

## The Case of the Missing Mahatma: Gandhi and the Hindi Cinema

Rachel Dwyer

**M.** K. “Mahatma” Gandhi (1869–1948) is regarded as the father of the Indian nation, or as Bapuji. Yet while Gandhi left many volumes of his work and many biographies have been written; his image is well known in India and throughout the world, mostly through photographs and chromolithographs (Pinney 2004, chap. 6); every Indian town has his statue, and his image appears on every Indian banknote; and even an opera on his life has been composed (Philip Glass’s *Satyagraha*, 1980), there are surprisingly few Indian films about him and his role in the national drama, the historic struggle for independence, the most important event in twentieth-century India.

Gandhi made the freedom struggle a popular movement in part through his manipulation of symbols such as khadi, the spinning wheel, and his dress, yet though a prolific writer, he eschewed the new medium of film for promulgating his message. Gandhi’s low opinion of cinema was recorded in his interview with the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC 1927–28): “Even if I was so minded, I should be unfit to answer your questionnaire, as I have never been to a cinema. But even to an outsider, the evil that it has done and is doing is patent. The good, if it has done any at all, remains to be proved.”<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi famously saw only part of one film in his life, Vijay Bhatt’s *Ram Rajya* (1943); his curiosity was never aroused by the first all-Indian film, D. G. Phalke’s mythological film, *Raja Harischandra* (1917 [1913]), although it retold the story of Harischandra, one of Gandhi’s role models (Gandhi 1982 [1927]: 23). Perhaps the reason is, in part, that in Gandhi’s lifetime the only film star he was said to resemble was Mickey Mouse, according to his close friend Sarojini Naidu. Gan-

1. Statement of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Sabarmati, dated November 12, 1927, ICC 1927–28, 3:56.

dhi was not even interested in meeting the greatest star of the day, Charlie Chaplin, whom he thought of as just a buffoon until he was persuaded that Chaplin was a working-class hero (Lester 1932).

The historical figure of Gandhi has appeared in a number of films. This article concentrates on Gandhi's absence in Hindi commercial cinema and raises questions about how life stories are depicted in historical and other genres in Hindi films and how, without this most popular medium for learning about history, Gandhi's life remains known in India.

### Images of Gandhi

In addition to the many photographs of Gandhi (Rühe 2004), there is a huge amount of publicly accessible documentary footage of the freedom movement, much on newsreel, providing images of Gandhi, his manner of moving, and the sound of his voice. Some of the newsreels were edited into documentaries (Garga 2007: 93), including A. K. Chettiar's 1940 film *Mahatma Gandhi*, which has footage of Gandhi from 1912 that was shot by many cinematographers. The original, made in Tamil, seems to have been lost, but a shortened version remains in *Mahatma Gandhi—Twentieth Century Prophet* (1953) (Chettiar 2007). Once Bombay's theaters reopened after Gandhi's assassination, two films on Gandhi were shown: *The Light That Shone* (1948) and the Rajshri *Vishwadeep Gandhi*, a three-reeler, directed by Dwarka Khosla (Dwyer 2006: 70–71). These do not seem to have survived, unlike many later films about Gandhi, including Vitthalbhai Jhaveri's *Mahatma—Life of Gandhi 1869–1948* (1968).

Gandhi appears as a character in many historical costume dramas (fictional stories set in historical times) about the freedom struggle, where his ideas play a key role in the salvation of the hero/heroine. These include the Indo-Canadian film by Deepa Mehta *Water* (2005), where becoming a follower of Gandhi allows a widow a new life, and Kamal Haasan's *Hey! Ram (Oh, Lord)* (2000), where the South Indian hero Saketh Ram, whose wife is raped and killed on the day of Mohammed Ali Jinnah's "Direct Action Day," a pro-Pakistan protest by the Muslim League (August 16, 1946), joins a Hindutva group and plans to murder Gandhi but ultimately accepts Gandhianism to resolve his conflicts.

Another group of films called "Gandhian ethos films" raise Gandhian views indirectly. These include the Marathi Prabhat devotional films (see below), as well as Tamil films such as *Thyagabhoomi* (1939), directed by K. Subramaniam and written by "Kalki" on the theme of untouchability, with an image of Gandhi seeming to give his blessing, and another on untouchability, A. V. Meiyappan's

*Naam iruvar* (1947), where in a song-and-dance scene the film star sings in praise of Gandhi before his statue.<sup>2</sup>

The 1950s are often referred to as the Nehruvian period in Hindi cinema, but the films are mostly quiet about Gandhi and are concerned instead with issues of modernity and the new nation. However, the occasional social film picks up the Gandhian ethos, including the controversial and long-banned *Nastik* (dir. I. S. Johar; 1954; see Dwyer 2006: 139), *Do aankhen barah haath* (dir. V. Shantaram; 1957; see Dwyer 2005: 82–84), and *Naya daur* (dir. B. R. Chopra; 1957; see Dwyer 2005: 175–76). Although Gandhi's image is seen in many films, it is not until the 2000s and the new historical film (see below) that Gandhi returns as a screen presence. However, there is a marked Gandhian ethos in the films of Ashutosh Gowariker, notably *Lagaan: Once upon a Time in India* (2001) and *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), but most clearly in his *Swades: We the People* (2004), which specifically refers to activist Rajni Bakshi's 1998 book on neo-Gandhianism, *Bapa kuti*. In *Swades*, the character Mohan leaves behind his work for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and returns to India, where he discovers his true self in village life, with his beloved, tellingly named Gita, as he becomes involved in promoting education for all and participating in anticaste activities.

A nonmainstream Hindi film is *Maine Gandhi ko nahin mara* (dir. Jahnua Barua; 2005), the story of a retired Hindi literature professor whose dementia leads him to believe that he killed Gandhi. His family stages a mock trial in which he is acquitted, but he claims that he is guilty, as we all are, as we all killed him, we have all forgotten him. In the most popular of all films that show Gandhi, he appears in bodily form. In 2004 a new film hero was introduced, Munnabhai, who reached out to one of the biggest audiences in India in *Munnabhai MBBS* (dir. Rajkumar Hirani; 2004) and in *Lage raho Munna Bhai (LRMB)* (dir. Rajkumar Hirani; 2006). Munna is a lovable rogue, a petty gangster who aspires to middle-class education and falls in love with upper-class girls. He appeals across audiences, classes, and regions and to viewers of all types of cinema, in part because he is one of the few heroes who represent a national fantasy and are accessible to all classes and ages.

Munna's second film, *LRMB*, is a fairy tale about a thug who, led by love, aspires to be a professor of history and a Gandhian. In this film, Munna is now fatherless and lacking authority. The father of the nation comes to fulfill this

2. [sify.com/peopleandplaces/fullstory.php?id=13273735&vsv=1068](http://sify.com/peopleandplaces/fullstory.php?id=13273735&vsv=1068); p. 45. "Plot Summary for *Thyagabhoomi*," IMDb, [www.imdb.com/title/tt0276559/plotsummary](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0276559/plotsummary) (accessed November 25, 2009).

role in his life, perhaps making Munna—whose name means “kid”—the *Aam Hindustani*, or the Indian Everyman.

This film also marks a recuperation of Gandhian thought, originally hybridized from global influences, as an Indian way of thought. Although Gandhi himself was famously anticonsumerist, his other values remain strong; even the most avid consumers in India put religion and family first—at least as ideals—and they consume *as* Hindus and *as* family.

*LRMB* does not deal with a complicated view of Gandhi but shows how adopting one of his strategies, satyagraha, can lead to an ethical resolution of conflict. Munnabhai calls this “Gandhigiri,” or Gandhism, a formation that echoes his own practice of *dadagiri*, or thuggery. This ethical stance, combined with Munna’s devotion to his beloved Jhanvi, his desire to do good, and his ability to suffer, is seen to be more valuable than education, as his understanding of Gandhi is superior to that of a history professor. We soon find out that his hallucinations of Gandhi are, in fact, the manifestation of the inner conscience of this Indian Everyman, as love requires a moral reformation and honesty.

