Locating Social Desire: Economic Empowerment of Women in the Film "Mother India"

Sameera Khan Rehmani and Saba Khan

Abstract

This paper explores the idea of film as a historical source of Indian women's desire to attain economic strength in the first decade of the country's political sovereignty. The Hindi language film "Mother India" (1957) is an archive of women's experiences and aspirations in post-colonial India. The film questioned gender stereotypes of national identity, women's societal roles, and decision-making abilities. It represented women as capable of laborious work like farming and enhanced their status as decision-makers and eventually, executors of retributive justice. It visualises the journey of a dependent distraught woman towards economic self-reliance. While it courageously broke off from the idealised versions of women as stay-at-home wives and mothers whose only power was a silent prayer, it ran alongside a complex notion of women's honour through their sexual chastity. Its commercial success gives an insight into society's probable acceptance of women in men's work areas with rigid patriarchal notions of moral uprightness. Further, it was silent on the ongoing political struggles of women across India. This paper expands the feminist film theoretical framework with emergent theories of representation situated at the intersection of Indian films, families, religions, and traditions. It also uses recent studies that describe Indian working women's accomplishment levels and self-image while attempting to maintain a balance between work and household responsibilities.

Keywords: gender, sexuality, film, desire, memory, history, myth, economic sustainability

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> "The theory of the instincts is, so to say, our mythology. Instincts are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness". Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis

> "Tu toh hamari maa hai, saare gaon ki maa hai" *(You are our mother, the whole village's mother)* - from the film "Mother India", 1957

One of the earliest anthropomorphic representations of India, which was still in its infancy as an idea of a nation, was imagined as a mother goddess in the 1905 painting "Bharat Mata" (Hindi for Mother India) by Abanindranath Tagore (Figure 1). This was an idea in the making but granted urgency by the partition of Bengal, Abanindranath's home state, by the then British Viceroy in India, Lord Curzon. In the painting, one can see a saffron-clad woman holding clothing, food, education and religion, symbols common to all Indians (Ramaswamy, 2010).

Figure 1. Bharat Mata (Mother India) by Abanindranath Tagore, 1905, Public Domain

Locating "Mother India"

For most people born and brought up in India after the 1970s, it is a surprise to find that the term "Mother India" (Hindi: "*Bharat Mata*") has only been in widespread existence since the last few decades of the nineteenth century. Partha Chatterjee (1991) demonstrated how the contemporary usage of these symbols took root in the historical imagination amidst the nationalist formation of 'India' in the nineteenth century. However, the imagery has been growing ever more popular and sacred with time, as can be seen from the evolution of the image of Mother India from an idea to an anthropomorphic-cartographic illustration of an actual mother in various forms; the sacredness can be further seen from the visibly censoring attitudes of the Indian governments and large masses of the public when confronted with artistic license in the depiction of this female form (Ramaswamy, 2010).

During the years of India's freedom struggle against colonialism, even as the idea of a Mother India was evolving, it was taken up as a motif of irony in Indian society by the "imperial feminists" of the time – i.e., those feminists who supported the idea that the emancipation of Indian women from the "savage" Indian men, can only be through the "civilised" imperialists and their laws. Even as Victorian feminists voiced their opinions against the "masculine" empire, they placed themselves as the "feminine" saviours of the empire. They frequently invoked the imagery of the "Oriental" (often Indian) woman to be saved in order to protect the Western civilisation and maintain the higher moral ground. This was pretty much in line with the European male depictions of the women from "the Orient," for example, the Reverend Edward Storrow's, *The Eastern Lily Gathered* (1852) emphasises how the Muslim women were the most sensual and polygamous and, therefore inferior to the Christian women. Millicent Garrett Fawcett, a famous Victorian feminist and the

leader of the women's constitutional suffrage movement in the late 1890s, said in one of her speeches that Indian women were "no better than beasts of burden". In fact, the British suffrage movement often pinned the demand for women's rights on the argument that this was the natural outcome of Western civilisational progress or else the fate of women would be that of the suppressed oriental women. In most of the documented discourse, speeches, and publications during the times of Victorian feminists as well as Edwardian suffragists, most feminists can be seen as aligned with the imperial ideology even as they felt that the "Indian woman" was suffering at the hands of the "Indian men" and their social and religious customs (Burton, 1994).

