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# Sanctity and Scandal

## The Mythologization of Mother India

Rosie Thomas

A rumor widely quoted in Bombay film circles is that when *Mother India*<sup>1</sup> was screened in Europe in 1958, it was beyond the comprehension of the hard-boiled, amoral Western audience. "Why didn't the heroine simply sleep with the money-lender? Then she could have fed her family without all that suffering" a bewildered Englishman is supposed to have said to horrified Mehboob Khan. Whether or not the story is apocryphal, its wide currency and endurance suggest something deeper.

*Mother India*, in fact, has had considerable acclaim from Western audiences over the years—probably more than any other mainstream Indian film. It received an Oscar nomination in 1958, patronizing but generally favorable reviews at its London release in 1961, and a flood of enthusiastic letters following its first transmission on British television in 1983. The wide circulation of the rumor almost certainly says less about actual Western audiences than about the terms of discourse of Indian cinema itself. Since it first emerged in the context of colonial India's fight for independence, Indian cinema, for a number of reasons, has been concerned with constructing a notion of Indian cultural and national identity. This has involved drawing on concepts such as "tradition." But a chaste and pristine India has also been constructed by opposing it to a decadent and exotic "other," the licentious and immoral "West," with the films' villains invariably sporting a clutter of signifiers of "Westernization": whiskey bottles, bikini-clad escorts, or foreign limousines. In this case, however, there appears to be a telling displacement. The decadent "other" is transposed from the narrative of the film itself (where colonial rape is nevertheless an implicit subtext) to the wider narrative of the film's conditions of circulation; from an element within the narrative which must be punished by the forces of virtue to the gaze of a Western audience whose control must be wrested or arrested.

It can be no coincidence that such a story circulates around this particular film. *Mother India*'s status in Indian cinema mythology and popular consciousness is legendary: it is the all-time box office hit and still guarantees full houses today, allegedly playing in some part of India every day of every year. Imbued as it is with the apparently untroubled optimism of the post-Independence decade, and referred to as "of our soil" or "full of Indian emotions," *Mother India* is in many ways the quintessential Indian film. Clearly, the rumor articulates a not unreasonable

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ROSIE THOMAS is a lecturer in film and video theory at Harrow College of Higher Education. She has published in *Screen* and other publications.

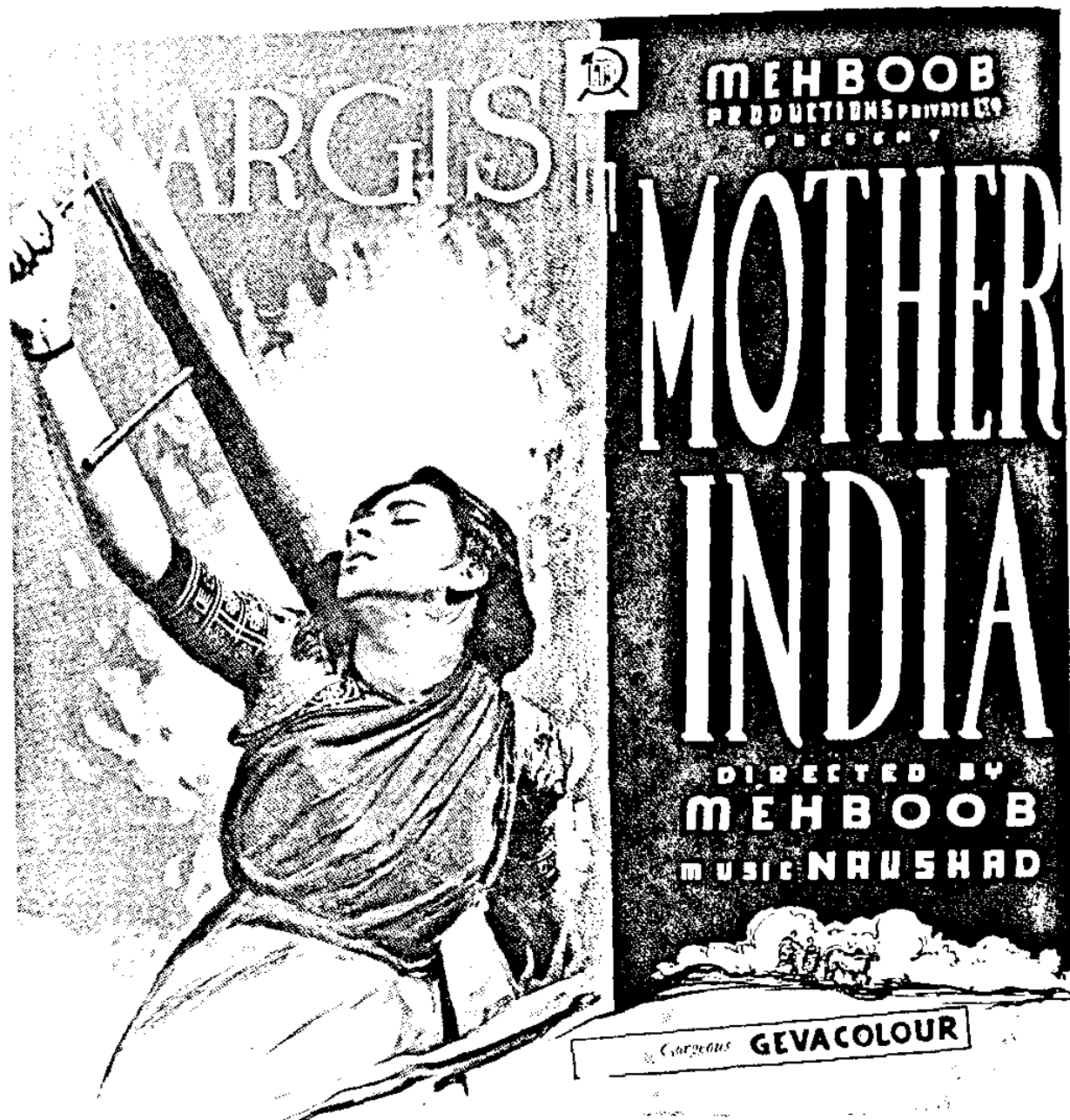


Figure 1. Poster for Mother India.

mistrust of Western appropriation of Indian cinema: the West's desire to see and know cannot be divorced from the ethos of colonialist adventuring, which controls its subjects both through voyeuristic fantasy and through attaining knowledge by means of which it can define and judge the rest of the world and thus consolidate its power. This should, of course, be read as a serious—and ever relevant—warning for an American academic journal devoted to examination of Indian cinema.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond this general warning lies a disturbing specific history, for *Mother India* is also the title of a notorious book published in 1927 by Katherine Mayo,<sup>3</sup> an American. This book purports to reveal research on the abuse suffered by Indian women at the hands of their menfolk but is an overtly sensationalized and very dubious diatribe that links hysterical accounts of horrific sexual abuse—maimed and lacer-

ated child brides, rampant venereal disease, and grossly unsanitary childbirth—with a spurious genetic argument that India is unfit for independence. A best-seller in the West, it provoked a storm of controversy and has now come to exemplify the crudest of colonialist propagandizing, particularly since recent research has revealed that rather than being a naive, misguided evangelist for women's causes, Mayo was almost certainly knowingly involved in a cynical British propaganda exercise.<sup>4</sup> The film's reference to this controversy was probably incidental, but the fact that both film and rumor so neatly invert the terms of the book in their construction and use of female sexuality is a feature of central significance, with wider ramifications that we will return to.

