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## The Texts of 'Mother India'

### Abstract

For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual'.<sup>^</sup> So wrote Walter Benjamin in his brilliant essay entitled 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. The question of the primacy of an original fades into insignificance as a wholly new concept of 'reproducibility' comes into existence. The question is no longer one of 're-presentation' but essentially one of 're-production'. With a deft shift in emphasis Benjamin suggests that mechanical reproduction now irrevocably replaces ritual by politics. Reformulated, the mystery surrounding the original, which is traditionally conceived as shrouded, removed, in short an Other, is replaced by an involvement in the processes of reproduction and response. Where the reproduction of a painting is read through an original, perceived or absent, the filmic text is the origin of its meaning, for it represents nothing other than its own self: there is no image beyond the filmic shot, no 'real' (the authentic, ritualistic presence), no godhead or ultimate source of meaning, a perceptual signified, behind the image. It is constructed through the lens, and exists only because of it. Not surprisingly, it was seen as a travesty of art, a subversion, essentially, of the mimetic principle which gave art a point of reference and even a legitimacy. The sort of studied, careful response that art demanded is replaced now, as Benjamin argues, by an ever-changing movement. He quotes Duhamel's reactions to film as being typical of high culture's barely concealed uneasiness on the subject. Instead of that difference which marks art, the difference, that is, of historical 'placement' and detachment, the film now makes it possible for art to enter popular culture and collapse its dichotomies. Its real antecedents are not painting but architecture and the epic poem, forms which have a participatory function in culture. Their aesthetic qualities are, in short, functional. Benjamin cites Duhamel again:

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'For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual'.<sup>1</sup> So wrote Walter Benjamin in his brilliant essay entitled 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. The question of the primacy of an original fades into insignificance as a wholly new concept of 'reproducibility' comes into existence. The question is no longer one of 're-presentation' but essentially one of 're-production'. With a deft shift in emphasis Benjamin suggests that mechanical reproduction now irrevocably replaces ritual by politics. Reformulated, the mystery surrounding the original, which is traditionally conceived as shrouded, removed, in short an Other, is replaced by an involvement in the processes of reproduction and response. Where the reproduction of a painting is read through an original, perceived or absent, the filmic text is the origin of its meaning, for it represents nothing other than its own self: there is no image beyond the filmic shot, no 'real' (the authentic, ritualistic presence), no godhead or ultimate source of meaning, a perceptual signified, behind the image. It is constructed through the lens, and exists only because of it. Not surprisingly, it was seen as a travesty of art, a subversion, essentially, of the mimetic principle which gave art a point of reference and even a legitimacy. The sort of studied, careful response that art demanded is replaced now, as Benjamin argues, by an ever-changing movement. He quotes Duhamel's reactions to film as being typical of high culture's barely concealed uneasiness on the subject. Instead of that difference which marks art, the difference, that is, of historical 'placement' and detachment, the film now makes it possible for art to enter popular culture and collapse its dichotomies. Its real antecedents are not painting but architecture and the epic poem, forms which have a participatory function in culture. Their aesthetic qualities are, in short, functional. Benjamin cites Duhamel again:

[the film is] a pastime for helots, a diversion for uneducated, wretched, worn-out creatures who are consumed by their worries ... a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence ... which kindles no light in the heart and awakens no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a 'star' in Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup>

It is advisable to break Duhamel's criticism into three. The first thrust is clearly class orientated – those who see films are basically 'uneducated', a huge mass of humanity whose cultural antecedents remain markedly oral; the second is psychological in that it necessitates involuntary response; the third, finally, is rooted in desire, the displacement, essentially, of the filmic subject by the spectator. The last is also characteristic of the narcissistic conflation of Self and Other, that first stage in human development where the image in the mirror is still trapped within the Imaginary – the cinema, in short, is read in this instance as primarily indentificational, or in Brecht's terms 'repressive'.<sup>3</sup> Behind Duhamel's critique of filmic response (as basically mindless and non-intellectual) is precisely the politicisation of artistic process raised by Benjamin. In other words, Duhamel's criticism politicises the film even as it proposes to frame it within a crude aesthetics of folklore. For, in terms of Benjamin's own argument, the film is part of a new consciousness, a political democracy where the authority of the primary text (the text in fact as the ultimate source of all meaning, as a kind of an Absolute Signified) ceases to matter.