Perhaps the most famous of these works was published in 1927 by Katherine Mayo, an American conservative historian and nativist, who titled her book "Mother India", wherein she used prevalent social inequalities and primitive practices in Indian society, especially child marriage, to mount a scathing attack on the inadequacy of Indians to be able to rule themselves, even as she absolved the colonial administration of any responsibility when she wrote:

> "The British Administration of India, be it good, bad, or indifferent, has nothing whatever to do of the conditions above indicated. Inertia, helplessness, lack of initiative and originality, lack of staying power and of sustained loyalties, sterility of enthusiasm, weakness of life-vigor itself – all are traits that truly characterize the Indian not only of today, but of long-past history." (Mayo, 1927, Page 16, see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Excerpt from the book "Mother India," 1927, Public Domain
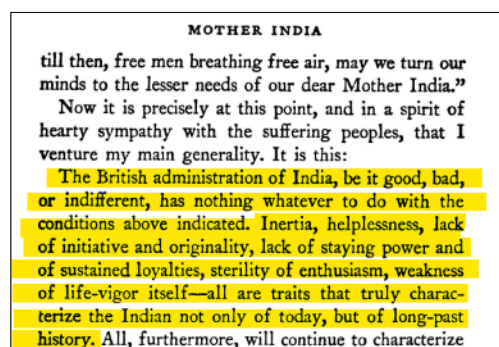
Mayo used piece-wise statistics and often blatant imperial feminism (Wilson, 1997) to paint Indians as ridden with "sexual weakness, " leading them to rape rampantly, suffering their women with child-marriages and premature maternity. Most people acknowledged it as having "serious substance", for example, by Gandhi (New York Times Archive, 1927 edition). However, their gripe was that the facts of the status of women in India had been misused to create an impression that the Indian struggle for freedom from imperialism was incomprehensible due to the social and religious

structures in Indian society, which have no solution except to be governed by a higher civilised race with a superior religion (Mayo, 1927).

Apparitions of aftermath

The book became a sensation and sparked protests and debates across continents. Sympathetic scholars considered it reformist literature, while critics worldwide attempted to call out its racism (Sinha, 2006). Gandhi was quoted in the New York Times to have famously called it the "report of a drain inspector sent out with the one purpose of opening and examining the drains of the country to be reported upon," even as the New York Times Book Review published a full-page review with the headlines "India is her own worst enemy." (New York Times Archive, 1927 edition)

Apart from demonstrations and protests, more than fifty books and pamphlets were written in rebuttal (Sinha, 2006). This was a significant event because now, irrespective of religious, political, and social beliefs, activists and intellectuals across India and abroad stood behind the title "Mother India" to defend this idea of India against the accusations in the book. In Foucauldian terms, this was akin to the woman's body as the centre of political struggle. However, tragically Gandhi himself fell victim to this imagery as his assassin believed Gandhi was violating Mother India by agreeing to the partition of India (Sharma, 2018).

Interestingly, the Mayo controversy led to various social and political changes, sometimes ironic. While the Indian nationalists opposed the line of argument of the book, they usually accepted the facts, and in their attempt to come out as emancipative of women, a large number of them lobbied with the British government to bring forth a law to increase the minimum legal age of marriage of girls to 14 (Sinha, 2006). In the subsequent in-depth studies of Mayo's letters, however, it does appear that she was 'guided' by the colonial administration to focus on these topics (Sinha, 2006). It has also been argued that her writings towed the colonial line to pit Muslims against Hindus (Jha, 1971). The controversy and subsequent events left an indelible mark on Indian collective memory, as can be seen from the naming of the film "Mother India" thirty years after the event.

"Mother India" – the restoration of myth

In 1957, ten years after Indian Independence, Mehboob Khan, an Indian Muslim filmmaker, re-wrote his 1940 film Aurat (woman) and named it "Mother India". The film's production team noted: "We have intentionally called our film 'Mother India,' as a challenge to this book, in an attempt to evict from the minds of the people the scurrilous work that is Miss Mayo's book." (Sinha, 2006)

"Mother India" is one of the most successful films in the history of Indian cinema. It has been translated into multiple languages and released across countries. It won an