What both the rumor concerning the film and the controversy around the book more broadly highlight are the complex issues involved in the reading of texts across cultures. Assuming that the text is not an "object" that contains meaning in itself, but that meanings arise in the process of reading and that texts open continuously onto other texts<sup>5</sup> I am concerned broadly with the implications (and difficulties) of this notion of intertextuality for how we talk about any individual film, particularly across cultures. At its most basic level, this essay is an uncovering (necessarily partial) of some of the other stories and imagery that open onto, and through which a mainstream Indian audience might read, the film, *Mother India*. It is not intended, of course, to "fix" the film (or to simply explain it to a Western film buff eager to consume such knowledge) but to illustrate the complexities involved in the processes of meaning production. On one hand, I argue that the film offers a number of fissured, partial and contradictory representations that address, construct, and produce meaning and illusory coherence for the spectator through the process of narrative (and the resolutions narrative appears to effect). On the other hand, I show that underlying the film are a number of other discourses that range from the imagery and rhetoric of nationalism to ideas current in Indian society about female chastity, derived from other films and books and gossip about film stars.<sup>6</sup>

The central argument of this essay is that *Mother India* is most usefully seen as an arena within which a number of discourses around female chastity, modern nationalism, and, more broadly, morality intersect and feed on each other, with significant political effects. The first part of the essay describes the film and discusses some of the play it makes with notions of femininity and tradition, ordering its material, somewhat precariously, within narrative. The second part focuses on two written texts which bear on the film and describes how these fix and use two very different constructions of female sexuality and tradition. While some understanding of the Indian concept of *izzat/laaj* (honor or chastity)<sup>7</sup> is important to making sense of the film and knowledge of mythological and other culturally specific references further enriches it, vital and invariably undervalued is knowledge of the expectations Indian audiences have of Hindi film as a genre and the usually extensive fund of information they have about film stars. Thus, *Mother India* is known to be a remake of Mehboob's earlier *Aurat* (Woman, 1940), to work within (and against) the conventions of mainstream Indian cinema, and to be mythologized now as *the* all-time classic, its songs, imagery, and dialogue firmly ensconced in the popular preconscious. However, Nargis, who plays the heroine, is equally a legend today, particularly since her tragic early death in 1981, and her star



persona provides a further, crucial inflection to the film. The third part of this essay also focuses on the gossip stories through which Nargis's star persona is constructed and argues that these also constitute a discourse about chastity, nationalism, and morality. While their comparatively open-ended form constrains this material in a manner different from film narrative, these stories work in crucial counterpoint to the film. Thus, for example, as the top star of her era, Nargis was popularly seen not only as glamorous and enviable but also as scandalously sullied because of a very open romance she enjoyed over a number of years with her married co-star, Raj Kapoor. It may not be altogether frivolous to suggest that the most significant differences between the European and Indian audience's understanding of *Mother India* may have less to do with the Europeans' ignorance of Indian ideas about female chastity (as the 1958 rumor implied) than with their ignorance of India's prurient interest in the star's purported lack of "chastity."

## THE FILM

*Mother India* is the story of a poor peasant woman, Radha, who, left alone with her children, defends her self-respect and an ideal of virtuous womanhood against tremendous odds: famine, flood, and a corrupt and lecherous moneylender, Sukhilal. Although his attempts to seduce her fail, he does keep her wedding bangles (*kangan*) in pawn and pauperizes the family by extracting usurious interest on a small loan for over twenty years. Her son Ramu grows up to be gentle, obedient, and supportive, but her favorite, Birjoo, turns outlaw in a single-handed fight against Sukhilal and the oppression he represents. Having failed to persuade the conservative, law-abiding villagers to join him, Birjoo then antagonizes them further by joking with, and disrespectfully touching, the young unmarried women of the village. His excesses are seen as a threat to the community's *izzat*, and the angry villagers start a fire in which both Birjoo and his mother nearly die. When Birjoo finally unequivocally oversteps the bounds of community morality by kidnapping Sukhilal's daughter on her wedding day, Radha takes the decision to kill her own son.

The film is, of course, constructed within the formal conventions of Hindi cinema: the narrative is not tightly linear but builds in more or less circular fashion through a number of climaxes that are counterposed with scenes of humor, spectacle or pure emotional import, notably, a series of visually powerful and musically splendid songs.<sup>8</sup> The film as a whole falls under the rubric of melodrama. A number of irresolvables, primarily in the arena of kinship and sexuality, are set in motion, resolutions are proposed which are only tenuously satisfactory, and the excess (the emotional overflow; that which cannot be convincingly resolved) is siphoned off in music and spectacle.

The undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated within the action, subordinated as it is to the demands of family/lineage/inheritance, is traditionally expressed in the music and . . . in certain elements of the *mise-en-scène*. That is to say, music and *mise-en-scène* do not just heighten the emotionality of an element in the action, to some extent they substitute for it.<sup>9</sup>

Nowell-Smith's description of Hollywood melodrama is highly relevant, for Indian mainstream cinema as a genre tends to address and move its spectator through a film importantly by way of affect, although this is structured and contained by deeply rooted and familiar narrative. The emphasis is on *how* things will happen, not *what* happens next; on a moral disordering to be (temporarily) resolved rather than an enigma to be solved. This positioning depends for its full effect on certain kinds of cultural competence, most notably, a knowledge of the parameters of the ideal moral universe of the Hindi film—that is, the paradigms of “good” and “bad” (or expected and unacceptable) behaviors through play with, or defiance of which, the film derives its dramatic tensions and within which the ensuing crisis must be “safely” resolved.

The most common ploy of Indian cinema is to throw the domain of kinship morality into crisis; in this, *Mother India* is exemplary. Drama is wrought, first, by exposing contradictory injunctions within the domain itself and, second, by opposing ties of kinship to the demands of the law and religious and moral duty to the community. The crises are dramatized through a series of dilemmas that face the heroine. Radha's first apparent choice is between being an ideal wife (honoring her *suhaag* and refusing Sukhilal's advances)<sup>10</sup> and being an ideal mother (feeding her starving children). Later, she must choose between being an ideal mother (unconditionally loving and protecting her son) and being an ideal woman of the village community (protecting its *izzat*, which has been tainted by Birjoo's abduction of one of its daughters), itself considered a kinship group. While the narrative momentum, and identifications offered, must position most spectators adequately to make sense of these dilemmas, they gain in power with cultural knowledge of the conventions of Hindi cinema's ideal moral universe, which lays particular stress on both the sanctity of the blood relationship—above all, the mother-son bond—and the sanctity of marriage (and *suhaag*), together with the controlled sexuality of wife and mother figures. Careful negotiation of values accruing to each character is crucial to the working of the film, so that, for example, much is made of the ambiguity of Birjoo's villainy. Although he endangers the village girls' *izzat*, he is also a passionately devoted and, in many ways, exemplary son whose breaking of the law is fired primarily by a desire to avenge affronts to his mother's chastity: he dies pulling from his chest the blood-soaked *kangan* he has recovered for her—a restitution of her symbolically violated honor.