Can authentic meaning be restored once genesis is erased? Terry Eagleton, whose statement I've reformulated as a question, seems to think so.<sup>4</sup> The question is an important one because Benjamin's case for mechanical reproduction – idealistic, messianic as well as revolutionary as it seemingly is – is predicated upon the belief that history progresses as much from its bad side as from its good side: 'there is no cultural document that is not at the same time a record of barbarism', wrote Benjamin in another context.<sup>5</sup> The target of the essay is clearly the 'auratic' phenomena associated with the original, and the reactionary, aesthetic, deployment of the original towards Fascist ends. For Benjamin then, film marks a release because in film at least the question of the original cannot surface. Now the reason why Benjamin is so central to my own thinking about film is that the programme for cultural release foreshadowed by Benjamin has been a feature of Indian culture throughout its history. Since art and religion were so closely intertwined, 'auratic' value resided not in the original but in the culture's capacity to transform the original into a symbol which could then enter the domain of the popular. Thus the release of art from ritual is in the making from its very genesis because authorship (as in the epics) is socially or 'functionally' (recall Foucault's concept of the 'author-function'<sup>6</sup> here) defined. The result is that each work of art, as symbol, is always both original and a forgery. It could be argued, and there is enough evidence to endorse this, that the reinscription of the Indian work of art into an 'auratic economy' was the product of the Western search for and fetishisation of the original.

In literature it took the form of the search for the original text or author. Is the *Bhagavadgita* for instance, contemporary with the rest of the sixth book of the *Mahabharata*? Can we reconstruct the original poems of the medieval saint singers of India? For the Indian whose interest was in the total text as transmitted towards a given moment in history these questions were irrelevant to its total value. For the European scholar, intellectual integrity or honesty demanded that the original be established, the 'source' of the voice be found – we owe this to the 'author's' memory. Here then is our point of departure from Benjamin. In releasing art from its dependence on the 'auratic' and the original, mechanical reproduction simply advanced a process which had been at the heart of Indian culture. And since the 'aura' was never for the brilliance of the original but rather for the emotional intensity of its subject matter (*rasa* theory is crucial here), film simply intensified the audience's relationship to the symbol in Indian society.

## I

Cinema in India began as a colonial business, and it has never been able to shed its colonial origins. Post-colonial cinema is thus locked into modes of representation and generic fashions begun when the colonised represented themselves through an essentially colonial machinery of mechanical reproduction. This feature is crucial to any reading of Post-colonial Indian cinema – unless it completely subverts its own cinematic history, it will always be colonial (and hence 'tame') in its overall ideology. In this respect my crucial filmic text, *Mother India*, symbolises the ambiguous stature of Indian post-colonial popular culture generally – a culture so deeply expatriate even whilst it proposes to be so defiantly non-expatriate.

Each year the statistical handbook of the Government of India devotes a number of pages of its Mass Communication section to films. The statistical information given in these yearbooks shows the Indian film industry as a profit-making industry in the general capitalist acceptance of the term and an enormous cultural artefact, both politically aware and self-reflexive, conforming indeed to the propositions about 'photographic' culture outlined by Benjamin. Ever since Dhundiraj Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913),<sup>7</sup> feature films have been an integral part of the political economy of India. Their mode of production and distribution to this day conforms to the classic definitions of supply and demand one generally associates with crude capitalism. In short it is a purely profit-making enterprise in which questions of art and aesthetics are subordinated to the profit-making motive – the industry as a whole has never been in the red! Statistics may be readily cited to demonstrate the resilience of this industry. Indian cinema ranks among

the country's top ten industries,<sup>8</sup> giving the government a revenue in excess of 200 million dollars and providing jobs to between two and three million people. It is a totally private enterprise with virtually no hidden government subsidies. Beyond this, the presence of some 11,000 permanent and 'touring' cinemas<sup>9</sup> expands the number of people directly employed by the Indian film industry considerably. Since 1980 the number of films produced annually in the nine major Indian languages has consistently exceeded the 700 figure. The total output of feature films in all the Indian languages in 1983 was in fact 742, a figure equal to the 1980 record-breaking achievement. Though no details of export earnings are given in the more recent Indian yearbooks, a quick glance at yearbooks in which these statistics were included indicates a foreign exchange potential in excess of ten million dollars. With the video boom the figure may have to adjusted slightly, though in real terms, as John Ellis suggests in his admirable recent work,<sup>10</sup> it is unlikely that the video is going to radically alter the money-making capacity of the film industry. Nevertheless, the claims made by the Indian Film Producers' Guild are disconcerting. In Britain – for years the major foreign market for Indian films – the number of theatres showing Indian movies has dropped from an all-time high of 159 to 2 in recent years.<sup>11</sup> The probable impact of the video aside, the 'privatisation' of the Indian film into homes through the video industry is clearly contrary to the very basis of the Indian film which quite unabashedly fits into a massive Indian tradition of oral culture and folklore.