Academy Award nomination in 1958, and it has been alleged that it lost to Fellini's 'Le Notti di Cabiria' (The Nights of Cabaria) by just one vote. It is among the rare films that continued to be in circulation in theatres across India for almost four decades up until the late nineties (Mishra, 1989). The film has a melodramatic telling of the trials and tribulations faced by the protagonist, "Radha", who appears as an old woman being asked to inaugurate a dam by grateful villagers. She then reminisces about her past from when she was newly married but was soon abandoned by her husband and found herself burdened in debt. She loses her youngest child to the ensuing poverty, further exacerbated by drought. Facing sexual advances from the moneylender, she adheres to her notion of chastity and refuses to trade her body for food. She demonstrates superhuman strength in the fields, takes her family out of debt, and persuades other families to stay and struggle. However, her second son Birju gives in to the bitterness he faced throughout his childhood and joins a gang of robbers. The villagers drive him out of the village, and Radha is almost killed in a fire in the situation but is eventually saved by Birju, who leaves the village. Sometime later, Birju returns kills the moneylender, and tries to kidnap the moneylender's daughter Rupa. To save Rupa's chastity, Radha shoots her own son Birju who later dies in her arms.

The film was a potent mix of plot, imagery, and identity – both on-screen as well as in the public sphere, for example, as a celebration of involved Indian Muslims (in the aftermath of partition) and their invocation of facets of Hindu mythology while keeping their identity, in opposition to the divisive project of Mayo's narrative. In an unscripted twist, the key actors, the Muslim actor playing "Radha" (Nargis) and the Hindu actor playing her on-screen son "Birju" (Sunil Dutt), had an off-screen romance when Dutt saved Nargis from an actual fire on the film's set. They married soon after this event and remained a powerful celebrity couple in Indian glamour and political circles for many decades (Thomas, 1989). It is interesting to note the formation and evolution of the Hindi film industry in Mumbai. From the very early decades, even before partition, the industry had a multi-religious and often secular microstructure, even though the themes of many films had religious overtones. Thus, we could see several Parsi, Muslim, Hindu and other actors taking up on-screen roles of different religious characters. Some of the most famous Hindu devotional songs were performed by Muslim musicians and singers who are revered even today. There were difficulties in a communally charged society faced by Muslims in Mumbai, in the immediate aftermath of partition in 1947, for example, as noted by the writer Saadat Hassan Manto who ultimately had to move to Pakistan. However, within a decade, it could be seen that Muslims had again contributed significantly to developing the Hindi film industry along with a largely welcoming pan-religious fan following across the country. In general, time and again, Muslims and other minorities in the Indian film industry have faced the complex cultural negotiation of their identity between being a Muslim and an Indian (Parama Roy, 1998). There have been criticisms of how Muslim directors followed subtle revisionism in their historical films, where they showed medieval Muslim kings celebrating Hindu festivals. In fact, in the context of this paper, the life of Nargis, the star of Mother India, is a case in point of her decisions to alienate herself from any form of identity

imposed on her from birth. Despite being born into a Muslim family, she consciously made gradual choices in her life to further herself from any association with stereotypes of Muslim identity (Parama Roy, 1998). After her marriage, she maintained a reasonably public demonstration of her secular credentials with her explicit embrace of Hindu symbols in her daily life while still associating with Muslim Sufi saints' tombs.

As a result of these successes and the text of the film itself, it can be argued that the film developed as a new site of collective memory (Mukherjee, Adams, and Molina, 2018), replacing the troubled memories of Mayo's book with the restored myth of "Mother India" as an empowered Indian woman with unhinged morals. Thomas (1989) describes the film as "the quintessential Indian film" because of the various aspects of melodrama that pitch sexual chastity and trials of motherhood on a backdrop of nationalism, religion, identity, and other intertextualities.

Myth, desire, psychology

Myth has a central place in psychology right from the start. Indeed the famous "Oedipus Complex" is named after the infamous character from Greek mythology. Freud wrote to Einstein explicitly referring to the argument that every science is, in essence, mythology (Freud, 1950). One enraging debate is on the structure of the unconscious – simplistically speaking, Jung, Rank and Campbell took it to mythology to understand the unconscious, while Lacan went on to explain it using the structure of language. While myths and archetypes might "give an approximate description of an unconscious core of meaning" in Jung's own words, he was, for the most part, opposed to any dogmatism towards approaching mythology as something that can be interpreted (Sels, 2011). And therefore, while approaches like Campbell's can try to give a standard structure to most myths and, in implementation, to most textual readings, it would be restrictive to look at a text from only that perspective.