Munna’s Gandhigiri was certainly more influential than academic research on Gandhi, for it led to a revival in talking about Gandhi, especially among the young, who began to follow Gandhigiri as a nonpolitical, moral way of behaving, sending flowers with “Get well soon” cards to those who are morally corrupt.

Yet there is a great ambivalence at the heart of this film. Although it is critical of “today’s values”—the obsession with money and consumerism, lack of concern for old people, superstitious beliefs, the corruption of business, and so on—it ultimately portrays Munna as an upwardly mobile street guy. He moves up the social ladder by marrying the English-speaking VJ and hosting a radio program himself. He does not achieve his middle-class aspiration of becoming a history professor, but he teaches the world about history and morality and rewrites history in the popular imagination.

*LRMB* typifies the way that history is used in Bollywood cinema—less new history than new mythology and less concern with facts and truths than with morality. Ashis Nandy (1995: 47) argues that myths and legends are open-ended views of the past and use “principled forgetfulness,” that they do not separate the past from ethical meaning in the present and so are at odds with history, which remembers. More than history, myths have ethical meaning in the present, although they also have religious elements, which the secularists fear.

At a time of such radical social change in India, new histories and new mythologies are created, so it is not surprising that from the past a figure such as Gandhi reappears to answer questions that Indians today are presented with. However,

although Gandhi is back, it is not the historical Gandhi, a challenging and difficult figure urging the abandonment of consumerism, but a Gandhi of India's new middle classes. This is not a political Gandhi but a Gandhi who is an inner conscience and moral guide, a fairy godmother who will help us realize today's dreams.

### The Indian Biopic

As is the case with Hollywood biopics (Custen 1992; Mann 2000; Bingham 2010), the Indian biopic is part of other genres, notably the historical (see Dwyer, forthcoming), as well as India's particular genres, including the mythological, the devotional. It comprises the nationalist biopic of historical heroes and heroines of India from the earliest records; the biopic of the leaders of the freedom struggle (1857–1947); and a miscellaneous group of biopics, including the popular Malayalam film, *Guruvayoor Kesavan* (dir. Bharathan; 1977), the story of the famous elephant.

The founding genre of Indian cinema was the mythological genre, which has tales of gods and goddesses and heroes and heroines mostly from Hindu sources (see Dwyer 2006, chap. 2). The mythological genre was closely associated with the freedom struggle (Dwyer 2006), but there is nothing mythological about Gandhi, although he was regarded as semidivine in his lifetime (Amin 1984), for he becomes deified only after his assassination, as can be seen in the history of the Indian chromolithograph (Pinney 2004: 133–44).

The devotional films (Dwyer 2006, chap. 3), also popular from the early days of cinema, though reaching a peak in the 1930s and early 1940s, differ from the mythological films in that although the deities appear in films, they feature the life of a particular devotee of that deity. Gandhi practiced his “experiments with truth,” which are closely aligned to bhakti, in his everyday life and politics. This connection between Gandhi and his politics was an essential part of the popularity of the devotional film during the preindependence period (see Mukhopadhyay 2004). The kind of bhakti that these films depicted was clearly recognized by the audience. At a meeting of the Indian Motion Pictures Congress in Bombay in 1939, K. M. Munshi praised *Sant Tukaram* (dir. V. Damle and S. Fattelal; 1937), linking its concerns with nationalism, Gandhi, and bhakti.<sup>3</sup>

Two silent films ran into problems because of their overt references to Gandhi,

3. Proceedings of the first session of the Indian Motion Picture Congress held on May 7–8, 1939, file P/T 28881, Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library. Thanks to Urvi Mukhopadhyay for this reference.

the first of which was Kohinoor Film Company's *Bhakta Vidur* (1921), produced by and starring Dwarkadas Sampat. The film drew so many parallels to Gandhi's freedom struggle, and with Vidur's Gandhi cap and his spinning of the *charka* (the spinning wheel Gandhi used for making khadi, or homespun cloth), that it was banned in some provinces of India. It also had a music score that was performed live with every show, including a song in praise of the spinning wheel (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 244). The Hindustan Company's *Bhakta Prahlad*, directed by Phalke in 1926, was famous for its special effects showing the trials and tribulations of Prahlad, who was presented as a satyagrahi, or follower of Gandhi's plan of passive resistance. After these films, references to Gandhi (and the nationalist struggle) were more carefully planned to avoid censorship.

It was no coincidence that the *sant* film's rise in popularity was during the 1930s when nationalism was one of the dominant public concerns in India and Gandhian nationalism was at its height.<sup>4</sup> It was certainly clear that the Prabhat Film Company filmmakers had Gandhi in mind when making their films, as seen in V. Shantaram's choice of the name *Mahatma* for what was later to be *Dharmatma* (1935), in Hindi and Marathi, the story of Sant Eknath (1533–99), a Brahman scholar who promoted the uplift of untouchables. Shantaram (1956: 32–33) made this as a political film rather than concentrate on Eknath's miracles, later saying that he chose the topic of Eknath so he could draw parallels between Eknath's criticism of the caste system and Gandhi's campaigns in the 1930s to abolish untouchability.

### Freedom Fighters

Many Indians follow Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's naming of the 1857 mutiny or uprisings as the first war of independence. There are a few 1857 biopics, such as *Jhansi ki rani* (dir. Sohrab Modi; 1952), about a popular figure in literature and folk tales, and *Rising: The Ballad of Mangal Pandey* (dir. Ketan Mehta; 2005), which ends with footage of Gandhi to tie the freedom struggle into one narrative arc.

The leaders of the freedom struggle, although the subjects of many chromolithographs (Pinney 2004), have had very few biopics in mainstream Hindi cinema, but many of them have been featured within India's realist cinema, often called "middle cinema":

4. Other forms of nationalism were also prevalent at this time. The newspaper *The Mirror* (August 13, 1939) notes that *Sant Ramdas* was banned in Kolhapur because it gives the *sant* more prominence than Shivaji (a great nationalist leader) and social unrest was feared.

- *Nehru, the Jewel of India* (dir. Kumar Kiran; 1990), Hindi, dubbed into English
- *Sardar: The Iron Man of India* (dir. Ketan Mehta; 1993), a biopic of Vallabhbhai Patel, in Hindi (Annu Kapoor plays Gandhi)
- Gandhi in *The Making of the Mahatma* (dir. Shyam Benegal; 1996), based on Fatima Meer's book *The Apprenticeship of the Mahatma* (Rajat Kapoor plays Gandhi)
- *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar* (dir. Jabbar Patel; 1998), in English (also Hindi version)
- *Veer Savarkar* (dir. Ved Rahi; 2001), in Marathi (Surendra Rajan plays Gandhi)
- *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, the Forgotten Hero* (dir. Shyam Benegal; 2005)

Shyam Benegal made a television series of Jawaharlal Nehru's *Discovery of India*, as *Bharat ek khoj*, in 1988. There is no biopic of Indira Gandhi, although *Aandhi* (dir. Gulzar; 1975), a film that belongs to middle-class cinema (Prasad 1998), was banned during Congress rule for the close resemblances of the politician heroine to Indira Gandhi.