The enormity of the 1983 figure of 742 feature films may be understood better if we recall that that figure is almost as high as the combined output of Japan, the US and Hong Kong put together (748).<sup>12</sup> With an adult (16 and over) viewing public in excess of 400 million, the Indian film has a potential audience only slightly less than that of Hollywood! Any systematic examination of the political economy of the Indian film industry will, however, require not only a thorough-going analysis of all aspects of the film industry's financial system (including 'black-money', underhand payment to actors and so on) but also a breakdown of the social and class types who see these films. That analysis would require a paper with very different aims and must at this stage be left aside for a much more comprehensive study of the Indian film industry. Here my primary concern is not so much with Indian film (though some understanding of it is crucial for a study of this kind) but with one particular example of Bombay Film, a term I use collectively to include films which are generally produced in Bombay and whose medium is Hindi. Furthermore the term 'Bombay Film' is used for a product which is made for popular consumption. This restricted use of the term excludes

from my immediate study films, though in Hindi, with an experimental dimension or artistic self-consciousness. In exploring this definition of Bombay Film I would like to postulate that *Mother India* and related films discussed in this paper belong to a single genre. I use the term genre not in the usual fashion of 'western', 'social drama', 'mythological', 'detective', 'mystery' and so on but as a term which expresses a certain fidelity to a particular formula for success. This formula, naturally, has a clearly defined narrative to which we may, after considerable distortion, give the term *grande syntagmatique*, the film, that is, as one huge narrative unit.<sup>13</sup> This being so, it is possible to show how every filmic text conforms, in broad outline, to a grand narrative which may, in itself, become identical with one film. Along with this narrative fidelity, the formula also demands that the film be constructed around the figure of a star-as-hero/heroine. Yet unlike the *masala* or *kedgeree* (*khichri*) theory put forward by many fanzies (through which in fact the cinema is partially constructed anyway: cinema is, after all, a 'construction' through a highly diversified set of responses) and approvingly cited by *Time Magazine* in an issue devoted, in part, to Asian cinema,<sup>14</sup> the Bombay Film is a very subtle art form which expresses a high level of consciousness about its dependence on formula. Indeed, the generic totality we give Bombay Film should not be allowed to hide the very obvious fact that it is capable of accommodating differences and contradictions.

One final look at the statistics. If we examine the figures given for 1981 we see that 206 films were certified in Bombay.<sup>15</sup> Since only 153 Hindi movies were produced that year, Bombay clearly produces or is the centre for the 'certification' of at least 53 movies which are not in Hindi (these would presumably be Gujarati and Marathi films). Furthermore, there is a growing Hindi film industry in Madras which has been responsible for at least a dozen or so Hindi films each year. Thus in using the generic title 'Bombay Film' I refer to a particular form or style of films made in Hindi. Except for some basic differences (Hindi movies from Madras tend to exaggerate the 'look' or 'pose' – the impact of the classical Southern dance forms is evident here), the generic specificity of Bombay Film is not altered by locality. I do, however, claim that the dominant cinematic form in India is this cinema. This may seem at first glance surprising because 153 Hindi films out of a total of 742 constitutes less than a quarter of all films produced. A quick glance at the 1981 figures once again shows the numerical strength of the Southern (Madras) cinema, notably those films produced in Malayalam, Tamil and Telegu. The total output of films in these languages amounts to 380, well over twice the number of movies made in Hindi. Yet films in none of the other Indian languages (including Bengali and Gujarati) have

potentially pan-Indian audience. And often films in the other languages are no more than straight imitations of Bombay films in Hindi. I referred to a potential audience of some 400 million for Indian films generally. It is clear that the Bombay Hindi film alone commands about three-quarters of that audience. A remark attributed to Shashi Kapoor, a member of the family most commonly associated with the Bombay Film of the last three or four decades, is salutary: 'What Gandhi couldn't do for India, the Bombay cinema has successfully accomplished'.