The film "Mother India" can, of course, be preliminarily viewed through existing myth structures, for example, Joseph Campbell's monomyth (Indick, 2004). Nevertheless, even as we employ that structure, we must caveat the criticism that Campbell has received from feminist scholarship, where it has been questioned as to why there are so few "women heroes" and why the "heroic" relates to superhuman instead of the mundane which may at times be the subtle heroism that saves the world (Tatar, 2021). In general, from most mythologies of the past, women are spoils of war to be won or chaste and dutiful mothers, wives, and daughters. It has been argued that the heroine's journey has not been captured accurately in most films and literature due to a lack of examples, intentions, or both (Murdock, 2013). It would be essential to note that Indian mythology is very rich in the portrayal of women as heroes across the spectrum of various traits. On the one hand, the myth of Goddess Kali is a manifestation of power through a feminine form. It encompasses timelessness across life and death in a subtle balance between reward and punishment. On the other hand, there is Goddess Sita, wife of the God King Ram, who embodies

resilience and patience, often described in retellings through many centuries as the purest ideal of womanhood – establishing notions of chastity, loyalty, a steadfastness as the long-suffering righteous wife. Then there is Radha – somewhere in the middle – she has a sense of belonging to Lord Krishna and is not afraid to express her desire and overcome societal norms through her agency. However, it is interesting to note that Radha in Mother India falls more in line with Campbell's Hero than Murdock's Heroine. In a way, the film "Mother India" does empower its Radha as the hero of her own life, ensuring no reliance on male rescuers (unlike prevalent myths and their cinematic references). Radha's journey starts with a call to adventure (marriage), results in trials and tribulations, floods and the perils of water, death of the hero through deaths of her children, her rebirth signified by the rebirth of the land, her final trial and moral uprightness etc. In fact, the critical aspect of "masculine strength", which is one of the key criticisms of Campbell's heroes, is found in multiple phases of Radha's life, as she displays superhuman strength when saving her children from the flood, manually pulling a plough meant to be pulled by an ox and also as she beats up her male assaulter with a stick (Figures 3, 4, 5). It can also be seen through the character development of Birju, who goes through his journey in similar steps. One key aspect of likeness with Campbell's theories is the violence. While Radha calls for Birju to be non-violent, her own approach is that of "righteous violence," where she can resort to violence in her wisdom and good judgment. Thus, the step of "Atonement with the Father" is violent for both Birju and Radha. For Birju, it results in his murder of Sukhilala, while for Radha, it results in the murder of her own son, who then proves himself worthy by restoring her marriage bangles.

Figure 3. Radha lifts a heavy plank to save her children from drowning. Still from the film Mother India (1957), reproduced for educational purposes

Figure 4. Spurning the sexual advances of the moneylender, Radha beats
him with a stick. Still from the film Mother India (1957), reproduced for
educational purposes

Figure 5. Radha works the fields with inspiring strength in the
absence of means and machinery. Still from the film Mother
India (1957), reproduced for educational purposes

As we note above, it would be too restrictive to read this film in the light of the individual's journey across mythic structures, especially because there is another myth development signified here that was happening since the past few years before the film – that of India as a unifying mother encoded in Hindu mythology (Ramaswamy, 2010). As discussed earlier, initially, it evolved as an extension of the Bharat Mata project, which started with nationalism identifying with religious devotion, but later incorporated a cartographic shape of India's geography anthropomorphising into a mother goddess. In fact, for many years, especially those leading to the partition of India on religious lines, this imagery had remained highly polarised, with many Muslims objecting to the representation of India through Hindu goddesses and Hindu anthropomorphic traditions. There were various spectrums of political nationalism during the build-up to the Partition of 1947, where Muslims

sometimes tried to create inclusive nationalistic identities while some created exclusive regional-religious segregations, which later directly impacted the Partition (Ghosh, 2016). The complexity of these religious boundaries is hard to understand as the Muslim nationalists leading the movements for a separate East Pakistan based on Muslim religious identity often resorted to nationalist literature, including explicit references to anthropomorphic visuals of the nation as Mother (Bose, 1997). In general, however, it was observed that references of the nation to the Hindu Goddess were alienating, as observed by Rabindranath Tagore, who opposed such explicit references (Bose, 1997).