Only one of the leaders of the anti-British freedom struggle is featured in biopics in popular Hindi cinema, namely, Bhagat Singh. Nehru noticed that Bhagat Singh's popularity was held to be greater than that of Gandhi (*Terrorism in India Report*, 1917–36, quoted Pinney 2004: 124), and he is much cited by establishment figures and revolutionaries. His image, where he is wearing Western clothes in order to hide his Sikh identity, is still seen all over India, especially in Punjab and the north, from vendors' stalls, radical lawyers, and certain trade unions (Pinney 2004: 127). Yet Bhagat Singh is infrequently discussed in official histories of Indian nationalism since he is not seen to have achieved any results. His huge popularity is in part because his mimicry of the colonial rulers endeared him to many who were trying to forge new modern identities, while Gandhi's experiments seemed alien and strange. Moreover, Bhagat Singh's fearless and valiant nature and his violent retaliation against the British are seen as more heroic than Gandhi's (more effectual) "passive resistance." Bhagat Singh's death—he is known as Shaheed (Martyr) Bhagat Singh—at the young age of twenty-three is more inspirational to youngsters than Gandhi is, the latter having only returned to India in middle age and died an old man. This question of heroism is noted in other popular depictions of Gandhi (McLain 2009: 197). All popular stories of Bhagat Singh play down his role as an intellectual, a writer, an atheist, and a Marxist and instead concentrate on his short, heroic, and romantic life.

Bhagat Singh clearly fits the requirements of the popular hero in real life as well as that of the Hindi film hero, a romantic figure who appeals to the young, whose life story is short and dramatic, a stereotyped Punjabi, heroic, brave, hyper-masculine, and always ready to put action before words. His disguise in British clothing also makes him stylish and more like a film hero, as does his male homosocial world (though sometimes a girlfriend can be added), where friendship and self-sacrifice are similar to that found in other Hindi films. That Bhagat Singh is young is important, because he can also sing and dance and fill all the requirements of a Hindi film hero, which it would be impossible for older and revered figures like Gandhi and Nehru to do. Also, a number of popular songs are associated with Bhagat Singh and can be included in his films, alongside a final song on injustice and martyrdom.

Films about Bhagat Singh include *Shaheed-e-azam Bhagat Singh* (dir. Jagdish Gautama; 1954) and *Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (dir. K. N. Bansal; 1963), neither of which seems to be available. However, *Shaheed* (dir. S. Ram Sharma; 1965), starring Manoj Kumar, one of the great nationalistic film stars of the day, remained dominant until the 2000s, when there was a sudden flood of Bhagat Singh movies: *Shaheed—e Azam* (dir. Iqbal Dillon; 2002); *23 March 1931: Shaheed* (dir. Guddu Dhanoa; 2002), and *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (dir. Raj Kumar Santishi; 2002)—as well as a television biopic by the veteran screenwriter and the director of the television series *Ramayana*, Ramanand Sagar. These films appeared during the political highpoint of the Hindu nationalist movement in India and are often highly critical of Gandhi for not supporting Bhagat Singh and not fighting to have his death sentence lifted. However, none of these later films was a hit, although 2006's *Rang de Basanti* (dir. Rakesh Omprahash Mehra; 2006) was one of the biggest hits of the year and was later selected as India's entry to the Oscars. This film, named after Bhagat Singh's favorite song ("Colour It Saffron"), shows a group of disillusioned metropolitan youths who are inspired to action when acting in a play produced by an English girl about Bhagat Singh. They gradually take on the ideology of the characters they are playing and respond in character to their anger with modern India and its corrupt politics, examining issues of minorities, with Hindutva driving them to their own martyrdom. It ultimately shows the futility of violent protest, but the film became a cult among youth, as did Bhagat Singh himself.



Yet the one figure for whom we do not have a mainstream Indian biopic is Gandhi (Benegal's middle cinema biopic about Gandhi, noted above, deals only with his years in South Africa). The first attempt to make one was when D. W. Griffith was approached by the British government to make an anti-Gandhi film in 1923 (Chapman and Cull 2009: 189–90), but this film was never made. Others who considered making a biopic included Gabriel Pascal in 1953 and David Lean and Emeric Pressburger, who in 1958 traveled to India to investigate making a film, but when they could not approve the script they made another biopic, *Lawrence of Arabia*, in 1962, instead. The same year saw the release of *Nine Hours to Rama*, dir. Mark Robson, based on Stanley Wolpert's book.<sup>5</sup> The film and book were banned in India and are still not widely available.

The next Gandhi biopic remains the definitive one, Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982). This is an epic film, evinced by its long running time of 191 minutes, accompanied by a 240-page book about the twenty years of planning (Attenborough 1982).

Attenborough began his film after Motilal Kothari, a British Asian, invited him to meet him to discuss his idea. In Kothari's honor, Attenborough had the camera blessed by a Pandit for the first shot. Attenborough studied up on Gandhi, reading D. G. Tendulkar's *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi* (8 vols.), Louis Fischer's *Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, and Gandhi's own books (Gandhi 1928, 1982). Drawing mostly on Fischer, he used three scriptwriters in succession. The first was Gerald Hanley, who wrote a screenplay in 1964,<sup>6</sup> but he was soon replaced by one of the most famous screenwriters of epics and biopics, Robert Bolt, who had written award-winning scripts such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (dir. David Lean; 1962), *Dr. Zhivago* (dir. David Lean; 1965), and *A Man for All Seasons* (dir. Fred Zinnemann; 1966). Bolt had written a script, "Gandhiji" (Chapman and Cull 2009), which he sent to Joseph Losey, but this was never made; Attenborough picked it up, but the final script was written by Jack Briley, who kept Fischer's structure, starting with Gandhi's funeral, and included some of Bolt's incidents, but largely rewrote it. Briley added C. F. Andrews and gave bigger roles to the Americans, Vince Walker and Margaret Bourke-White.

5. For reviews of *Nine Hours to Rama*, see *New York Times*, Movies, [movies.nytimes.com/movie/104061/Nine-Hours-to-Rama/overview](http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/104061/Nine-Hours-to-Rama/overview) (accessed November 25, 2009).

6. Gerald Hanley, obituary, *Independent*, October 3, 1992, [www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-gerald-hanley-1555218.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-gerald-hanley-1555218.html).

Attenborough drew on his connections in the UK and in India to begin planning the film:

I knew Earl Mountbatten of Burma, the last British viceroy in India, because my first film, *In Which We Serve*, was based on his wartime naval exploits. He put my idea to the present Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru, who gave approval in principle for the project. So I flew to Delhi to meet him [in 1963].

Nehru was a revelation. In his office he produced an album of snapshots, his collection recording India's long march to independence, and we got down on our hands and knees to pore over them.

Throughout he referred to Gandhi as Bapu, which, he told me, was the respectful Hindi word for father. Here was a snap of Bapu spinning cotton at his ashram. There was another with the young Nehru himself, laughing together like naughty schoolboys. The prime minister told me priceless anecdotes. I was elated. (Crossette 1981)

Nehru had read the script and sent Attenborough to meet various members of his cabinet and introduced him to Gandhian authorities. The last time Attenborough saw him, Nehru said, "Whatever you do, do not deify him—that is what we have done in India—and he was too great a *man* to be deified" (Attenborough 1982: 110).

Indira Gandhi read the script in 1980. She said the government would not "approve" the script but should "merely satisfy themselves that, related to the subject matter, the manner in which the film was envisaged was a proper one" (Attenborough 1982: 181). When the film was made, there was one small deletion of a scene in the Aga Khan Palace (Attenborough 1982: 229) and Indira gave her formal approval—"The film has captured the spirit of Gandhiji" (Attenborough 1982: 228).