## II

One of the things about any cultural artefact is that it shows how the culture of which it is a product represents itself. Since no culture can represent the source culture better than the source culture itself, it follows that, in a way, the most authentic representations (even when these representations are ultimately distortions of that culture) and critical readings must in fact come from Indians themselves.<sup>16</sup> It is this question of representation, of cultural representation, of self-representation which takes me to *Mother India*, the modern epic of India for, as I have said, the real knowledge and understanding of India must come from those texts which have been disseminated into and consumed by that culture. This knowledge is not simply a matter of 'passive consumption'; it requires a sympathetic understanding of critical practices not necessarily available to the Indian him/herself.

Released in 1957 *Mother India* is a film which has probably been dubbed and subtitled more than any other film in Hindi. It was screened in London four years later; and both in Britain as well as, of course, in India it has been shown regularly in cinemas patronised by Indians. It is said that it is screened somewhere in India on every day of the year. In 1983, Channel 4 showed it on British television as part of its highly successful season of Indian Cinema. Now in its thirtieth year, it has acquired something of a cult status and in some quarters the status of the 'definitive' Indian film text. Along the way it has won many awards in India, has been widely acclaimed in the Middle East and Southeast Asia and has gained an Oscar nomination (in 1958).

Its producer and director Mehboob Khan, a Muslim, was an important figure in the Indian film industry, having produced extremely popular films such as *Aurat* (1940) (an early version of *Mother India* which was indebted to Pudovkin's socialist realist cinematic adaptation of Maxim Gorky's *Mother* [1926]),<sup>17</sup> *Mela* (1949), *Andaaz* (1950), and *Aan* (1951) among others. *Mother India* is in some ways more centrally diffused and contradictory than Mehboob's other films in the genre of Bombay Cinema. It is in fact not one



film but a number of films, not one text but a multiplicity of texts. The first text is obviously embedded in the title itself. *Mother India* goes back immediately to Katherine Mayo's antagonistic and racist book of that name published in 1927.<sup>18</sup> The connection is disturbing because Katherine Mayo adopted a crudely geneticist argument (though her sensational account of sexual abuse through child marriage had some basis in fact) aimed at representing the Hindu (and not the Muslim) as both physically and emotionally decrepit and hence totally incapable of running his or her own affairs. Mayo's book was a best-seller which went into some dozen reprints in just under three years, and was used as a powerful propaganda tool by the British against the Indian Nationalists, Gandhi included.

The title also triggers a second *Mother India* text in that it forcefully reminds us that there is something motherly about India, or that motherness is India. Nevertheless there is a curious reading of 'Mother India' in this film which is perhaps much more interesting, for 'Mother India' is really an English title – there is nothing Indian about the words 'Mother' and 'India'. When you look at the credit stills of *Mother India* you find that 'Mother India' is simply transcribed into the Hindu/Sanskrit script or the Urdu/Persian script so that 'Mother India' is presented as a kind of a universal term which is not in need of translation at all. This is rather intriguing for an Indian epic (though it may be a statement about the power of colonial discourses generally) because the title therefore enters into a string of Bombay films with none of *Mother India's* totalising vision, nor its presumed universality. *Taxi Driver* (1952), *Street Singer* (1940), *CID* (1957), *Mr X* (1956) were all Indianised; they are nuanced in such a way that they become part and parcel of the sociolect. There remains, however, something terribly unusual, removed, detached, alien about *Mother India*. In short 'Mother India' is a transcendental signified. What are the connections? 'Mother India' has a certain hegemonic presence. It is a translation of *bharata mata* behind which stands the Sanskrit compound *matrbhumi*, Motherland. Through yet another system of transformations one can actually connect *matrbhumi*, Mother-earth, with the figure of Sita, the heroine of the *Ramayana*, the *dhiram bharyam* (the steadfast wife) who replaces, in Indian consciousness, 'Mother India'. There is another way in which the connection is sustained and this is through the name of Sita. Sita means 'of the furrow' and indicates through her name her own autochthonic origins. So that 'Mother India' really becomes a way of talking about Sita, the figure who is really a stand-in for India. Historically, however, Sita is not a given; she has never been there in that form all along; she had to be fought for; and Hindu cultural and Brahminical ideology had to come to terms really with what was in the epic tradition, Sita's rape and