In this light, 'Mother India' – a film released just a decade after partition – was a powerful attempt at reuniting various religions under a more acceptable reading of Hindu mythology – one which touched upon the experiences and morality of common masses. Apart from the filmmaker, many crew members were of different religions. The lead character plays "Radha" – a symbolic name in Hindu mythology as the playful consort of Krishna (an avatar of the Hindu God Vishnu). There are various theories as to why other names were not chosen, e.g., Sita is too restricted in associations of purity, and Durga is considered too retributive (Mishra, 1989) – Radha provides inclusiveness and warmth to the psychology of the viewers. In a way, the film projected a desire of the newly independent country to be a warm, playful, inclusive, and loving motherland with a strong sense of morality that had emerged at that time, primarily patriarchal with elements of Puritanism from multiple traditions, including those brandished by previous colonial masters.

One of the key differences from the 1940 film was the enrichment of the character of the younger son Birju – a complex character who rebels against the tyrannical and corrupt moneylender. Certain clear Oedipal references can be found (e.g., he wanted to return his mother's marriage bangles which were pawned in tough times) (Thomas, 1989). Birju picks up and throws the slithering snake into the flood, which scares her mother (see Figure 6). While his birth father is absent after a brief initial accident, he locates his castration anxiety in the moneylender who is lusting after his mother in most of his early impressions (Figure 7). While he picks up the gun, his mother and brother break away from him. Society tries to burn him alive – the fire is symbolic of the anger and rage in his mind (Figure 8). In the end, he does confront and kill this faux father, along with the assertion that there is no difference between them. He then transfers his rage onto the moneylender's daughter, who had rejected him due to his poverty and generational debt. However, before he can abduct her, he is confronted by Radha, now "Mother India", and not just his mother, who is not reluctant to shoot him.

Figure 6. The boys watch as the snake slithers towards their mother in the flood.
Stills from the film Mother India (1957), reproduced for educational purposes

Figure 7. The sequence where Birju almost dies of hunger forces Radha to
think about prostituting herself to Sukhilala, the moneylender. Stills from the
film Mother India (1957), reproduced for educational purposes

Figure 8. Birju is surrounded by fire, trying to save his mother. Still from
the film Mother India (1957), reproduced for educational purposes

The film continues with the inherent theme of linking women's sexuality with their "honour" and the honour of the whole village and, eventually, society. The concept has its roots in the patriarchal setup in society, where women were treated as the property of males. Irrespective of religion, the general practice worldwide and in the Indian subcontinent (with some exceptions) has been that the father would 'give' his daughter in marriage to his son-in-law. The role of women was to be a reproductive conduit to facilitate the extension of a man's clan/caste/religious identity etc. The husband's family name is associated with the children, and for a long time, women have had limited or no property rights. In effect, the 'power' of a man came to be associated with his ability to 'protect' his property – subtly referencing his women (mothers/wives/daughters). This 'protection' was not only against forced aggressions by other men but also as a 'control' over the women's own agency, denying them any say in their sexual and reproductive rights. One way to exercise this control is through an unwritten social enforcement of the concept of 'honour' – i.e., a woman's honour is linked to her sexuality which she must exercise only through a marriage arranged by her family, and many women go to great lengths to appear to be upholding this concept for example through the adoption and propagation of the usage of 'purdah' (veil) and other gender segregation practices. In fact, even if a woman is a victim of a sexual crime through no fault of hers, she is still considered to have lost her 'honour' – this was referenced as someone who had 'looted her honour'. This has been explored in great depth in various works like Thomas (1989), Sinha (2006), Feldman (2010), Chatterjee (2020) and others with the common observation of a twisted patriarchal morality centred around chastity and suffering of the rural woman. Radha generally bears the brunt of poverty, floods, lack of health facilities and other severe issues without complaining. It is only when she is faced with the prospect of sexual immorality (against herself as well as against the moneylender's daughter) that she turns into the goddess of retribution and punishes the aggressors, even if it means killing her own son.

Amidst the more extensive dramatic sequences and conflicts, there was another subtle desire at play in this film from the beginning. As the film begins, we see Radha being revered and requested to inaugurate a dam, outlining the desire of newly independent Indians to conquer the forces of nature – floods and droughts – which wreaked havoc in the lives of Indians who were mostly rural agrarian during that time. Starting from the very initial studies by Indians trying to understand mass poverty in India, many Indian economists, who were often part of the nationalist movement, came to conclude that a state-led planning agency was needed to drive changes such as accelerated industrialisation. Right from the first government of India, this led to the formation of the "Planning Commission of India" (PCI) in 1950, which had globally recognised statisticians and other experts. The PCI prescribed economic policy as bundles of 5-year plans. Notably, the Indian government had been working on their "Second 5-Year Plan", with a key focus on building dams along with other economic progress during the period of this film's release (Schulze, 2002). One way to interpret this is to understand it as a battle for control – controlling nature and controlling women. As Thomas (1989) observes, there is a dichotomy in the Indian narrative – that of the West, which can control nature but not its women,

while the East has chaste women and needs to control nature (Thomas, 1989). In hindsight, there is also politics here than just gender, although given the marketing evidence (Thomas, 1989), it does appear the primary motive was the chastity of women. It cannot be ignored that the larger mood of the country's political influencers was economic independence during that time, of which socialists like Mehboob were prominent propagandists during those early years (Schulze, 2002).