Attenborough also mentions Indira Gandhi's help in getting four hundred thousand Indians to act as extras in the re-creation of the funeral procession. Most important, she authorized the government of India, through the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), to give \$6.5 million toward the \$22 million for production, of which the rest came mostly from the UK Goldcrest Company (which was later behind *Slumdog Millionaire* [dir. Danny Boyle; 2008]) and some from American private sources, while the film was distributed by Columbia Pictures. Barbara Crossette (1981) reported that questions were asked daily in the Indian Parliament about the cost and the direction or the intent of the film. Future prime minister Morarji Desai threatened to kill himself in protest if the film was

made. Yet the film was made and Desai did not kill himself. Despite the assistance from the Indian government, and the amount of money the Indian government made from the film, as well as the presence of many Indian actors, this is a British film.<sup>7</sup> The spectacle of Gandhi's life and the freedom struggle is done like the early Hollywood biopic, identified as classic melodrama (Bingham 2010: 17). Although the Hollywood-style narrative is used, this is not the self-critical British biopic seen in films such as *Lawrence of Arabia*, but is part of the 1980s British heritage film, to which the "Raj revival" belongs (Higson 2005), both thought to be associated with the uncertainty in British society as part of Margaret Thatcher's social engineering and the height of the Cold War. It is somewhat different from the other Raj revival films in that an Indian is the central character, and it is very unusual, if not unique, to have a film whose hero is someone who was the key leader against the colonial power. The Raj images gave a sense of security in the past, but the story of Gandhi projected then-current concerns in Britain back onto the past, so Gandhi becomes antiracist as well as anticolonial and antiwar.

However, the film was of political importance to Indira Gandhi, too. Restored after being voted out after the Emergency, and facing growing crises in the Punjab, Indira Gandhi, who as a former minister for information and broadcasting understood the power of the expanding media, may have realized that the film was a way of rehabilitating the Congress and herself, by showing her father and his party to good effect. Given that she was about thirty when India became independent, she could have easily been a character in the film herself but was presumably deliberately excluded.

The Anglocentric nature of the film, noted by James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull (2009), is not disputed. The beginning of *Gandhi* sets the scene in a classic Hollywood biopic mold by partly disavowing the inaccuracy and the incompleteness of the film. As the camera descends from the sky, the screen reads:

"No man's life can be encompassed in one telling. There is no way to give each year its allotted weight, to include each event, each person who helped to shape a lifetime. What can be done is to be faithful in spirit to the record, and to try to find one's way to the heart of the man." Over a soundtrack of "quotes" from later episodes in the film, ending with the sound of gunfire and screams, the camera closes in on the scene of the assassination of Gandhi. The next scene is his funeral, where, instead of Nehru's famous tribute, we hear the voice-over commentary on Gandhi's life and his importance by the famous American journalist Edward R. Murrow:

7. *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) was the subject of similar debates.

The object of this massive tribute died as he had always lived—a private man without wealth, without property, without official title or office. . . . Mahatma Gandhi was not a commander of great armies nor ruler of vast lands, he could boast no scientific achievements, no artistic gift. . . . Yet men, governments and dignitaries from all over the world have joined hands today to pay homage to this little brown man in the loincloth who led his country to freedom. . . . Albert Einstein added, “Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.”

Even as the camera closes in on the funeral procession the first shots are of various non-Indians—Lord Louis Mountbatten, Mirabehn (Madeleine Slade), and Walker—before the leaders of the freedom struggle—Sardar Patel and Maulana Azad—then Gandhi’s son, Devdas, followed by Nehru, before moving to photo-journalist Bourke-White. This clearly sets the point of view of the film, that we are seeing Gandhi’s global importance, rather than an Indian view of the “Father of the Nation,” or “Bapu,” as he is called in the film.

This viewing of Gandhi through Western eyes is seen in the casting of the film with American stars—Martin Sheen, cast as a journalist (Vince Walker; a composite of several writers, including the *New York Times* reporter Webb Miller and Louis Fischer, Gandhi’s biographer), and Candice Bergen as a photographer (Margaret Bourke-White, who played no significant role in Gandhi’s life)—showing the role of the media in the creation of Gandhi in the West and giving them more importance in the international role of the star than the then relatively unknown Ben Kingsley. Bourke-White spends time with Gandhi and Kasturba, his wife, at the Yerawada Gaol, the Aga Khan Palace, where Bourke-White is an intermediary for the audience for Gandhi explaining his life.

The British are played by another group of well-known character actors (Sir John Gielgud as Lord Irwin, Edward Fox as General Dyer, Trevor Howard as Judge Broomfield, John Mills as Lord Chelmsford), while Geraldine James (Madeleine Slade/Mirabehn) was beginning her career as a major actress. The British are mostly pantomime villains—“dolts, buffoons or bigots” (Ward 1995: 256)—yet these bumbling upper classes are benevolent despots, planning to leave the empire. This allows the exploration of postcolonial themes that were about to become fashionable in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Othering the “native,” as well as looking at race, class, and identity, although they were undermined by being confronted by one of the last great orientalists, Gandhi himself, who, highly Anglicized, (re)adopted Indian manners and customs. Lower-class British appear

as the police, where they are seen to beat up Gandhi (although the historical accuracy of these incidents is implausible [Hay 1983: 88]).

Less well-known actors took the other roles of more sympathetic foreigners, including the vicar, Andrews, one of Gandhi's closest friends, who appears in a highly sanitized form of a typical rural vicar rather than the complex figure often struggling with his sexuality that he was in real life, and Herman Kallenbach, who gave Gandhi the land for Tolstoy Farm and was a great supporter of South African Indians and later of Zionism.

General Smuts, renowned as an astute observer, is shown as one of the first foreigners to understand Gandhi most clearly when he says in the film: "We Westerners have a weakness for these — these spiritually inclined men of India. But as an old lawyer, let me warn you, Mr. Gandhi is as shrewd a man as you will ever meet, however 'otherworldly' he may seem."

Casting Gandhi was always going to be a major problem. The lead role in a biopic is usually played by a major star, whose star text enters into dialogue with the role in the film. However, in India, casting anyone as Gandhi was controversial. A female journalist objected to Gandhi being portrayed at all, but if he must be, said that he should appear on screen "as a moving light." In a rare loss of temper, Attenborough snapped back, "Madam, I am not making a film about bloody Tinkerbell!" (Attenborough 2008).

The final choice was Kingsley, Krishna Pandit Bhanji, son of Rahimtulla Harji Bhanji and Annalyna Goodman, who was chosen partly because he brought no associations, being an actor in the Royal Shakespeare Company rather than in any way a star. Like Gandhi, Kingsley is Gujarati, at least partly. Gandhi was also, to all purposes, a diasporic Indian when he returned to India in 1915, after twenty-one years in South Africa and three years in London.

There was controversy that Gandhi himself was not played by an "Indian," perhaps because this was reminiscent of all good imperial adventure stories, such as *Kim*, where the hero can "pass" as an Indian. Kingsley was clearly more plausible than other actors considered, from Richard Burton to Dirk Bogarde to Anthony Hopkins. It seems no Indian actor was ever considered for the role. Even Nehru supported the choice of a non-Indian:

I paid Nehru a second visit months later, and he made two observations. The first concerned the problem of finding an actor to play Gandhi. I needed a trained professional, not just a lookalike. The prime minister's own surprising choice was Alec Guinness, which took me aback because Alec was English.

“The nationality is unimportant,” Nehru declared. “All that matters is that he should be very good. Besides, the idea of being portrayed by an Englishman would have made Bapu laugh a great deal.” (Attenborough 2008)

Kingsley’s portrayal of Gandhi was extraordinary, as he came across as human, warm, and funny, even though his saintliness overcomes strange features of personality. Kingsley’s superb performance made him seem to be Gandhi himself in his walk, his talk, and his mannerisms. This created an illusion of presence, that Gandhi really is there with the audience. This was reinforced by creating scenes that were well known from newsreels and photographs.

Given that Gandhi’s long life had to be compressed into the biopic, he comes to represent others in the film. He is the embodiment of the freedom movement, the Indian nation, and, in this Western film, the idea of Indianness. Indeed, Gandhi and Nehru both explored their understandings of nationality about selfhood in their writings about themselves (Majeed 2007). Roshan Seth is convincing as Nehru, but many of the others are “walk-ons whose sole function is by turns to be dazzled or bewildered by the Mahatma” (Ward 1995: 256).

Unsurprisingly, the most criticized depiction is of Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, who is portrayed inaccurately (Hay 1983) as a “motiveless baddie, seemingly making a career out of hanging around looking sinister while wearing natty suits and smoking cigarettes” (Tunzelmann 2009), “quietly ominous-looking” (Simon 1983: 269), a “languid and malevolent fop” (Ward 1995: 256).