reinstitution into Rama's world. In that act of struggle a whole Sita idiom evolved; a whole set of Puranic treatises were written to make Sita other than herself. Where Rama actually became, in the later recensions of Valmiki, god-incarnate, Sita somewhat more slowly and problematically became Vishnu's consort Lakshmi. The culture invested Sita with excessive meaning, over-determined her through massive semantic and mythic overcoding, but could not quite remove her epic violation. That guilt of 'rape' led to excessive circumspection and cultural bracketing for woman generally. This congruity of Sita/Mother India/Woman thus surfaces as an artificially constructed presence which I think is culturally and ideologically rather suspect. In projecting that affinity the ruptures and discontinuities are glossed over. Instead we get an excessive insistence upon *dharma*, the Law of culture, and an excessive valorisation of genealogy so that Sita may be granted a central position in Indian consciousness. If Mother alone knows the secret of your birth (it's a lucky child who knows its father) her power within culture becomes inviolate and beyond falsification. I have spoken almost metaphorically, alluding to symptoms and possibilities rather than historical certitude and finality. *Mother India* then represents, at least as I see it, a massive problem of Motherness, Sitaness and Otherness in Indian culture. If we return to the epic formulations of Mother, we are far from satisfied with the film's presumed certainty about its version of the history of Sita. To deconstruct *Mother India*, to decentre it, to read it through a kind of negative dialectic, against the grain so to speak, is tantamount to rupturing ideological smoothing over or gloss. It is in short a recipe for the Indian return of the repressed.

What I am suggesting is that 'Mother India' is a problem and an historical compromise. Indian culture (and this culture also endorses a predominant patriarchal point of view) has countered this problem through the projection of a range of symbols which are dispersed throughout the culture. These symbols associate Mother with Goddess (here Sita is Lakshmi), with Wife (here Sita is Draupadi), with Lover (here Sita is Radha), and through the slightly contradictory iconography of Kali and Durga, as the avenger or destroyer, where Sita of course is the female embodiment of some of the characteristics of none other than Shiva. In this final historical compromise woman (femininity) is seen as a total counterpart of the two crucial masculine gods, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer. This is in fact the second major text of *Mother India*. Given its specific cultural antecedents (and readings) *Mother India* also blurs the 'feminist' distinctions between the 'feminine' (as a social construct) and the 'female' (biologically determined sexual difference). For the more adept student of gender and sex (which I

am not) it would necessitate a systematic and culture-based reading of the female form in India.

A third *Mother India* text requires two sets of productive activities: firstly, the manner in which the signifier 'Mother' is filled out in the film; and secondly, the manner in which a narrative is generated. This second set of productive activities – the manner in which the narrative is generated and how the viewer responds to it – may be discussed first since it is relatively straightforward. In one of the two great epics of India, namely the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, the poet Valmiki is careful to say that the epic as sung by Lava and Kusha, the twin sons of Rama, 'is replete with all the poetic sentiments: the humorous, the erotic, the piteous, the wrathful, the heroic, the terrifying, the loathsome, and the rest'.<sup>19</sup> These sentiments are of course straight out of Indian theories of *rasa* or emotional responses as these were advanced in the great texts of Sanskrit dramaturgical and poetic practice. The continuities between an on-going Indian cultural tradition and Indian Cinema is not lost on the viewer of the film, as Raj Kapoor (*Awaara*, *Jagte Raho* etc.) said in an interview:

Where did the whole thing originate? The telling of a story, the singing of a story, came from [the] mythology, it came from the epics, it came from the Vedas. These were then portrayed in villages and from the villages they travelled with players in folk-lore, in folk music and in folk drama and then developed into theatre. Till the talkies arrived we could not bring that tradition to the public at large. And theatre had as its mainstay not only dialogue, but music. Now this is very, very important to the Indian audience – that theatre combines all different fields of fine art into one. And when we came to the medium of cinema and the talkies came in – we brought music, dialogues, and everything else to the Indian Cinema. Since then Indian Cinema has used all different facets of entertainment: it has got its magic, its thrills, its romanticism but underlying all this is *music*, which is India.<sup>20</sup>