Although the spectator appears to be positioned primarily through the figure of Radha, this identification is, of course, partial and fragmented, and one is simultaneously offered the infinitely more dangerous position of Birjoo. From here, a familiar underlying structure, the Oedipal drama, unfolds: the son's fantasy of displacing the father and taking his place with the mother is a violation of the law against incest and must be punished by castration or death. This is not overt, of course, but its resonances underlie the poignancy and emotional power of, for example, Birjoo's offering of the blood-soaked bangles. While the film can be seen to play out, on one level, this most recurrent preoccupation of human mythology—the conflict, from a male perspective, between desire and the law—it also weaves around this other material more specific to Indian culture and film conventions.

All such ordering works to give apparent mastery of (and to cover over) ambivalence and contradiction, none more fraught than in the construction of woman.<sup>11</sup> In

*Mother India* we, in fact, find Radha constructed through a number of partial and, at times, conflicting representations that refer to a spectrum of archetypes of ideal femininity in Indian culture, and the figure appears to operate as a terrain on which a notion of "the ideal Indian woman" is negotiated.

The types of images that erupt in the course of the film vary from shots of Radha heroically enjoining the villagers not to desert their motherland to images of her being trampled underfoot by them; from being carried out of blazing haystacks in her son's arms to stuffing chapatis into her sons' mouths as they pull a plough through their fields; from shots that look down on her blushing coyly behind a wedding veil or as sindoor (vermilion) is placed in her hair to shots that look up at her proudly striding forward harnessed to her plough; from shots of her crying on her son's shoulder and pleading with him as a lover might to the images of her wielding a heavy stick, ax, and, finally, gun. The most powerfully horrifying image is of Radha leveling a shotgun at her son. But, in fact, all the central male figures are destroyed or implicitly "castrated" by association with her: she kills her favorite son; her husband loses both arms (and implicitly his manliness) following her insistence that they plough some barren land; the villainous Sukhilal ends up covered in cotton fluff, cowering like a naughty infant as she beats him with a big stick, and pleading abjectly with her to save his daughter's izzat; and her elder son Ramu becomes ineffectual in her shadow. Thus, she is both venerator of men and venerated by them as *devi* (goddess) and *maa* (mother), and she is, in turn, in need of men's protection and a protector and destroyer of men.



Figure 2. Nargis and Raaj Kumar as her husband in *Mother India*.

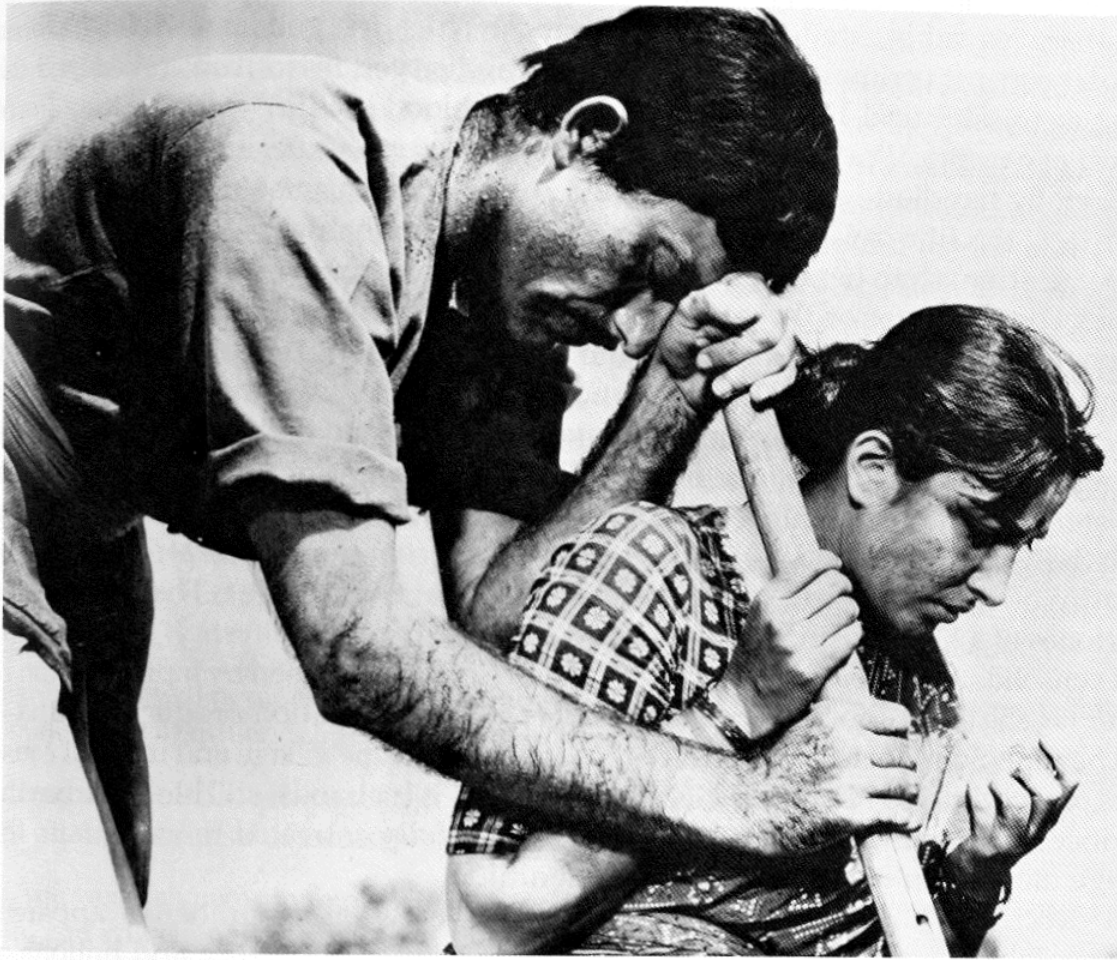


Figure 3. Raaj Kumar and Nargis in *Mother India*.

