

THE TRANSITION OF GANDHISM TO ‘GANDHIGIRI’ IN VISUAL NARRATION: A STUDY OF GANDHI AND *LAGE RAHO MUNNA BHAI*

By

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Abstract: *In the year of sesquicentennial celebration of Gandhi’s birth anniversary the researcher through this paper proposes to study the depiction of Gandhi and his teachings as portrayed in the visual narrations. Even though Gandhi is said to have watched just two films in his lifetime, but even decades after his death in the year 1948 many filmmakers are still showing great interest in Gandhi and Gandhism to build popular visual narratives. Films have been critical in their nature and approach towards Gandhi, his life and his teachings. While some filmmakers through their works have criticized the established historical information on Gandhi, some of them attempted celebrate and romanticize Gandhism in an informative way. Richard Attenborough in his 1982 release titled ‘Gandhi’ presents the freedom fighter as national figure who agitated against the powerful British with his unparalleled weapon of Ahimsa and Satyagraha to attain freedom for India. Rajkumar Hirani in his 2006 release Lage Raho Munna Bhai depicts Gandhi through the prism of knowledge of a local Mumbai gangster, who has embraced the core of Gandhism with an obvious twist of his understanding of the present day world and dealing with day to day challenges. The neologism of Gandhigiri is used to express the tenets of Gandhism in contemporary term in this film. The pluralist approach towards Gandhian ideology has made its way for further comprehending the subject by the masses. Gandhism, which is founded on two perpetual pillars of ‘truth’ and ‘non-violence’, has acquired its acceptance among the contemporary generation through a strategic marketing and rebranding of the messages. Hence, this paper strive to examine the different traits of representation of Gandhi in films, namely Gandhi (1982) and Lage Raho Munna Bhai (2006) for better understanding of the new aesthetics ways of interpretation and theorization of Gandhism in the present socio-cultural environment.*

Keywords: *Gandhism, Gandhirigi, Gandhi, Lage Raho Munna Bhai, Rajkumar Hirani, Richard Attenborough.*

Introduction

Visual narratives have a cascading impact on the masses who are exposed to its ideas. Gandhi as a subject has been represented by the art of film making since long back. Gandhi is perhaps the only personality in India, next to the fictional romantic hero Devdas, created by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay on whom several films were produced in different languages. The work of reconstructing and reinterpreting some already accredited ideas or personalities within the scope of contemporary visual narrative mode, helps to re-contextualise the said ideas or personalities in a given socio-political and socio-cultural context. Apart from films Gandhi has been showcased in various contemporary popular culture forms like musicals, theatre, poetry, punk rock band, television shows, graphic novels and even rap battles. This contemporary popular culture has represented Gandhi, not only for approving Gandhi and Gandhism but also for reproving his socio-political and personal principles. The story of Gandhi's personal and political journey since the Pietermaritzburg railway station incident in South Africa in 1893 to his return to India in 1915 and becoming a mass leader as well as the torch bearer of non-violence movement against the British rulers have been portrayed by the film makers in the genre of subjective exercises. The multiplicity of themes have uncovered Gandhi in different roles such as a father, a husband, a mass communicator and above all a man with morale who eventually became the Mahatma. Harish Trivedi in his essay "Literary and Visual Portrayals of Gandhi" published in *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi* (2011), remarks on the representation of Gandhi in the literary works of art as, "Gandhi has permeated Indian literature and the arts; he is found to be everywhere, from office walls to public spaces to collective memory either personal or transmitted. He has been represented to enduring effect by a variety of foreign writers and artists as well, from points of view that serve to illuminate him differently and often with a striking supplementary"

As one of the highest film producing countries in the world, Indian cinema has provided a considerable space to the leadership stories of Indian freedom movement. However, many eminent Indian film makers and producers have shied away from making a film on Gandhi immediately after India's independence or his assassination, in spite of Gandhi's popularity and recognition as mass leader with multi-faceted personality. Most of the initial screen presence of Gandhi was in the category of docudramas rather than films having commercial value. Gandhi was first seen in a 1922 newsreel, where a lean and agile Gandhi can be seen addressing a gathering. Another newsreel titled 'Gandhi fast brings new Indian crisis during his anti-untouchability protests' was shot in 1932. A.K. Chettiar, a newsreel cameraperson edited the first full length documentary on Gandhi in 1944. The documentary was titled *Mahatma Gandhi: 20th Century Prophet*. The first commercially released 1939 Hollywood film that caricatured Gandhi by depicting the protagonist as a murderous cult leader wearing almost the same attire as Gandhi was titled *Gunga Din*. The first serious attempt to portray Gandhi in a feature film was done in the 1963 Hollywood release *Nine Hours to Rama*. The film was based on a novel by Stanley Wolpert and tried to capture nine hours in the life of Nathuram Godse who assassinated Gandhi. Though the film was impressive in its tone, but only a few scenes of the sole Indian actor JS Cashyap playing Gandhi and the absence of

Indians in the key roles moreover the dialogue delivery of American actors in Indian accent made the film look an unsatisfactory attempt.