No Indian film is more aware of this cultural heritage than *Mother India*. In other words, beneath *Mother India* lies a complex set of cultural practices which vie for domination among themselves, song vying for domination over dialogue, dialogue over song, filmic representation over dialogic representation (that is, visual effects over oral effects), the actors amongst themselves, personal sincerity (that is, the ability of an actor to portray a character), and generic or historical/cultural sincerity (that is, how a particular type, the Rama figure or the Sita figure for instance, has always been represented in that culture). There is thus a continuous tussle, a continuous struggle or contest going on between these various cultural practices in a movie like *Mother India*. If we want to look at the the question of difference, if we want to look at the question of where or when or at what point a film actually triumphs over the obvious, the conventional, the

predictable, the routine, I think we will have to locate it at the level of a certain kind of rebelliousness within the context of these norms. The kind of rebelliousness which I have in mind may be located when actors already confined to pre-ordained rules through, for instance, their names, their roles and so on, break past these confines and momentarily rupture the text.<sup>21</sup> Great Bombay Film actors, and I use the word 'great' with caution, are in fact those who are aware of the weight of the tradition and their own subtle little difference from that particular tradition. In their better moments, these actors were probably actors such as K.L. Saigal (best known I think for his performance in P.C. Barua's 1935 classic *Devdas*), V. Shantaram, Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Sunil Dutt (especially the Sunil Dutt of *Mother India*) and, more recently Amitabh Bachchan, Shabhnaz Azmi, Rekha and Smita Patil. This catalogue of 'great actors' emphasises the extent to which popular cinema in India draws on a wealth of Indian cultural experience, understood by and shared with the audience. When cinema in India has borrowed (and which cinema has not come under the alluring and dizzying influence of Hollywood?), it has transferred its borrowing to produce specifically Indian effects – from Indian Charlie Chaplins to Indian James Bonds. *Mother India* too has borrowed from the West, and it is informed by these borrowings. But in spite of all its borrowings and the accompanying imperfections that borrowings necessarily bring to cinema of another culture, *Mother India* remains very much an Indian text.

### III

I would now like to return to the question of how the signifier 'Mother' is constructed. The text is obviously held together through the figure of a woman. We are meant to identify her with *Mother India* but I suspect this is not as obvious as we think. Many viewers have seen her metonymically and not symbolically. Since neither suture nor identity is totally maintained in the way in which the heroine is represented (this is not the case with the hero as we shall see later), the metaphorical congruity so essential for absolute identification is thwarted at every stage. And, furthermore, since *Mother India* enters an already coded Bombay filmic practice, the practice which in fact endorses a mixture of dramatic and poetic properties, generic flux and open-endedness, it follows that textual production itself will be discontinuous and fractured. *Mother India*, as I have said already, is a much more contradictory text than meets the eye.

We are introduced to the Mother as 'the Mother of the village' and for this reason she is asked to open a new dam just constructed in a village in post-colonial India – remember this is 1957, ten years after independence.

[It is clear that Prime Minister Nehru supported Mehboob Khan's venture to make *Mother India* – *Mother India* begins with many shots of agricultural advances, irrigation projects, use of tractors and so forth]. The story is then unfolded as a 'memorial reconstruction'. Yet this woman through whose memory the story is enacted is not, strangely enough, named after Sita or Lakshmi or Durga or Kali or even Kunti. On the contrary she is called Radha, a choice which in itself signifies that the other names I have mentioned are not, except in mythological films, part of Bombay filmic practice. In other words, the naming of 'Mother India' as Radha signifies that Bombay Film does not like to call its heroines Sita or Lakshmi or Durga or Kunti even though these goddesses and heroines from the epics would have been seen much more naturally and readily as precursors of 'Mother India'. I am not saying that Radha belongs to a completely different system: it's just that given her special relationship with Krishna, Radha can be manipulated much more readily by Bombay Cinema. In some ways Radha is much more open-ended; Sita is obviously closed. This kind of naming takes us to the heart of Puranic India, to the heart of that India where *Mother India* is set, where the narrative of *Mother India* is unfolded; and this is of course in the heart of Krishna territory, Uttar Pradesh, where the folk deity is in fact Krishna. Stories about Krishna are the source of many of the idioms, metaphors, and rituals we find in *Mother India*.