The cultural competence of most Indian audiences means they would, on some level, recognize within this Radha allusions to a variety of figures of Hindu mythology: Sita (archetypal dutiful, loyal wife and embodiment of purity, whose trial by fire and abandonment with two young sons are implicitly invoked<sup>12</sup>; Savitri (exemplarily devoted wife); Radha herself (the cowherd who was Krishna's lover); Lakshmi (goddess of wealth and good fortune, to whom brides are customarily likened and to whom Sukhilal explicitly, and somewhat ironically, given the context of his attempted seduction, likens Radha); and the more fearsome mother goddesses, Durga and Kali, powerful symbols of female sacred authority and embodiments of *shakti* (female power), who punish and destroy if they are displeased. There are also more covert references, for example, to Surabai, the holy cow, and to Mother Earth, the fertility principle.

This diversity of allusions and a degree of incoherence are undoubtedly crucial to the experience and dramatic power of the film. But while the Oedipal subtext may operate as one form of ordering of this diversity, it is elaborated with another important, and more culturally specific, patterning. As Wadley has pointed out, in the Hindu tradition not only does femaleness embody a fundamental duality—woman as bestower and as destroyer—but female sexual energy is always potentially dangerous but can become beneficent (to men) if controlled through marriage



or otherwise subjugated to male authority.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the goddesses who have no regular consort (primarily those known as mother goddesses) are considered the most aggressive and fiery—often demanding blood sacrifice—due to the “fierce power of chastity,”<sup>14</sup> a power that accumulates through sexual abstinence but that, if carefully handled, can also be tapped to male advantage.

In fact, the film relates each manifestation of Radha’s apparently threatening power or strength to her exemplary chastity, and this then serves (male) traditional values and the *izzat* of the community. Radha’s defiant refusal of Sukhilal’s advances thus is constructed less as a stand against male sexual oppression of women than as evidence of faith in Lakshmi and as a refusal to dishonor her husband and hence her *suhaag*. It is by virtue of this noble chastity and faith that Radha derives strength to uphold the morale of the village and save it from a string of natural disasters. Similarly, her subsequent killing of her son is less a display of solidarity with the women of the village than a defense of the community’s *izzat* (ensuring the chastity of young women given to other villages in marriage). The pattern has overtones of a blood sacrifice, Radha’s own “fierce power of chastity” being tested and consolidated before the act, first by the fire ordeal and then by a purification in water (as she and Birjoo swim to escape). The film’s resolution produces Radha—and her upholding of female chastity—as the savior of the village and implicit cause of its prosperity and liberation from oppression: it is *her* hands, still bloody from the sacrifice of her son years before, that are respectfully entreated to inaugurate the village dam, signifier of technological plenitude.

In describing the film as a play of tensions between a number of apparent irreconcilables—primarily within the domain of kinship morality and notions of femininity—and the (tenuous) mastery and coherence narrative seems to offer, it is important to remember that these irreconcilables draw on, and slip between, a number of discourses. Mulvey has described melodrama’s fundamental appeal and power as lying in “the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of overdetermined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes.”<sup>15</sup> *Mother India*’s central celebration of a notion of female chastity does, in fact, work some particularly complex elisions and denials, most notably, through its slippage between discourses of sexual and national identity.

For any Indian audience, the title *Mother India* immediately situates the film within the discourse of the Freedom Movement, and the film is seen to be as much about nationhood as womanhood. Although the British are not overtly represented, there are a number of oblique but highly charged allusions, notably, the metaphor of colonial rape that underlies the whole film: the predatory oppressor appropriates a defenseless woman’s wedding bangles through force backed by a corrupt law. However, the villainous Sukhilal is simultaneously the tyrannical feudal lord, and the film can be read as a description of the triumphant emergence of a new India from both feudal and colonial oppression. The long introductory credit sequence together with the film’s final moments—the body of the film unfolds as flashback—is most revealing. Following a long montage of dams, pylons, power stations, cranes, bulldozers, and bridges, Radha, who appears as a venerated but dumb and mud-stained old woman, is asked to inaugurate and bless an irrigation project by the men of the village who, as paragons of patriotic deference, signified by the white cotton *kurta* (shirt) and *Gandhi-topi*,<sup>16</sup> humbly address this champion of

female chastity as *maa*. It is a vision of a new utopia that integrates features of both alternative deposed societies. The traditional society, it is implied, was fundamentally morally sound, its evils concentrated in a villain who could be vanquished. And here Sukhilal evokes the mythological villain, Raavana, the rapacious king of Lanka who abducted Sita. However, this society was vulnerable to the vagaries of nature. The locus of male violence and notoriously uncontrolled female sexuality, western society is fundamentally morally unsound, but it does have technological mastery. Thus, controlled female sexuality and uncontrolled nature are opposed to controlled nature and uncontrolled female sexuality. Power in the new society is generated by control of both: oppression is ousted and the hazards of nature overcome with modern technology, but the purity of traditional values—symbolized by female chastity—must still bless, and ultimately legitimize, technological advance. Mother India must open the dam.

In celebrating Radha's power and her defense of chastity in this way, the film implicitly, but crucially, denies the essential role played by Birjoo's act of violence in killing Sukhilal and the conscious sacrifice Birjoo made of his own life:

This suffering will never end as long as Sukhilal lives. By my death the villagers will have clothing, food and fuel to burn . . . the whole village will change.

To which Radha, who was throughout a conservative force remonstrating with him against the use of excessively radical or violent action, replied:

No, you won't change anything with a gun . . . Don't lose heart, son. If you will only keep faith, god will change our days and the fate of the village.

Within the framework of the Oedipal subtext, the denial of the desire and subsequent violence of the son and its displacement onto woman are not so mysterious. But this denial can also be related to the context of early post-Independence India and the wide currency of Gandhi's ideas, which drew on notions of *bhakti* (redemption through selfless devotion) and a concept of potent, active femininity to oppose two models of (male) behavior. The Gandhian ideal used a nonviolent, "feminine," and supremely potent force; the other, the violence, machismo, and uncontrolled aggression seen to mark Western as well as various Indian warrior traditions.<sup>17</sup> The film appears to echo this by denying and destroying Birjoo's potency, while celebrating and saving Radha and the gentler son, Ramu.<sup>18</sup>

One of the most traumatic aspects of independence was, of course, the amount of violence that was involved and that erupted so horrifically at Partition. The film's seeming denial of the effectiveness of revolutionary violence is rather more fraught than at first appears. Throughout the film, one finds examples of highly charged imagery and covert reiteration of the denial; for example, one central and powerfully emotional song begins with images of streams of refugees leaving their homeland (which could not but evoke Partition, particularly in 1957 India) but ends with them returned to peace and prosperity, dancing by sheaves of wheat on a map of *pre-Partition* India. Although coherent "explanation" of the song is feasible, for an Indian audience, much of the power of such sequences undoubtedly lies in the emotional impact of this dream-logic reworking and censoring of Indian history.