The film transfers this desire for economic independence into the protagonist for most of her life, as she is depicted to break most stereotypes for becoming economically sustainable. This economic desire is not without sheer grit. In the song "Do not leave your land of birth," a strong play of camera work and editing (e.g., dissolves) reinvigorates the viewer with much of the message of the film – Radha's life flashbacks into scenes of happiness and hope, hordes of villagers fleeing flooded fields are persuaded to believe in themselves and the prospect of growth. This song is used to represent the passage of time where Radha ploughs the fields with her small children, who grow into young adults (Figure 9). There is no weakness in Radha's efforts on the field, no men to help her for most of her life. The song covers her successes and establishes her as the village leader. While the script could have been written with various plots which could have brought back the men in Radha's life to help her, for example, the return of her husband, dependence on her sons, etc., to his credit Mehboob Khan does not do any of that. Till the end, Radha is shown to be the hero, unwavering in her values, however patriarchal, and conquering her circumstances.

Figure 9. The song employing the passage of time. Stills from the film
Mother India (1957), reproduced for educational purposes

Presence and Absence – the erasing of Indian Women by Mother India

While most of the themes in the film are nationalistic and moralistic, it does resound with the post-colonial aspirations of Indians at the time. In the late nineteenth century, women's groups emerged in India to champion women's issues such as widow remarriage, Sati, education for women and property rights. However, in the run-up to 1947, many women activists and groups focused on supporting the freedom struggle. After 1947, they again started looking inwardly into the issues facing the status of women in a post-colonial India, especially the right to work with

dignity, respect, equal pay, etc. (Prasad, 2021). Overall, the history of Indian women's struggles and movements for their rights is a long-winded one, with the past two hundred years being witness to various forms of organisation to demand reform in fields of personal law, criminal law, social status and equal rights towards education, economic empowerment, and property ownership to name a few (Kumar, 1993).

While maintaining an Individual "virtuous hero," the film did not acknowledge the equations of caste, religion and other fractures. Willfully ignoring the view of Ambedkar as the village being a site of caste-based oppression (Ambedkar, 1948), it is interesting to note that Mehboob Khan tried to balance the views of Gandhi and Nehru – that the village was a place of authentic Indian culture with some backwardness which could be resolved by physical structures such as a dam (Jodhka, 2002). Perhaps the most prominent absence is that of collective movements of contemporary rural women. Various parts of the country were seeing a consolidated effort from the rural agrarian population, especially women, to rebel against similar existing systems of economic and sexual exploitation at the hands of moneylenders, landlords and wealthy farmers. Three major armed struggles in India right after Independence which had significant participation by Indian women have been extensively documented, the Telangana armed struggle (1946-51) in southeastern India, the Tebhaga movement (1945-48) in eastern India and the Warli movement (1945-52) in western India. The Telangana and Warli struggles were particularly anti-patriarchal against the themes of sexual slavery of rural women, primarily due to exploitative economic contracts laid down by landowners and moneylenders. The Tebhaga movement was more around equal wages and a fair crop share. (Prasad, 2021)

Metz's theory of film attempts to read them using semiotics and psychoanalysis. Film has an imaginary double – oscillating between the absence of the photographed and the presence of the photograph – the realisation from the spectator that film is an illusion, and yet this very approximation of a dream gives it an upper hand over theatre which is too real and cannot compete with film which can utilise the "drive" aspect leading to pleasure from not only what is on screen, but also from the imaginary, the latter being narcissistic pleasure unconstrained due to infinite possibilities of condensation and displacement (Metz, 1982).