Many important figures in Gandhi’s life are not shown, such as Annie Besant, Rabindranath Tagore, and Aurobindo. One of Gandhi’s major critics, Ambedkar, is missing from the film, giving Gandhi the major say on caste reform. Indians other than Gandhi himself are most notably the crowd, the “teeming masses” that foreigners always note, while relatively insignificant foreigners are foregrounded in the film. Gandhi himself is the English-speaking hero who seems nearer to the imperial rulers than to the masses, although he adopts their dress and lifestyle during the film. The Indian Gandhi is missing, and only the scene in Porbandar, in which he looks across the Indian Ocean to Africa and to the UK, locates him where he grew up.

### **The Historical Events**

Like other biopics, the film *Gandhi* tries to create authenticity by the use of other media such as fake newsreels of Gandhi’s visit to the UK and his broadcast to the

United States, while the presence of Walker and Bourke-White emphasizes the role of foreigners in witnessing the life of Gandhi.

Without being too distracted by historical inaccuracies and anachronisms,<sup>8</sup> which are vital for the biopic (Hansen 1996), Stephen Hay (1983) covers most of these in an evenhanded manner. He points out the film's many liberties with the truth, confused chronologies, and invented incidents: "A general rule, then, for anyone wondering how much of the first half of the film is true to the record, is to assume that very little of it is" (Hay 1983: 89). For example, Hay points out that Gandhi was not beaten up by the police in South Africa for burning his pass, nor was he sent to jail in Champaran; Sarojini Naidu rather than Maulana Azad led the 1930 salt march; and Nehru and Patel did not go to see him in Noakhali. The other elements are a more excusable part of writing a fiction; where time has to be compressed, characters collide.

The film has a number of dramatic set pieces to suit the large scale of the film. These epic scenes, spectacles, and tableaux include the Amritsar massacre in Jalianwala Bagh in 1919, the Salt March, the violence in Chauri Chaura in 1922, and the Partition migrations. These are contrasted to the small moments of Gandhi's life, where intimate scenes are turned into psychological drama.

Gandhi is made into a person for our time. His problematic features are brushed away, and he becomes an archetypal Indian mystic, saintly, kind, and witty. There is little reference to his non-Indian life, as the film begins when Gandhi was settled overseas. Gandhi is not seen in India until his return from South Africa in 1915, when he was already forty-six. The film shows his faith in Empire and in the English law in which he was trained; he brings up his sons like English gentlemen. However, the film misses showing his Indian upbringing, his family background, and his early years in Gujarat; his becoming Anglicized; and his life and study in London. His Indianness is learned on his return, in middle age, and like many a later visitor to India, he arrives in the country in Indian dress, tours the country by third-class train, and is as shocked as any outsider by sights of poverty and people traveling on the train roof. India is presented through his outsider's eye, as we see wealthy barristers, Jinnah, Patel, and Nehru, with servants, swimming pools, and Western luxuries. He even rides an elephant in Champaran, reminding us of E. M. Forster's comment that seeing India always ends in an elephant ride.

This marking of the beginning of the biopic life with the events that trigger

8. "Goofs for *Gandhi*," IMDb, [www.imdb.com/title/tt0083987/goofs](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083987/goofs) (accessed November 25, 2009).

the rise to greatness is quite usual (Bingham 2010: 5). The formation of Gandhi's political conscious in South Africa is highlighted (drawing in part on his *Satyagraha in South Africa* [1928]), with no attention to his religious and moral formation in his family and his youth in Gujarat and in his earlier travels to London, although Gandhi highlights their importance in his autobiography, which ends in 1920 (Gandhi 1982 [1927]). This lack of reliance on Gandhi's own writing for his life story is striking, given that the autobiography has a better subtitle, *Experiments with Truth*, and that it is mostly a series of episodes in his life from which he draws spiritual and moral truths or examples, rather than an exploration of his inner self or his character formation. These experiments, including those that Gandhi carried out on himself physically as well as mentally (Alter 2000), such as his fasts and nature cures, are barely mentioned, perhaps because they would make him seem too cranky and faddish for a Western audience. There is a brief mention of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) at the beginning of the film, where he fails and promises to fast to make up for it. Otherwise, fasts are presented as blackmail rather than something spiritual, rather than a practice that is normal in Hinduism: Sardar Patel also fasted all his life. Gandhi's important social work in India is barely mentioned; in a speech after Jallianwala Bagh he states that he is pro-Muslim and anti-untouchability and that he advocates khadi, but there is no reference to any action or what the spiritual importance of spinning was. His desire to reach out to the poor sometimes seems more like a political move than a genuine spiritual and anticaste measure.

The film's mythologizing of Gandhi means that it does not probe many key questions. Gandhi is not shown as wily, tormented, or cranky, as he could have been depicted. We learn nothing about his political ideas and religion beyond some sort of vague mysticism and a number of homespun truths or statements against caste rather than his complex attitude toward it that caused much conflict with Ambedkar. It does not make clear why in many cases Hindus more often than Muslims objected to him or why his assassin was a Hindu. The film does not discuss Gandhi's attacks on modernity, from railways to medicine, or his views on gender, or his difficult sexuality (Nandy 1983: 48–63). In fact, we learn little about his thought or inner life, let alone his daily activities, such as twice-daily prayer meetings, his extensive writing and journalism, his fasting, and his weekly day of silence (*maunvrata*), or about his training of satyagrahis. Instead, the film is more about his external actions than about his internal life.

Despite these issues, the film was always aimed at greatness. A grand opening was held with President Zail Singh and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in atten-



dance. Although I have not located any contemporary Indian reviews of the film, Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1983: 34) notes its massive impact:

At the time of writing, Gandhi is entering its 11th week in six theatres in Bombay. It has been granted tax-exemption by the Maharashtra government, and a directive has been issued from the Prime Minister's desk to all State Governments that they grant a similar exemption. Every screening in the city has seats block-reserved for primary-school children who see the film as part of their history lesson, and they are not the only ones who are being shown the film as history comes alive. Practically the whole of Bombay's upper-middle class is awash in a wave of nostalgia for the leader of its nationalist movement.

The film was shown in schools and in special screenings held for schoolchildren, and it has been screened many times on Doordarshan National, Indian state-owned television, sometimes on Gandhi's birthday, October 2.

Three years after the film's release, Kingsley was given the Indian civilian honor of the Padma Shri, preceding his being named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2000 and his knighthood in 2001. Kingsley has recently shown interest in the Hindi film world, acting in *Teen patti* (2010), where he starred alongside Amitabh Bachchan, and he has plans to play Shah Jahan to Aishwarya Rai Bachchan's Mumtaz Mahal in a movie he will produce, provisionally titled *Taj*.

In the United States, the marketing of the film began in October 1982. The film won eight Oscars, the most ever won by a British film, beating by one Oscar *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), one of the great masterpieces whose connections with and parallels to the making of *Gandhi* are remarkable, notably the great epic form of empire and the story of a British man passing as an Arab and sympathetic to both sides, something of a mirror of Gandhi, who begins the film passing for a British man, then an Indian.

In the UK, the reviews were divided between the right and left wing, the former saying that the film was anti-British and pro-Indian and the latter mirroring this argument. Philip French (1982) noted that the film was an "honourable, honestly affecting, carefully crafted film" whose "texture recalls those solid, inspirational Hollywood biographies of the 1930s associated with Paul Muni, while the structure, as in Brecht's *Galileo*, is a succession of exemplary sequences each built around a single proposition."