The slippages effected by the notion of female chastity itself permit the most

complex disavowal, however, for within India, the notion conflates a number of not wholly compatible ideas and discourses. First, female chastity represents female sexual energy not dissipated by sexual activity, and as such, it is a potent force in nature that can either be tapped to male advantage or become positively dangerous to men. Second, it implies a passive sexuality, woman constrained as a pawn of male power networks and locus of displaced male anxieties. Third, it is used as a metaphor for purity, and hence for the “purity” of traditional values, for an ideal society uncontaminated by colonial oppressors, and for India itself. This slippage between woman and nation means, for example, that the film can construct woman as an ultimate authority and power, disavow this by relegating woman to metaphor for India or ideal morality, and simultaneously preserve a construction of woman as pawn of male desire.

## BACKGROUND READING

The rumor that *Mother India* puzzled Western audiences because they could not understand the Indian stress on female chastity is not, in fact, so misconceived. Although female chastity is familiar in the West as a symbol of purity, this draws primarily on a Christian equation of sexuality with sin, an association scarcely present in the Indian formulation, and the range of ideas the concept encompasses in a Hindu or Muslim context would certainly be lost on most Westerners. It was ostensibly to contextualize *Mother India* for international audiences that the filmmakers produced a special brochure.<sup>19</sup> It was a twenty-two page, full-color booklet containing reproductions of oil paintings illustrating both themes and scenes from the film together with a number of short essays (in English) purporting to explain Indian traditional beliefs about womanhood, nature, and destiny and to give a flavor of peasant life in village India. The whole is resonant of a sentimental, and somewhat hysterically moralistic, Victorian religious picture book, each image capped with an overblown title and a florid prose description.

The booklet begins and ends with the assertion that the film is about Indian women’s *chastity* and its sanctity. It refers to

this epic drama of an Indian mother, the nucleus around which revolves the tradition and culture of ages in this ancient land . . . (where) . . . chastity, the sacred heirloom of an ancient race, demands the supreme sacrifice, even of her children, from the mother. (P. 1)

It brazenly asserts that woman exists only in terms of man.

In India, woman is part of man . . . her single prayer is to die in the presence of her husband . . . To this eternal Indian woman, the home is her temple, her husband her god, the children his blessings and the land her great mother. (Ibid.)

This is finally naturalized in a historical perspective.

The woman is an altar in India. She is loved and respected, worshipped and protected . . . Indians measure the virtue of their race by the chastity of their women. To them a woman’s person is sacred, her chastity a virtue to be nursed and her character a prize to be envied . . . Indian women have thrown themselves into the sacrificial fire to escape even the defiling shadow of a foreign invader . . . This India of the olden days still lives in the 700,000 villages of India. (P. 16)



Throughout the booklet, Radha/Mother India is described as ideally pure and an exemplary mother and wife and repeatedly compared to the goddesses Sita and Savitri. However, in stressing analogies with these paragons of purity and selfless devotion to husbands and sons, there is a significant omission: it ignores all reference to the more powerful and terrifying facets of ideal Indian femininity, as embodied in the punitive and destructive mother goddesses such as Kali and Durga, although these are in fact implicit in the film. The effect of this construction of a comparatively uncontradictory model of femininity is to close off whole areas of themes and tensions apparent in the film, presenting instead an ideal moral universe free from disorder or ambiguity, with woman safely controlled and idealized.

A similar disavowal operates in the description of traditional India, which is shown as an unequivocal utopia where "an ancient peace-loving people . . . lead a harmonious community life," with colorful festivals and mothers telling "stories of virtue and valor" from mythology to build the character of their sons. The theme of rural oppression and Sukhial's corruption is scarcely mentioned, and hardships are ascribed to the "inscrutable smiles and frowns of nature," designed by god and destiny to make "heroes out of men and mothers out of women." Furthermore, "the Indian farmer likes his sweat to mix with the perspiration of his bullock," so that even those who know of tractors often prefer not to use them (p. 8). In this context, Birjoo becomes a virtual villain for having "hatred in his heart" and for losing faith in divine justice. Again, this shift of emphasis closes off much of the narrative play of the film: if traditional society is a utopia, questions about the ethics of revolutionary violence become less compelling; if Birjoo is a villain, Radha's dilemma is less acute; if peasants prefer bullocks to tractors, Western technology need not be incorporated.

It would be easy to dismiss this as simply a sexist and reactionary rant. However, as with the film (whose complex workings and contradictions particularly defy simplistic categorization), such blanket dismissal is dangerously reductionist. (Intriguingly, Mehboob Khan himself was not coy about contradiction: his studio emblem blithely combined a hammer and sickle with an Urdu couplet meaning "Man proposes, God disposes.") While the use of the figure of woman to signify a vestibule of traditional purity and power undoubtedly works to oppress women on many levels, in the context of the nationalist struggle, it can be simultaneously a tool to counter imperialist oppression. We cannot ignore a history in which an American book, brazenly appropriating the nationalist catch-phrase "Mother India" to its own title, had sensationalized a picture of degradation purporting to be of Indian womanhood and had claimed not only that "Indian women of child-bearing age cannot safely venture, without special protection, within reach of Indian men"<sup>20</sup> but even that "a very small percentage of Indian women seem . . . well and strong . . . This state I believe to be accounted for by a morbid and unawakened mentality, by venereal infection, and by sexual exhaustion. They commonly experience marital use two and three times a day."<sup>21</sup>

While an Indian rumor constructs a West so licentious and amoral that it cannot remotely comprehend Mother India's bid for chastity and must have the concept spelled out in a proselytizing picture pamphlet, a Western book—far more sinisterly—constructs and projects onto India a sexuality so depraved that chastity



is inconceivable, where women are routinely abused to the point that Indian genetic stock is depleted and "(Indians') hands are too weak, too fluttering, to seize or hold onto the reins of government."<sup>22</sup> In this context, the insistences of the film booklet, the rumor, and the film itself seem less excessive, for they are implicitly involved in reclaiming "Mother India" for India, in exorcising the defamation and pollution of the term by Mayo—and, similarly, that of India by the West and of Indian women by colonialist men.<sup>23</sup>

## THE STAR

These are not the only discourses, however, within which the film is read and other texts at play within the broader arena of *Mother India* already undermine too seamless a construction of an ideal India. Although Bombay filmmakers assert that certain transgressions of an ideal morality are impossible in Hindi films because the Indian audience is conservative and easily shocked, this same audience appears very eager to be shocked in certain contexts, if one is to believe the evidence of the network of gossip that surrounds the scandals in the lives and loves of film stars in India. These stories are consumed almost as avidly as the films themselves, and in recent years, many publications have been regularly produced devoted exclusively to such narratives, which become tacitly—and at times, even quite overtly—interwoven in the Indian audience's readings of the films. Compared to the films, the form of the gossip narrative is somewhat open-ended and most usefully likened to soap opera. There is a long-standing core of central characters, whose careers and romances have been the focus of obsessive public scrutiny over the years and are standard cultural knowledge throughout the Hindi film-going centers of India. There are a number of ongoing and intertwined story lines, within which short, self-contained dramas are played out. Crises erupt and are temporarily resolved, but as in soap opera, the elements of the drama remain to be reused, reexplained, and resolved again in a new drama, thus allowing a continual reworking of the obsessions of the discourse, which turn primarily around sexuality and kinship but also deal with modern Indian identity.