In any artistic transformation Sita, though deeply ambiguous, remains extraordinarily stable. As a result Indian Cinema can do very little with a figure like Sita. Her field of operation is limited; her relationship with the audience carries with it such a vast repertoire of expectations and prior readings as to make her totally predictable. I think it is for this reason, among many others I am sure, that in *Mother India* the Mother, the Woman, is not called Sita, she is called Radha, Krishna's jovial consort, immortalised in Jayadeva's Sanskrit masterpiece *Gitagovinda*, the song of Krishna.

How does Radha fit in? Radha as I have said is Krishna's mistress, a cowherd whose love-longing for Krishna – at least insofar as the Vaishnavite, East Indian and especially Bengali tradition is concerned – is read as the epitome of religious devotion to God. Physical love, in other words, is read allegorically or homologously, as *bhakti* or devotion. The intensity with which that physical love is expressed (as in Jayadeva for instance) is directly proportional to the intensity with which the devotee as Radha expresses her devotion to her beloved Krishna as God. I think this is an important feature of the relationship between physical love and devotion in Indian devotional and, indeed, erotic texts as well. The connection between the *rasa* of eroticism, the *rasa* which has been given the Sanskrit name of *shringara*, and

a much later *rasa*, the *rasa* or *bhakti* or devotion, is a very important connection and it is one which is probably familiar to students of Medieval European devotional texts as well.

It should be noted, however, that this figure of Radha is in many ways a later development. The great founders of Indian discursivity, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, which are the basis of much filmic, literary, theatrical or dramatic culture of India, remain remarkably silent about Radha. She seems to have emerged much later and is chronicled extensively not so much in epic texts but rather in what are called the *Puranas*, a slightly different body of literary and religious texts. These were compilations which got under way probably in post-classical India, in the period from around the 5th or 6th century A.D. (these are very vague starting points only). So while Sita is fundamentally epic, going back to the *Ramayana*, Radha is indeed Puranic. Where Sita, as we have seen, does not have referential freedom – she is closed, she is fixed, immutable, existing only in endless replays of sameness – Radha's presence, on the other hand, enables the typically Indian concept of life as play, as a game, as ludic, to surface. As a result of this 'openness', Radha oscillates between woman, devotee and beloved. In *Mother India*, of course, she also acquires, through typically Indian processes of mediation, the qualities of the mother too.

Let's apply this information to *Mother India*. As I have said the Mother, played by the actress Nargis, is called Radha. Her husband is predictably Shamu, a diminutive of Shyam, a North-Eastern Indian name for Krishna, who is also known as Govinda, Gopala, Madhava, and so on. This Krishna/Radha relationship, written over the Rama/Sita relationship, enables the film to play with sentiments which Mother-as-Sita would have precluded. It enables precisely those sentiments, those many *rasas* whose combination, expression and manipulation make up the great text that Lava and Kusha spoke about in the *Ramayana* to surface. In *Mother India* woman is therefore represented as wife, as lover, as Mother in both her role as a preserver and destroyer and also, because she is Radha and not Sita, as a figure who is marginally comic. I say 'marginally comic' because the comic elements do not invade the total text. They simply enable the film, consciously or unconsciously, to bring in the Devaki/Krishna playfulness to the text as well as to suggest a relationship tinged probably with Oedipal longings. There is thus a conscious collusion and collision with culture taking place in *Mother India*. The film rather nervously gestures towards configurations and possibilities of meaning which go outside and beyond the basic plot of the film itself. More immediately, I have suggested that the way

in which Radha enters Indian consciousness and a particular order of mythology is very crucial for any reading of this film.