Geoffrey C. Ward (1995: 254) argues that it is a "work of worship, not art, a portrait of a saint so uniformly worthy . . . that when he is murdered the audience

is left with only the fuzzy notion that Gandhi was just too good for this wicked, wicked world.” J. Simon (1983) describes it as an “immense series of heroic frescoes” and too simplified, while H. M. Geduld (1983) argues that it shows a collection of “straw figures” against which Gandhi triumphed. Rajadhyaksha (1983) is deeply hostile to the film, as is Salman Rushdie (1998), who criticizes the film as an example of

unhistorical Western saintmaking. Here was Gandhi-as-guru, purveying that fashionable product, the Wisdom of the East; and Gandhi-as-Christ, dying (and, before that, frequently going on hunger strike) so that others might live. His philosophy of nonviolence seemed to work by embarrassing the British into leaving; freedom could be won, the film appeared to suggest, by being more moral than your oppressor, whose moral code could then oblige him to withdraw.

However, Rushdie realizes the power of film, observing:

But such is the efficacy of this symbolic Gandhi that the film, for all its simplifications and Hollywoodizations, had a powerful and positive effect on many contemporary freedom struggles. South African antiapartheid campaigners and democratic voices all over South America have enthused to me about the film’s galvanizing effects. This posthumous, exalted “international Gandhi” has apparently become a totem of real inspirational force.

Historians (see above also) share this ambivalence to the film, recognizing its historical limitations, notably the oversimplifications that lead to the missing Mahatma, but admire it as film, realizing its power. Stephen Hay (1983: 93) admires and enjoys the film, pointing out that it gives “its large audiences an elementary sense of what Gandhi’s life and methods were all about.” Francis Robinson (1982) notes: “As a film specifically about the man, *Gandhi* succeeds brilliantly. Many sides of his character are revealed as we follow the Mahatma’s path from his early struggles against the pass laws in South Africa to his final crusade against communal violence as India won independence: there is courage, determination, compassion, humanity, humour, faddishness, his shrewdness in the world of politics.” Alex von Tunzelmann (2009), in the persona of a history teacher grading historical films, gives *Gandhi* a C+ for history and B for entertainment.

Attenborough’s *Gandhi* has had a huge influence on other Indian biopics, such as the nonmainstream biopics on other nationalist leaders mentioned above, all of which appeared after *Gandhi* and with epic formats and often star casting, as well as the telling English versions of several of the films. It is likely that it also funded

these films, as the NFDC took one-third of the profits worldwide and therefore had resources to do so.

However, the version of Indian history created by Attenborough's film has become part of the way that India knows Gandhi. A biopic of Gandhi's elder son, Harilal, *Gandhi My Father* (dir. Feroz Abbas-Khan; 2007), shows his problematic relationship with his father. This film copies many scenes of imagined stories in Attenborough's film, such as the episode where Gandhi is thrown out of the train and the burning of the passes (cf. Hay 1983: 88). In the latter case, Gandhi was in fact served with a summons to appear in court, but the case was withdrawn (Hay 1983: 91).

### The Case of the Missing Mahatma

When Attenborough's film was released, many in India were shocked that many young, educated Indians knew so little about Gandhi. As Crossette (1981) notes:

Prompted by the controversy over the film, the newsmagazine *Sunday* sponsored a poll of nearly 2,000 well-educated young people in urban areas and found that more than half didn't know where Gandhi was born, most could not say when he died, and some could only describe him vaguely as a man "who cleaned his own toilet and was for self-dependence." [Reporting the findings, the *Times of India* headlined the story, "Father, forgive them."]

In this centenary of the publication of *Hind Swaraj* (1909), it seems in some ways that despite the omnipresent statues and images of Gandhi, many people do not know much about him. He is seen as a successful leader against colonialism, but people ignore the issues for which he fought most strongly, such as those of caste, which have not changed. Despite many online resources and thousands of books about Gandhi, not many people read his work today. For example, in the centenary of *Hind Swaraj*, few people know it is a response to Savarkar, rather than to the British, and is directed at supporters of violent resistance. Sometimes it seems that although Gandhi's memory is revered in India, he is more important outside India, in the work of Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and others (Hardiman 2003).

For many people, inside and outside India, Gandhi lives on mostly in Attenborough's *Gandhi* (dubbed in Hindi or seen in English; the recent DVD has both options).<sup>9</sup> An academic book on Gandhi opens with the sentence "Since his death

9. The Hindi version was made for simultaneous release but was nine minutes longer than the English. One of the extra scenes was Gandhi begging for Hindu-Muslim unity. See Marmetz 1982.

in 1948 Gandhi's life has been the subject of more than one thousand books and Sir Richard Attenborough's Oscar-winning film" (Coward 2003: 1). It seems that for most people, academic historians excepted, the film is equivalent to these one thousand books. This film is how the world remembers Gandhi best. This is not surprising since other biopics also have this effect, but what is remarkable is that even after thirty years and the great social changes and reappraisal of history in India, this one version remains unchallenged.

It may be that Nehru and Gandhi himself would find it amusing (see above) that Gandhi is known best through this film, but questions remain as to why the dominant knowledge of Gandhi in India today is a foreigner's view, albeit it one partly financed and supported by the government of India. What does this say about Gandhi? Where is Gandhi in India today? Is the Mahatma missing? Is he forgotten, irrelevant to the new India? What does it say about the popular cinema and its depiction of history on film? Why is the Mahatma missing from this important medium?

Attenborough's film is sincere in its approach to Gandhi, presenting him to India and to the rest of the world in a way that creates a relationship among us (the audience), them (the people in the film), and him. The film is accessible to the illiterate and to those who would not be bothered to read a serious book. Without this film, how much would people know about Gandhi today? How important would he be to the West? Is it not time to reassess Gandhi as a person and his importance in India for shaping ideas of nation, nationalism, and the freedom struggle?

The key to Attenborough's film is its representation of the freedom struggle as one of moral right, whose characters behave as expected, whether British, American, or Indian. The film is a memorial to Gandhi and to 1947 and to the history of India. It represents, like no other text or monument, the founding moment of the nation, moving from memory to history into becoming a new site of collective memory (Ricoeur 2004; Guynn 2006: 165–96). Attenborough's *Gandhi* is the history that everyone remembers, and it seems pointless to argue about its faults given its medium and its massive popularity. It takes Gandhi and the freedom struggle beyond narratives of history and politics, showing us how Gandhi's body was his message and his moral experiments. It gives us the comforting illusion of presence as Gandhi, the father of the nation, Bapuji, is still with us.

Gandhi is a difficult person to fit into the modern world, where he is seen as a saint or a crank. The biopic genre, like Attenborough's film, has to "normalize" its subject so that he or she is someone the audience can have an emotional involvement with or "root for."

However, the "real Gandhi," the historical person, cannot be fitted into a film,

as this would be too controversial since, despite Nehru's wish as expressed to Attenborough, Gandhi is now too revered to be the subject of a film and the freedom struggle is too sanctified, for like the Bharat Mata temple in Hardwar, they are part of India's sacred history. Even Pope John Paul II knelt and prayed at Gandhi's *samadhi* (memorial) on his visit to India in 1986.

This deification of Gandhi was noted in his lifetime by Shahid Amin (1984), although Christopher Pinney (n.d.) shows that while this was true of photography, chromolithographs depicted a "human" Gandhi until after his assassination, when, as he notes, there are "'apotheosis' images and 'avatar cycle' images. The former depict Gandhi ascending to heaven in the manner of eighteenth-century European Imperial heroes, and the latter present a central atemporal form around which a biography in the form of 'descents' appears."