Nargis became a star in the late 1940s, and although she retired from films in 1957, she remained very much in the public eye until her death. She is undoubtedly a central legendary figure of Indian cinema, and most Indian audiences are familiar with—and still discuss—the details of her story. It is not possible to reconstruct precisely how the stories would be inflected in 1957, as film publications then were more discreet and much was told by word of mouth as rumor. What is available today are primarily modern retellings of her story: rumors circulating among the general public now, stories told by people who claim to have known or have met her, features in gossip magazines of recent years, some archival features, and a small number of published interviews. The questions and issues that structure the legend have been inevitably and importantly reworked over the years, according to the preoccupations of each generation, and it is crucial to stress that my concern here is with the persona of Nargis as publicly constructed rumor, not with an "accurate" biography.<sup>24</sup>

The story of Nargis is that of an unfortunate girl, born in 1929 to a famous Muslim

courtesan-singer and a young Hindu doctor later ostracized from his "respectable" family for this association. The story goes that even as a child, Nargis had dreamed of redeeming herself by becoming a doctor, and her mother had sent her to a good Bombay school and disciplined her strictly, largely keeping her away from the film industry throughout her childhood. Once she reached adolescence, however, Nargis's mother not only tricked her into (most unwillingly) starring in a film for her friend Mehboob Khan but also allegedly put her daughter's *nath* (virginity) on the market and allowed a wealthy Muslim prince to pay handsomely for her. (This episode is sometimes denied, or recounted as her first affair. Its purpose seems to be to construct her as already tarnished before meeting Raj Kapoor.)

By the late 1940s, Nargis had become a top star, but it was her professional and personal partnership with Kapoor, handsome young star, producer, and director, that brought superstardom and notoriety. The couple's bold and very open love affair captured the prurient imagination of the nation: on the one hand, it was enviously celebrated; they were young, glamorous, beautiful, rich, and said to be passionately in love. They epitomized a modern freedom and lack of inhibition. They flew around the world, were seen photographed with Truman at the White House in 1952, were popular as pin-ups in bazaars throughout the Arab world, and were household names in Russia following the unprecedented success there of *Awaara* (The Vagabond, 1951). Many versions of the gossip justify the affair not only because of their (anomalous) status as film stars, but also because the love is said to have been pure, blind, an all-consuming passion, and even divine. Moreover, Nargis is applauded for having had the courage to live her life openly and show total devotion to "her" man, for example, wearing only white saris in deference to his whims, slaving with exemplary dedication at his studios for minimal pay, and even wearing sindoor in her hair despite the fact that he continually refused to marry her. On the other hand, the affair was a source of voyeuristic titillation and completely scandalous. As Kapoor was a married man with children, Nargis was denounced as a whore and a home-breaker, and the affair as squalid. It is also stressed, particularly today, that Kapoor exploited her—although it is simultaneously suggested that, of course, as a good Hindu, he could not have left his arranged marriage to marry a tarnished woman. After seven years, Nargis eventually "saw the light" and, "heartbroken," left him. She scrupulously kept a vow to avoid his presence for over twenty years.

The next episode is recounted particularly often and with overt fascination. Some time after the breakup, Nargis was shooting the fire scene for *Mother India* in Mehboob Studios when the blaze got out of hand, and she was trapped behind a wall of burning haystacks. In a dramatic gesture, Sunil Dutt, the young and comparatively unknown actor who played her son Birjoo, dived heroically into the flames and carried her to safety in his arms. After he saved her life, they fell in love and later married quietly. When news of the marriage broke, there was a sensation, fueled by a distinct frisson of scandal that a younger man (and screen son of *Mother India*) was marrying the notorious First Lady of the Indian screen.

Riding high on the phenomenal success of *Mother India*—and national and international accolades for her performance—Nargis retired from the dirty world of the film industry and gave birth to a son, Sunjay. Gossip invariably stresses how crucial leaving films was in saving her reputation. For the next twenty years, she

continued to devote her energies to caring for her husband and three children, for whom she was a "tower of strength." Much is made of her performance as an ideal wife and mother, keeping traditional Hindu fasts for her husband's well-being (Sunil's prospering career was taken as evidence of her devotion), and idolizing her son. As Sunjay grew up, the gossip press made much of this exemplary mother-son relationship: "For a minute we looked in admiration at this wonderful, dignified, first lady of the Indian screen. I turned to Sunjay. His eyes held sheer idolatry and respect as he gazed fondly at his mother."<sup>25</sup> She also gave dedicated service to community charities, especially those helping spastics. The family suffered various hardships. At one point, Sunil's films began to fail, he had indiscreet affairs with other actresses (although Nargis remained the long-suffering, faithful wife), and they were constantly harassed by a public loath to forget the colorful Kapoor affair. Sunjay was taunted by schoolmates, and, most bizarrely, when Kapoor in 1970 chose a young unknown beauty, Dimple, to co-star in his son's debut film, a decidedly far-fetched rumor gained ground that Dimple was Raj and Nargis's secret illegitimate daughter who had been farmed out to a local businessman for adoption. Moreover, Sunjay was clearly developing into something of a rebel: while Nargis wanted him to be a doctor, he wanted to become a film star, and before long, stories started to circulate of his teenage romance with a top starlet—of whom Nargis was said to disapprove.

In accordance with a pattern that has been remarked on in the construction of other stars,<sup>26</sup> stories about Nargis construct her as both ordinary and extraordinary, as a housewife with her share of mundane domestic joys and trials and simultaneously as both an extraordinarily talented actress and a bold rebel who had uninhibitedly followed through a grand and divine passion and who continued to live among the rich and powerful. She began to be referred to respectfully and affectionately as *bhabhi-ji* (lit., elder brother's wife) by the film industry, becoming their public spokesperson and president of the Producers' Association, I.M.P.P.A. More significantly, she is said to have built up a close friendship with Indira Gandhi over the years and in 1980 was rewarded with a seat in the *Rajya Sabha* (House of Lords). She was by then a national symbol of dignified glamor and respectability, the other first lady of India—Indira Gandhi's glamorous alter ego. Nargis's first parliamentary intervention was stoutly patriotic and wildly controversial: she denounced Satyajit Ray's films for showing India's poverty to the West, rather than "Modern India . . . (for example), dams,"<sup>27</sup> and a national debate ensued.

Later that year, at age 51, Nargis was discovered to have cancer, and when Indian doctors gave up hope, she was rushed to New York's foremost cancer specialist. For weeks on end, her distraught husband kept constant vigil at her bedside, and his prayers and superhuman endurance appeared to have been rewarded when the specialists declared a "miracle." Nargis was triumphantly brought home and fondly anticipated her new-found dream of seeing her beloved son make his public debut as a film star. Weeks later she suffered a relapse, and just three days before Sunjay's premiere, she died. The nation mourned, and the family was devastated.

