethnographies of the Popular and the Public Sphere in India', *South Asian Popular Culture* 5, no. 2 (October 2007), 88.

<sup>v</sup> Cf. M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1940 [1927]), 292.

<sup>vi</sup> Vinay Lal, "'He Ram": The Politics of Gandhi's Last Words', *Humanscape* 8, no. 1 (January 2001), 34-38.