Dwyer (2011) in his article titled *The Case of the Missing Mahatma: Gandhi and the Hindi Cinema*, wrote ‘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’. The then prime minister Jawahar Lal Nehru in a speech told the Rajya Sabha in December 1963 that ‘the production of a film on the life of Gandhi was too difficult a proposition a Government department to take up. The Government was not fit to do this and they had not got competent people to do it (Roy, 2010).

It was much after the success of Hollywood director Richard Attenborough’s film titled ‘Gandhi’ in 1982 that Indian producers and directors started producing their works involving Gandhi as a lead character or as a character of significant value. During the time period between 1982-2018 there were about ten to twelve films that portrayed Gandhi as central character or a character of significant value in the entire script of the film. Films like Ketan Mehta directed *Sardar* (1993), Shyam Benegal directed *The Making of the Mahatma* (1996), Jamil Dehlavi directed *Jinnah* (1998), and Tirlok Malik directed *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (2000), were presented within the realm docudramas with limited commercial elements. Whereas films *Hey Ram* (2000), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), *Mane Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara* (2005), *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006), *Gandhi, My Father* (2007), *Papilio Buddha* (2014) received commercial treatments with songs and dance sequences as nondiegetic content appealing to the masses.

But the two films on Gandhi that was able to create the biggest popular impact and won many honours is Richard Attenborough’s 1982 release *Gandhi*, primarily made in English and also released in a Hindi dubbed version in India, and the Raj Kumar Hirani directed Hindi film *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* released in 2006. Both the films are set in a completely different backdrop with the entire plot portraying many facets of the life and teachings of Gandhi. While Attenborough’s *Gandhi* won eight Academy awards, *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* won four National film awards in India. What is more, unlike any of the other films that have mentioned, both these films witnessed a great box-office collection, making them commerciality a hit. Hence an academic discourse is viable proposition to assess the depiction of the reconstruction of Gandhian philosophy in visual narratives.

Attenborough’s Gandhi

The first film on Gandhi that achieved an unprecedented success was Richard Attenborough directed 1982 release titled *Gandhi*. This is an epic film in itself, with a run time of nearly 191 minutes, accompanied by a 240 page book and about twenty years of research Attenborough’s film showed Gandhi in entirety. The ideology, leadership skills, humanitarian aspect, personal life, inner conflicts, political life of Gandhi was crafted with immense care. The inception of Attenborough’s *Gandhi* was when the director met Motilal Kothari, a British Asian to discuss his idea about a film of the life of Gandhi. Attenborough met Prime minister Nehru and Indira Gandhi in this regard in 1963. Trivedi (2011) mentioned that learning about

the intentions of Richard Attenborough Nehru warned the director by saying, “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”. During his days of research Attenborough learned about 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). Taking most of the inspiration from Louis Fischer’s work the director used three scriptwriters in succession to develop the character of Gandhi for his film. The final script was written by Jack Briley which kept the core essence of the Fischer’s narrative structure. In 1980 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi read the script sent by the director. In spite of the director’s request she refused to approve the script, saying that film must be the creation of its makers. However, Attenborough (1982) in his book *In Search of Gandhi* mentioned Mrs. Gandhi’s point of view as “Government and Ministry should merely satisfy themselves that, related to the subject matter, the manner in which the film was envisaged was a proper one.”

Like all other biopics, Attenborough’s *Gandhi* tries to hit all the right tone to create an authentic account of the history of modern India, which includes the episode of the country’s political agitation against British imperialism. It elaborately showcases the contribution of Gandhi’s philosophy in creating a free India by fighting off British hegemony with the powerful weapon of satyagraha and non-violence. The film has a number of epic set pieces to suit the grandeur of the film. Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi* provides a space for the most of the significant events of Gandhi’s life by a firmly edited narrative which presents Gandhi in an idealized manner. It was a mammoth task on the part of Attenborough for dealing with the subject of Gandhi. The director opens his film with one of the most tragic episode in the history of modern India, the assassination of Gandhi. Portraying the assassination scene at the beginning of the movie and using close shots provides a sentimental and sympathetic undertone to the film. Attenborough has portrayed every significant historical events related to the life of Gandhi, from his journey to South Africa, Non-violent resistance to the discriminatory regulation, experiments with Satyagraha, non- violence, Champaran episode, the Swadeshi movement, Salt march, Non-Cooperation Movement following the the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and finally Godse’s gunshot.