In this context, the struggles of Indian women contemporary to the making and release of the film "Mother India" were erased by the film in two ways. One is the obvious absence – there are no women's political movements on screen, no solidarity or help from other women. Going by the Bechdel test, most of the dialogues between women revolve around men or honour. Radha takes care of her boys and is a maternal force for the rest of the village. Her help and the ultimate sacrifice of killing her own son to save the moneylender's daughter are also driven by the idea of chastity rather than solidarity between them (Thomas, 1989). At the same time, what is present on-screen is the violent retribution of Birju against the oppression of the moneylender, leading to him killing him. As we have observed, this could be considered the stage of "Atonement with the Father" for Birju, but that

would be a tad too simplistic, although still accurate. What Birju also represents is the collective sum of violent socialist struggles happening around the country at that time, and as we have seen, a large number of them were by rural women. By taking away the moral authority of Birju's struggle and downplaying his sacrifices, the film implicitly inflicts the same treatment on the women's struggles happening at that time. Radha, the Mother India on screen, tells Birju that he will not accomplish anything with a gun; only God can change the fate of the village (Thomas, 1989), which can clearly be seen as a direct statement to all the violent struggles happening across the country at that time, especially the crucial women's struggles which we noted earlier. The scene where the villagers try to burn Radha's family and Birju saves her is powerfully reminiscent of the "Trial by Fire" phase of Campbell's monomyth, as it lays down a strong oedipal subtext but at the same time, Radha emerges with the determination and the knowledge that she will have to sacrifice her own son (as we saw in Figure 8 above). Ironically, Radha wields the gun herself in an unforgettable scene, almost symbolically referring to the Hindu Goddess of retribution – Durga – solemn-faced and wearing all-black (Figure 10), when she decides to take her son's life in order to protect the chastity of the moneylender's daughter.

It is also interesting to note the handling of the memory of the violence of partition and the rupture of partition. In the famous scene where the villagers are leaving with their belongings, the scene is highly reminiscent of the common scenes of mass migration during the partition of India (Figure 11). However, this pain is washed away from consciousness of the spectators, as Radha's exemplary efforts bring back prosperity, and eventually, the peasants form a cartographic representation of undivided India and dance happily (see Figure 12, also Thomas, 1989).

Figure 10. Radha embodying Durga, the goddess of retribution Still from
the film Mother India (1957), reproduced for educational purposes

Figure 11. Radha and her children sing to persuade people to stay back and rebuild after the floods. Still from the film Mother India (1957), reproduced for educational purposes

Figure 12. Still from the film Mother India (1957), reproduced for educational purposes

The character of Radha is shown strong both in character and strength, but extremely humble and content with the bare minimum requirements of life. Despite contributing so much towards the village and her family, she does not expect people to recognise her efforts. She never demands progress until the government representatives show up to announce that progress has been delivered to her village, which she accepts at face value.

Another missing aspect is the lack of discussion around work safety and health issues pertaining to women. While women have multiple unique health issues such as menstruation, contraception, pregnancy, maternal morbidity etc. (Khan and Singh, 2015), the film is mostly silent. The death of Radha's children due to hunger and abject poverty is only treated from a view of establishing the "twist of fate" rather than as a social and political failure. Similarly, her household work is taken for granted in

line with global stereotypes continuing to this day (Khan and Zeba, 2021), even though women in India had already started demanding some recognition around that time (Prasad, 2021).

Conclusion: Film as Memoir of a Nation's Temporal Aspirations

The idea of film as a historical source of Indian women's desire to attain economic strength in the first decade of the country's political sovereignty is, therefore, clearly that – a historical source of "desire" rather than "reality." To its credit, "Mother India" as a film does capture and becomes an archive of women's experiences, traumas, and aspirations in post-colonial India. It questioned gender stereotypes of national identity, women's societal roles, and their decision-making abilities. It documented the mistreatment of rural women. It represented women as being capable of laborious work like farming and enhanced their status as decision-makers and eventually, executors of retributive justice. In fact, it surprisingly manages to keep agency with the woman protagonist without straying into the usual tropes of men as saviours and helpers. However, it ran alongside a complex notion of women's honour through their sexual chastity. Similarly, it continued to establish most gender normative roles that were considered appropriate to be done by women. It also failed to represent contemporary collective women's movements. While it hinged upon class, poverty, and morality struggles, it did not acknowledge other societal fractures such as caste, gender, religion, etc. In retrospect, it actually goes to stifle, to a large extent, the women's struggles and their hard-earned successes, wrapping them instead in a patriarchal propaganda of chastity, humility, and an almost voiceless subservience to political priorities of industrial development.

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