Stories continue to circulate about Sunjay. After his mother's death, he became a self-destructive rebel, allegedly ruining his health and film career with drugs, wild nights, and alcoholic binges. In Nargis's daughters' rare appearances in gossip, they are invariably constructed as "good," and, with a touch of fortuitous symmetry, the



eldest recently married the son of Rajendra Kumar, who had played Mother India's good son, Ramu. Sunil, Nargis's husband, has become a pillar of the community. In 1985, pledging his support for the bereaved son of Nargis's friend, Indira, he was elected a member of Rajiv Gandhi's new government.

The parallels between the film and star texts are, of course, remarkable: both are preoccupied with the control of female sexuality and patterned around sacrifice and the burgeoning of female power and authority. Both involve mothers' relationships with rebellious sons, and both work toward a definition of a "modern" Indianness, with dams recurring, somewhat bizarrely, as key signifiers in each. Direct cross-overs occur, with Nargis's star persona increasingly integrated with Mother India in later years; but there are also some crucial inversions. To the extent that the star persona is always implicit in the Indian audience's reading of a film, these inversions provide a counterpoint and tensions that can, at times, explosively exacerbate the apparent coherence of the film.

Just as the film had played with a diversity of representations of "woman," so the star persona of Nargis ties a number of facets of modern Indian womanhood loosely together: the Muslim courtesan, the "Westernized" free lover, the passionate Radha, the devoted Hindu wife, the adoring mother, the powerful politician, and so forth. While some coherence is provided through the overriding linear narrative (sexuality placed under social control leads to redemption and power), the facets still to some extent coexist in contemporary gossip, which orders this material primarily through spinning stories around the questions that such conflicts throw up: Can a daring, uninhibited seductress be a dutiful wife and mother? Can the daughter of a courtesan be a respected symbol of national propriety? While the film more or less contained irreconcilables through the process of classic narrative, and the booklet's didacticism closed off even more, the star persona exists primarily in the telling and retelling—with varying emphases, moralistic commentaries, and speculations—of a heterogeneous collection of anecdotes over many years (which the present account has necessarily had to linearize, standardize, and condense), and resolutions are always temporary. It can thus accommodate more internal incoherence and more overt transgressions of ideal morality. If the star persona is a discourse on how to live modern Indianness and the crises of conflicting moralities this entails, stars become more fascinating the greater the contradictions they embody and the greater their transgressions.

Similar themes structure both texts, however, and the most obvious inversion—that the persona of Nargis at the time she played Radha was very far from a paragon of maternal chastity—masks a deeper structural similarity. In the film, Radha's chastity was tested when kinship duty and economic necessity (feeding her children) crossed wider social morality (preserving *izzat*)—and, in fact, the film ultimately allows her both. In the gossip, Nargis must choose between kinship duty (obeying her mother) plus economic necessity and wider social morality (preserving her *izzat* and becoming a doctor), but here the former constrains her and she loses her chastity with dire social consequences.<sup>28</sup> Thus, underlying and interwoven in the film's blanket celebration of ideal chastity is a text that opens up a number of questions sealed over by the film: *Which* women must be chaste? What is the place of India's various erotic traditions—from goddesses such as Radha to the Muslim courtesan? How is modern Indian woman's sexuality negotiated?

Probably the most dramatic subversion of the film's denials lies in the moment at which the two texts literally overlap: Birjoo/Sunil Dutt rescues Radha/Nargis from a wall of blazing haystacks. It is in fact a turning point in both texts: within the film, the point at which Radha's devotion to her son is most acutely tested and recognition of the need to sacrifice him begins; within the gossip, the purging of the "unchaste" woman, the point from which Nargis can achieve redemption and power by self-sacrificing devotion to husband, son, and community. The booklet adds its own significant inflection to this moment with a painting of a modestly draped woman lost in swirling (womblike) blood-red and orange flames. The caption reads:

Fire, the crucible of virtue . . . Like Sita, the fabled goddess of purity, she stepped into the ordeal of fire only to come out into the dawn of a new life. Those who sacrifice never die. They only inherit a greater existence.<sup>12</sup>

Somewhat strangely, this description fits the gossip story better than the overt sense of the film scene, which not only makes no explicit reference to Sita but is more obviously about testing Radha's devotion to, and unflinching protection of, her *son*—and his to, and of, her. The fact that the film's testing of the mother's devotion and son's power is played out in an idiom that echoes Rama's testing of the chastity of his wife, Sita, leads to an interesting elision: Birjoo the son plays out the role of Rama the husband, the fantasy of the son displacing the husband/father. These are, in fact, peculiarly intense scenes: around these moments, Radha and Birjoo appear most like lovers, the *mise-en-scène* becomes revealingly extravagant and patently excessive. The sequence culminates in a crescendo of orchestral strings



Figure 4. Image from the publicity booklet for *Mother India*.

and wild camera pan through trees, before dropping down into a lilting, lyrical song: "O Mere Laal Aa Jaao" (Come Back, My Son), soothingly reinstating the "proper" mother-son relationship. That the gossip stories represent the fire scene as the precise moment at which the stars fall in love is thus a dizzy exacerbation of an already dangerous Oedipal subtext, for it provides the "knowledge"/fantasy that the scene was really played out. Sunil married Nargis. The son "got" the mother.

It is, of course, primarily through controlled sexuality and motherhood—rather than chastity per se—that Nargis is seen to have consolidated her power and authority, and the obsessional interest of the gossip in Nargis's very ideal relationship with her son suggests that her power, and the completeness of her redemption, must be continually asserted and tested. Radha, the dotting mother whose rebel son has to be killed when she can no longer control him, becomes Nargis, whose beloved rebel son becomes wild and self-destructive when she dies and can no longer control him. The film's significant denial of the effectivity of revolutionary violence is echoed, although more tamely, in the gossip. Where Radha's struggles had been against the villain Sukhial, Nargis struggled first against her semi-villanious mother and then the film industry—a veritable Sukhial with its black money, extortionate interest rates, rapacious exploitation of young women, and sex and violence in its films. Like Radha, Nargis's fight against social injustice was gentle and nonviolent, eventually moving into voluntary social work and institutionalized politics. She was known for opposing both radical politics (supporting Mrs. Gandhi throughout) and even radical filmmaking (decrying Satyajit Ray's "Westernized" films, Mrinal Sen's Marxist films, Mani Kaul's "avant-garde" practice), and her centrality as an icon of respected Indian female power was crucially bound up with this conservatism. Mother India had blessed the new India by opening a dam at the request of devout male villagers. In her last months, Nargis sanctioned a similar vision of modern India by insisting to an assembly of male politicians that Indian filmmakers should show not poverty to the West but dams. We thus find the model of controlled female sexuality invoking the image of controlled water to generate power for a new India—while still fighting the shadow of the controlling gaze of an ever-critical West: "When I go abroad, foreigners ask me embarrassing questions . . . like 'Do you have cars in India?' I feel so ashamed my eyes are lowered before them."<sup>29</sup>

To the end, the gossip stories attempted to negotiate a harmonious marriage of Western technology and Indian traditional values. As Nargis lay in a prestigious American hospital, paying huge fees to take advantage of the latest medical technology, she and Sunil were, according to the gossip press, displaying to the admiring Western world the sublime devotion of the traditional Indian married couple and the power of Hindu faith and prayer. "After seeing this, I think I will convert to Hinduism," one American specialist allegedly announced.