Some still-living associates of Gandhi registered shock that a feature film of his life should be attempted at all, painting it as a premature if not sacrilegious undertaking (Crossette 1981). Yet the controversy about earlier depictions of Gandhi fits in religious genres, such as the mythological and devotional biopics mentioned above, which date back to the colonial period and were controversial only to the British censors. However, since independence, films with religious genres are no longer made as A-grade feature films. Even in fiction, where Gandhi appears quite often, he is frequently treated as a religious figure. In his life story in Raja Rao's 1938 novel, *Kanthapura*, villagers know him through the *Harikatha*, the telling of Gandhi's life and role in the freedom struggle through a religious genre, in this case a narration of the life of Vishnu. Gandhi's saintliness is unquestioned and inherent (though see Tripathi 2007); his politics are shown to be causal. Yet much of what makes Gandhi interesting is his interest in Victorian spirituality (Tidrick 2006), his problematic sexuality (Adams 2010), and his obsession with his body and with enemas and nature cures (Alter 2000; Grenier 1983; Moore-Gilbert 2009: 36–41). Gandhi's person is not explored in psychological depth. Character formation is ignored in favor of causal events focusing on a changing point in the life. This is seen clearly in Attenborough's *Gandhi*, where Gandhi's politics are mobilized because he was thrown off a train. *LRMB* shows how Gandhi is more important as a myth than as a historical fact. The public memory of Gandhi requires this simplified, holy Gandhi that an actor such as Kingsley could rescue from this static, passive image ("passive resistance" being a very wrong translation of *satyagraha*) by adding more depth to the character. Rajat Kapoor in *The Making of the Mahatma* can show Gandhi as a politician and a family man, but the film does not need him to take on this mythical status.

The problem of finding someone who can play Gandhi is key, since biopics

## Public Culture

usually require stars. Kingsley was not a star when he played Gandhi, but he is a star now. He brings no star persona to the film, but Gandhi is already iconic and a “star” of India’s melodrama of the freedom struggle. Yet he is never ordinary, and his greatness seems assured from the early part of the film. Kingsley’s extraordinary performance is the outstanding feature of this film, for it is impossible to imagine another actor playing this role. In Hindi films, playing Gandhi can be controversial, since a star’s lifestyle and offscreen activities are subject to scrutiny. It is striking that Darshan Jariwala’s most famous role before playing Gandhi in *LRMB* and in *Gandhi My Father* was in a Gujarati television serial of Narasimha Mehta, the greatest Gujarati poet and the composer of Gandhi’s favorite *bhajan* (devotional song), “Vaishnava jana” (“He Is the True Vaishnava”).

The specific melodramatic mode and requirements of the Hindi film are not well suited to the character of Gandhi. Whatever the film, the attractions of Hindi film have to be incorporated—star, song and dance, and film locations—and this works for Bhagat Singh (see above) but not for Gandhi, who cannot be played by a star because he little resembled an Indian male film star in his looks or in his desire to be feminine (Nandy 1983). Gandhi cannot sing and dance or become emotional. Gandhi’s London journey and his travels in India and beyond are of hardship, not glamour. He does not have youth or beauty on his side, though he did have charisma. His fasts, his rejection of consumerist behavior, and his celibacy are not suited to romance, and any comments about his relationship with the young women who surrounded him would be appalling. Gandhi’s “experiments with truth” make him too honest and too problematic, and he has a “discontinuous personhood” (Fox 1989: 23), all of which make him a difficult character. Moreover, in the national drama, Gandhi is the father of the nation so he has to behave like a father, not a hero. This is perhaps why he can be found in a film such as *Gandhi My Father*, which can accommodate melodrama, as Gandhi himself remains remote from family drama, appearing saintlike, while Harilal (Akshaye Khanna, a real Hindi film star) can put in a performance worthy of India’s most famous maudlin hero, Devdas.

## Current Politics

Gandhi’s close association with the Congress Party and the role of Nehru and of the Congress government led by Indira Gandhi have been noted as helping finance Attenborough’s film. Perhaps the real Congress Gandhi is Attenborough’s Gandhi and the image of Gandhi he created is the one the Congress Party wanted.

Perhaps a Congress government would also impose strict censorship on a film

that was overly critical of Gandhi. However, the Congress government has not kept Gandhi's ideals alive, as is underscored in the film *Maine Gandhi ko nahin mara* (dir. Jahnu Barua; 2005), where the lead character, undoubtedly a Congress supporter, argues that, actually, it is people like him who have not kept Gandhi's ideals alive in today's world.

It is notable that many of the films that criticized Gandhi in the 2000s were made during the ascent of Hindutva politics. Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, came from these groups that represented Hindutva politics, and perhaps it is the shame of Gandhi's assassination that underlies these films. A Hindutva reading of Gandhi, or indeed Godse's criticism of Gandhi, does not necessarily demonize him but instead suggests that his ways are not ways that others can emulate.

Godse's defense even today sounds like the standard line of Hindutva supporters on Gandhi, that is, that Gandhi's life was noble but unlivable and that it is not possible for the rest of us to do what he can.<sup>10</sup> Godse acts on moral and reasoned grounds and, like Gandhi, seeks the British(-style) courts to uphold what he believes to be right.

In addition to keeping Attenborough's film in the public imagination through television screenings and its recent anniversary release in Hindi and English on DVD, another reason for the continuing presence of the film may have to do with the limitations of the biopic genre in Hindi cinema. Although the Hindi biopic appears to be developing at present, this seems late for a genre that is so good at melodrama and focusing on questions of nation, gender, and sexuality embodied in a key figure played by a major star. It is only recently that it is moving away from the lives of gods, heroes, *sants*, and national mythology, to cover new subjects (Dwyer, forthcoming).

Given these many absences, why is there a sudden interest in making biopics? Part of the reason is undoubtedly due to the rise of computer-generated imagery. No longer would a director have to find four hundred thousand Indians, because a crowd could be created digitally. More important, the ongoing experiments with genre in Hindi film (Dwyer 2010) are allowing new genres to emerge and thereby creating new audiences. Written biographies remain popular, as do gossip and glamour as well as the desire to immortalize. For Bollywood stars, the opportunity to play a lead role that would allow them to embody another celebrity or a hero and be in front of the camera for most of the film is also of interest.

Changing genres are also representative of changing society, and the recent

10. "Godse's Defense Speech in Court," [gleez.com/articles/general/godses\\_defense\\_speech\\_in\\_court](http://gleez.com/articles/general/godses_defense_speech_in_court) (accessed November 25, 2009).

changes in Indian society can be closely linked to shifts in genre (Dwyer 2010). Siegfried Kracauer (1995 [1930]) sees the biopic as the need for some sort of legitimate art form for the emergent bourgeoisie who need heroes. This may also apply to members of India's new middle classes, who now dominate India's media (Dwyer 2000). Perhaps for them, Gandhi is only an image, a parental figure, a nationalist saint, but someone who is barely known and belongs to another era. They want new heroes to represent their values of Indianness, sexuality, beauty, and so on. For them, more relevant and interesting are figures such as businessmen Dhirubhai Ambani, Vijay Mallya, and Chandrababu Naidu; sportsman Sachin Tendulkar; politicians Indira Gandhi and Narendra Modi; and actors Shah Rukh Khan or Madhubala.

It is not surprising, therefore, that no new biopic of Gandhi is planned. However, if there are no current discourses on him, is he really important in modern India? Is he just a saint or a martyr, rather than a politician? Is his message so forgotten that a luxury pen that writes with saffron ink and costs thousands of dollars is issued—though later withdrawn—in the centenary of *Hind Swaraj* (BBC 2010)? Is the real Gandhi missing in Attenborough, missing in Hindi cinema, and missing in modern India?

Yet as India seeks a role as an emerging world leader today, Gandhi remains the only really globally known Indian. He is seen as one of the greatest figures of the twentieth century, and though he may not be fashionable today, as consumerist culture is in its early days, he may well return to favor as the limits of happiness in this modern world become clear. Perhaps his example of morality, truth speaking, and human values may find another, albeit modified, role in a newly confident India. New books on him are promised (including two volumes by Ram Guha), and books on him are among the few nonfiction books on India widely reviewed in the West. Perhaps India's shifting middle classes, following the initial upsurge of consumerist culture of the 2000s, may seek new values and look back to Gandhian values, however modified by other ideologies such as the Green movement or anticapitalism. This may lead to a new image of Gandhi to be defined and preserved in a cinema, the great form of mass modernism, a powerful public memorial. As Hindi film genres and Indian society are changing rapidly, perhaps it will not be too long until the mystery of the missing Mahatma is solved.