Attenborough made a serious attempt to in drawing a biographical portrayal of Gandhi which is intertwined with the parallel understanding of the history of Indian freedom movement. The film brings forth the impression of incompleteness to the history of Indian freedom struggle without the presence of Gandhi. Without touching the controversial aspects of Gandhi intentionally the director has portrayed the image of Indian nationalism through the heroic intervention of Gandhi with success. Kaul (1998) in his work *Cinema and Freedom Leaders* notes the relevance of cinema in spreading the values of Gandhism as, “a performing arts movement developed for spreading the message of the freedom struggle to the remotest villages...cinemas had made the main leaders of the freedom struggle known by their faces and Mahatma Gandhi was better known to remote rural audiences than some of their own regional leaders.” Attenborough’s film has provided the sense of Gandhism in visual by not harming the sensibility of Indian national sentiments. Such a herculean task of making a biopic film using accentuating visual techniques and strategic narration of individual history

as well as of the nation deserves an academic appreciation. Juergensmeyer (1984) in his article *The Gandhi Revival--A Review Article* mentioned that Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* had become the most widely viewed cinematic portrayal of the man and one of the most widely seen films in history. Attenborough's *Gandhi* as a film has invoked the public imagination and emancipation, bestowing a gravitas to the life Gandhi and his body of works best known as Gandhism.

Munna's Gandhi

In 2004 Raj Kumar Hirani in his directorial debut introduced a new film hero, Munna Bhai aka Murali Prasad Sharma to the audiences. The first instalment of Munna Bhai series *Munna Bhai MBBS* showed the main protagonist Munna healing the patients with love and compassion after an abortive attempt to do an MBBS. Munna appealed to cross section of audiences and to viewers to all types of cinema. The success of the first instalment inspired the makers to create the second instalment of the Munna Bhai series. However, the second instalment had no impression of continuity that is often the characteristic of a sequel. Munna's second film, *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* is a fairy tale of a lovable rogue local gangster who inspired by love aspires to be a professor in history and a Gandhian. Unlike other films on Gandhi a new alternative narrative method is used in this film to propagate Gandhism in a patriotic comic genre. In the age of globalisation and transforming ideas the film perfectly reconstitute history making it seamlessly compatible with contemporary popular cultural space. *Lage Raho Munna Bhai (LRMB)* presented the Gandhian principals in the foreground without any jingoism of a patriotic film or a documentary style narrative technique hailed as cinematic tribute to Gandhi. The film managed to escape the in fights prevailing among historians from different school of thoughts.

Lage Raho Munna Bhai marked a revival of Gandhian thought and was successful in unifying them to the Indian way of thought that has been hybridized because of global influence. *Bande Mein Tha Dam* (The guy had guts), *Bandemataram* was the opening line of a song saluting the greatness of Gandhi. LRMB abstained from dealing with a complicated view of Gandhi but showed the protagonist Munna, who is fatherless and has no authority discovering Gandhi to fulfil this role in his life. Munna garners limited knowledge about Gandhi and his philosophy after his brief visit to the public library. Munna started practising Gandhism which he avows as Gandhigiri and as a result the film follows the transformation in his character and life style in totality. Protagonist Munna adapts to Gandian strategies of satyagraha and non-violence to find ethical resolution of his conflict with property mafia in his city. The film shows the apparition of Gandhi that is visible only to Munna, advising him in a very brief manner. The advices are then used by Munna to guide common citizens to deal with their daily life issues. Munna's Gandhigiri is certainly more influential than that of any academic research on Gandhi. Gandhigiri revived the public consciousness about Gandhi, especially among the youths, who started to follow Gandhigiri as a non political tool to fight corruption and misappropriation of power. Gandhigiri has installed a moral way of behaving among the contemporary generation.

The undercurrent of Hirani's movie LRMB has no trace of Gandhism as a serious subject but has every bit of commercial features of a movie with traces comic narration using the core essence of Gandhism. Having the confluence of the commercial entity and entertainment value on one hand and a serious subject like Gandhi on the other productively influence the changed cultural and aesthetic sensibility of the new age globalised mass audience. LRMB as filmic venture provided a deep aesthetic space for Gandhi in order to propagate his three basic principles of non-violence, Truthfulness and fearlessness. Lage Raho Munna Bhai proved the presence of an appetite for the idea of Gandhi and Gandhism that could be allocated a space for re-interpretation and re-enactment even at the time when commercial cinema is changing and experimenting with its narrative styles.

At a time of radical social change in India, it is not surprising that Gandhi as a subject could be experimented in not only the print literacy arena but also in the scope of visual narrative. A personality such as Gandhi is an inspiring and motivating topic even in the new cultural space. In the filmic universe Gandhi has reappeared as a powerful voice answering questions that Indians today are presented with in their day to affair. As a tool for transforming the mankind in present age of globalisation and digitization film makers have courageously re-structured the Gandhian ethos to cater to the audience set in a dynamic ethico-cultural settings. By finding new meaning of the message the Gandhi that has been brought back in visual narrative is not a political Gandhi, but a Gandhi who act as an inner conscience and moral guide. The showcasing of the transformation of Gandhism to Gandhigiri has led to the creation of adherent of Gandhi cross-section of society. Therefore, this paper has examined the possibilities of representing the astounding leader Gandhi and construction and reconstruction of his ideas giving new nomenclature in visual narration for reaching out to the mass.

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