Between a curious Western gaze denied any comprehension of Indian chastity and one that must be solicited with vistas of an India by which it might be benignly awed lies a history of difficult shifts and uneasy negotiations around the construction of a modern India within a neocolonial world. *Mother India* must be regarded as a broad terrain of multilayered, interrelating, and conflicting texts that not only have historical and economic dimensions but also crucial political ramifications.<sup>30</sup> Although the complexities of shifting and alternative readings and positionings





Figure 5. Poster for Sunil Dutt's campaign for Parliament, 1985. Photograph by Behroze Gandhi.

must render blanket categorizations such as “radical” or “reactionary” inadequate (and suggest that texts are worked with rather than simply “consumed”), the confluences and slippages that this wider text negotiates have produced *Mother India* as a site of extraordinary emotional potency and clear political effectivity—whether in the area of gender relations or the narrower forum of national politics. The figure of controlled female sexuality continues to be tapped to generate power for husbands and sons—in the national interest. In 1980, Mrs. Gandhi’s election campaign had used the image of a raised hand with the caption “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.” In Rajiv Gandhi’s 1985 election campaign following his mother’s assassination, Sunil Dutt, Nargis’s “savior” and devoted husband, stood as parliamentary candidate for Bombay. His poster showed a map of India within which stood the figure of Indira Gandhi, sheathed in a decorous sari. Beneath this was the raised hand, to one side Sunil’s photograph, and above it all the caption “Mother India needs you.” He was returned with an overwhelming majority.

## NOTES

1. *Mother India*, Bombay, 1957; producer/director: Mehboob Khan.
2. See, for example, Robert Cruz in *Screen*, vol. 26, nos. 3–4 (1985). However, in the context of a multicultural Western society, institutionalized disdain for, and ignorance and marginalization of, mainstream Indian cinema seems equally dangerous, as this is not only a symptom of but feeds directly into racism.
3. Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927).
4. See Manoranjan Jha, *Katherine Mayo and India* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1971), which renders naive Mary Daly’s uncritical praise of Mayo’s “exceptional” understanding (*Gyn/Ecology*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 119.
5. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (U.K. Fontana/Collins, 1977), especially, 147–148.
6. While the former broadly describes the spectator “in process,” a subject positioned by the film (and offers a way out of the impasse of a relativism whose ultimate logic must be to posit as many—equally valid—readings as readers), the latter indicates the kinds of “cultural competence” that the intended audience might be expected to bring to the film. The distinction is, of course, primarily conceptual and, as the paper makes clear, the two are less easily separable in practice. See Charlotte Brunson, *Screen*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1981), and Annette Kuhn, *Screen*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1984), for discussion of these issues in relation to “women’s” genres.
7. *Izzat* and *Laaj* can both refer to controlled female sexuality. The connotations of *izzat* are broader, covering a general sense of prestige, honor, respect, while *laaj* refers more specifically to female chastity/virginity. Both embody the idea that female “honor” reflects on the “honor” of the whole kin/affine network.
8. For further discussion of these conventions, see Rosie Thomas, in *Screen*, vol. 26, nos. 3–4 (1985).
9. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Screen*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1977), 117.
10. *Suhaag*: the auspicious state of being blessed with a living husband. The concept has wide currency and is symbolized by the woman placing *sindoor* (vermilion) in her part and wearing bangles. Widows may no longer do these things and become, themselves, inauspicious.
11. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories, Mulvey and others have suggested that, in cinema, the denial of male anxiety around the figure of woman (due to the threat of castration that she represents) takes the fetishistic form of disavowal through idealizing woman. Laura Mulvey, *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975).
12. In the *Ramayana*, when Sita was rescued from the clutches of the monstrous Raavana, the wicked king of Lanka who had abducted (but not “touched”) her, her husband Rama would not be convinced of her “purity”—and consequent worthiness to remain queen of the land—until she had undergone



- an ordeal by fire. Although her survival "proved" her innocence, as the people remained sceptical, Rama banished her for many years, until their two sons were grown.
13. Susan S. Wadley in *Women in India*, Jacobson D. and Wadley S. (New Delhi, Manohar, 1977).
  14. Chris Fuller, "The Divine Couple in South India," *History of Religions*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1980), 327.
  15. Laura Mulvey, *Movie*, no. 25 (1977/78).
  16. *Gandhi-topi*: white oblong cap popularized by Gandhi and since adopted by many politicians as a symbol of earnest, sober respectability. It now has an additional popular connotation of hypocrisy.
  17. See Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).
  18. Genre also operates here: for years the standard hero of Hindi cinema was a passive melancholic who accepted his fate with resignation as his duty or else destroyed himself. *Mother India* marked an early breakthrough in negotiating a model of masculinity that used violence but was not wholly villainous, and Birjoo could, therefore, be only marginally heroic.
  19. The booklet, entitled *Mother India*, was apparently co-written with Baburao Patel and published in Bombay around the time of the film's release.
  20. Mayo, 186.
  21. *Ibid.*, 60–61.
  22. *Ibid.*, 32.
  23. See, for example, Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980). The potential effectiveness of this kind of reversal of colonial discourse is, however, always constrained by other power relations already in the field. For the West to see itself marginalized within Indian representations may be salutary, but it is a different experience from India seeing itself continually so positioned within colonialist (and neocolonialist) discourse. See Gayatri C. Spivak in *Europe and Its Others*, vol. 1, ed. F. Barker et al.; (U.K.: University of Essex, 1984), 128.
  24. A star persona is also built up around the accumulation of meanings from previous film roles. For reasons of space, I have not dealt with this here, although, interestingly, one finds distinct echoes of the gossip persona in these: Nargis frequently played Raj Kapoor's lover, a Westernized sophisticate, and even a coquette but always ultimately "good" and suffering for her lover.
  25. *Film World* (Bombay), August 1980.
  26. See John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (U.K.: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); Andrew Britton, *Katharine Hepburn: The Thirties and After* (U.K.: Tyneside Cinema, 1984).
  27. *Probe India*, October 1980, 14.
  28. "As long as I was in school my friends were all with me . . . But going to picnics or calling me to birthday parties was stopped. And that hurt a lot. I was completely shattered." Interview with Nargis.
  29. *Probe India*, October 1980, 14.
  30. More precise articulation of these is, of course, important, although outside the scope of the present, necessarily limited, paper.