## References

- Adams, Jad. 2010. *Gandhi: Naked ambition*. London: Quercus.
- Alter, Joseph. 2000. *Gandhi's body: Sex, diet, and the politics of nationalism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Amin, Shahid. 1984. Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–22. In *Subaltern Studies 3*, edited by Ranajit Guha. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Attenborough, Richard. 1982. *In search of Gandhi*. London: Bodley Head.
- . 2008. The film bosses wanted Gandhi to be sexy—and be played by Richard Burton. [www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1052245/Richard-Attenborough-The-film-bosses-wanted-Gandhi-sexy-played-Richard-Burton.html#ixzz0jNoazeSA](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1052245/Richard-Attenborough-The-film-bosses-wanted-Gandhi-sexy-played-Richard-Burton.html#ixzz0jNoazeSA).
- BBC News. 2010. India court snub for luxury Gandhi pen. BBC News, February 24. [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8534101.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8534101.stm).
- Bingham, Dennis. 2010. *Whose lives are they anyway? The biopic as contemporary film genre*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Chapman, James, and Nicholas J. Cull. 2009. *Projecting empire: Imperialism and popular cinema*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Chettiar, A. K. 2007. *In the tracks of the Mahatma: The making of a documentary*. Edited and introduced by A. R. Venkatachalapathy and translated from the Tamil by S. Thillainayagam. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.
- Coward, Harold, ed. 2003. *Indian critiques of Gandhi*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Crossette, Barbara. 1981. Filming Gandhi's life stirs passion in India. *New York Times*, January 25. [www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/gandhi-ar1.html](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/gandhi-ar1.html).
- Custen, George F. 1992. *Bio/pics: How Hollywood constructed public history*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Dwyer, Rachel. 2000. *All you want is money, all you need is love: Sex and romance in modern India*. London: Cassell.
- . 2005. *100 Bollywood Films*. London: British Film Institute.
- . 2006. *Filming the gods: Religion and Indian cinema*. London: Routledge.
- . 2010. Hindi films and their audiences. In “Being here, now: Some insights into Indian cinema,” edited by Shanay Jhaveri. Special issue, *Marg*, 61, no. 3: 30–39.

- . Forthcoming. The Indian biopic. In *The biopic in contemporary film culture*, edited by Belen Vidal and Tom Brown.
- Fox, Richard. 1989. *Gandhian utopia: Experiments with culture*. Boston: Beacon.
- French, Philip. 1982. *Seductive Mahatma*. [www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2008/apr/11/alifeinfilm](http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2008/apr/11/alifeinfilm).
- Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. 1928. *Satyagraha in South Africa*. Translated by Valji Govindji Desai. Ahmadabad, India: Navjivan. (Written in Gujarati in 1924.)
- . 1982 [1927]. *An autobiography or the story of my experiments with truth*. Translated from the original Gujarati by Mahadev Desai. Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books.
- Garga, B. D. 2007. *From Raj to Swaraj: The non-fiction film in India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Geduld, H. M. 1983. Celluloid Mahatma. *Humanist* 43, no. 3:37–38.
- Grenier, Richard. 1983. The Gandhi nobody knows. *Commentary*, March. [history.eserver.org/ghandi-nobody-knows.txt](http://history.eserver.org/ghandi-nobody-knows.txt).
- Guynn, William. 2006. *Writing history in film*. London: Routledge.
- Hansen, Miriam. 1996. “Schindler’s List” is not “Shoah”: The second commandment, popular modernism, and public memory. *Critical Inquiry* 22: 292–312.
- Hardiman, David. 2003. *Gandhi in his time and ours: The global legacy of his ideas*. London: Hurst.
- Hay, Stephen. 1983. Review of *Gandhi* by Richard Attenborough. *Public Historian* 5, no. 3: 84–94.
- Higson, Andrew. 2005. *English heritage/English cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ICC (Indian Cinematograph Committee). 1927–28. Vol. 3. Oral evidence of witnesses examined at Madras, Rangoon, Mandalay, Calcutta (one witness), Jamshedpur, Nagpur, and Delhi, with their written statements. Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch.
- Kracauer, Siegfried. 1995 [1930]. The biography as an art form of the new bourgeoisie. In Siegfried Kracauer, *The mass ornament: Weimar essays*, edited and translated by Thomas Y. Levin, 101–6. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lester, Muriel. 1932. *Entertaining Gandhi*. Quoted in [www.culture24.org.uk/sector+info/campaigns/art48016](http://www.culture24.org.uk/sector+info/campaigns/art48016) (accessed January 15, 2010).
- Majeed, Javed. 2007. *Autobiography, travel, and postnational identity: Gandhi, Nehru, and Iqbal*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mann, Glenn, ed. 2000. The biopic. *Biography* 23, no. 1: v–x.

- Marmetz, Aljean. 1982. Hard-sell promotion of the movie “Gandhi” begins. Best Pictures, *New York Times*, October 11. [www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/gandhi-ar2.html](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/gandhi-ar2.html).
- McLain, Karline. 2009. *India’s immortal comic books: Gods, kings, and other heroes*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Moore-Gilbert, Bart. 2009. *Postcolonial life-writing: Culture, politics, and self-representation*. London: Routledge.
- Mukhopadhyay, Urvi. 2004. The perception of the “medieval” in Indian popular films: 1920s–1960s. Ph.D. diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
- Nandy, Ashis. 1983. *The intimate enemy*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- . 1995. “History’s forgotten doubles.” *History and Theory* 34, no. 2, Theme Issue 34: World Historians and Their Critics. May: 47.
- Nora, Pierre. 1996. *Realms of memory: Conflict and division*. Vol. 1. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pinney, Christopher. 2004. *Photos of the gods: The printed image and political struggle in India*. London: Reaktion Books.
- . n.d. From portrait to avatar: Gandhi in the popular imaginary. [christopherpinney.com/Gandhi.php](http://christopherpinney.com/Gandhi.php) (accessed March 10, 2010).
- Prasad, M. Madhava. 1998. *Ideology of the Hindi film: A historical construction*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. 1983. Gandhiana and Gandhology. *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 3:33–34.
- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish, and Paul Willemen. 1999. *An encyclopaedia of Indian cinema*. 2nd ed. London: British Film Institute.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2004. *Memory, history, forgetting*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Robinson, Francis. 1982. Gandhi. [www.historytoday.com/dm\\_getArticle.asp?gid=12554](http://www.historytoday.com/dm_getArticle.asp?gid=12554) (accessed March 13, 2005).
- Rühe, Peter. 2004. *Gandhi*. Oxford, U.K.: Phaidon.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1998. Mohandas Gandhi. *Time*. [www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,988159,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,988159,00.html).
- Shantaram, V. 1956. The eternal conflict. *Filmfare*. January 6, 32–33.
- Simon, J. 1983. Political antithesis. *National Review* 35, no. 4:269.
- Tidrick, Kathryn. 2006. *Gandhi: A political and spiritual life*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Tripathi, Salil. 2007. The lives of saints. *New Statesman*, April 23. [www.newstatesman.com/arts-and-culture/2007/04/gandhi-india-west-film-complex](http://www.newstatesman.com/arts-and-culture/2007/04/gandhi-india-west-film-complex).

**Public Culture**

- Tunzelmann, Alex von. 2009. Gandhi: An uncomplicated man in complicated times. *Guardian*, October 15. [www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/oct/14/gandhi-reel-history](http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/oct/14/gandhi-reel-history).
- Ward, Geoffrey C. 1995. Gandhi. In *Past imperfect: History according to the movies*, edited by Mark C. Carnes. New York: Hold.

Copyright of Public Culture is the property of Duke University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.