I have tried to include in the overall genealogical field triggered by Radha other characters from *Mother India*. Let me now make those connections a bit more explicit. Radha and her husband Shamu connect the text to earlier, particularly literary, antecedents. The family tree that we can extrapolate from *Mother India* would go something like this. Radha marries Shamu/Krishna and they have four children, but only two survive. The first one is called Ramu who, again along the lines of Shamu, is the diminutive of Rama, the epic hero. The other son is Birju and Birju, unlike Rama the archetypal, dutiful son, is slightly different in the sense that Birju probably comes from Braj the locality in which Krishna lived and of which he is the local deity. Through this sense of 'locale', Birju, as a diminutive of Braj, in fact appropriates some of the symbolic roles of Krishna. The case might not be as simple as all that but I think that it is quite obvious that there is an underlying connection (through Braj) between Birju and Krishna. So just as Radha may be broken up into the dutiful woman and a playful mistress, so Krishna too is both god incarnate – the mediator in the ritual of battle as in the *Mahabharata* and hence a Rama figure – and the child-like mischievous stealer of honey and butter, celebrated in Puranic lore. Through this particular tradition of naming, Shamu's children make up two dimensions of Krishna himself – Krishna as Rama, the law-giver, and Krishna as the player, the mischief-maker, the stealer of butter. The composite Krishna/Rama of Shamu, in other words, is therefore dispersed through Ramu the dutiful son and Birju the playful son. The first one is clearly epic, the second from the Puranas. In this manner Ramu enters a predictable discourse whereas Birju remains ambivalent – both the teaser of water-carrying maids, as well as, in the final analysis, the avenger. Since Birju's relationship to his first or ur-name is problematic (since its basis is really in metonymy and not in metaphor) we may fill out his existence or his character in *Mother India* in various ways, or at various levels. The Mother's love towards the younger son both conforms to cultural norms (and these are predictable cultural norms) and at the same time endows that love with a replay of the Radha/Shamu desire so cruelly brought to an end in the first hour of the film. From this possibility the older brother is excluded. Indeed those who give in to the Law of the Mother, like her husband and her older son, are symbolically castrated and made inarticulate. As a young child Ramu in fact does not say a word throughout the film except perhaps to scream 'ma' ('mother'). It becomes clear, therefore, that in naming the younger son Birju and in making the connection with Krishna, albeit the playful Krishna, and

through him in making Birju more like his rebellious father Shamu before he succumbs to the mother's wish to till an unproductive piece of land, thereby losing both his arms, the film connects sexual potency with rebellion against the Mother even whilst it plays, unconsciously, with the much more frightening issue of the Oedipus complex. Birju in fact dies holding a pair of blood-soaked *kangans* (his mother's marriage bangles) he had recovered from Sukhilala. As a son's symbolic restitution of his mother's honour, it is an image fraught with inescapable sexual overtones.

#### IV

The *Mother India* text is also a function of filmic representation and is constructed through it. In the first half of the film at any rate, the epic form of visual representation is relatively unified. Through the obvious mediation of the technique of socialist realism, especially those techniques of film-making polished and perfected by people like Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Mayalovsky, we find a particular construction of narrative underway. There are certain classic epic shots (the long shot and the epic pose) which are favoured over others and which among many others dominate the first half of the film: the image of bullock carts being dragged across the horizon, a long shot taken from just underneath the branches of a tree, a man's gaze atop a scaffolding, Mother and Sons in profile against or together with the symbols of the hammer and sickle. These are visual images which reinforce an overall epic filmic technique of representation. *Mother India's* epic form is thus as much filmic (through techniques of film making) as it is narrative. The ideological basis of this appropriation must be considered especially insofar as the film was clearly endorsed by Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, as indicative of the progress that India had made ten years after independence. Thus in speaking about *Mother India* as a multiplicity of texts we must refer as much to its filmic complexity as to the verbal fragments, the collage of various narratives, which underly this particular text.

At the level of discourse, however, we find at least two narratives in *Mother India*. The first is a relatively clear-cut and sustained narrative which begins with Radha's marriage to Shamu, goes through the loss of Shamu's arms and his disappearance, and effectively ends with the growth of the two surviving sons Ramu and Birju. The second more complex narrative is probably less well sustained and the film does tend to weaken somewhat in the second half. This second narrative is all about love and hate, desire and sexuality, comic buffoonery and the tragic, where the narrative gets lost in the kinds of filmic representations selectively endorsed by the Bombay film



industry. And here, in this second narrative, we have bullock cart races, banditti and a general speeding-up effect whereby the essential control of the text through the Mother is lost. In this narrative – that is in the second narrative of *Mother India* – the text acquires different centres: the Mother, Birju, the landlord Sukhilala, and the woman school teacher, who finally becomes the revolutionary intellectual and who points out the need for action after Birju fails to learn accountancy. But since this second text, the second narrative, is complex and discontinuous or fractured, its unity has to be found elsewhere, beyond the textual domain, beyond the film *Mother India* as we see it, and in the base culture itself. It is here that *Mother India*, like the genre of Bombay Cinema, requires a multiplicity of self-justifying and self-explicating discourses. In one way the semantic field of the signifier *Mother India* is a discourse (and text) of this kind.

## V

An informed analysis of *Mother India*, therefore, takes us away from the surface expressions of culture to those dialectical processes in the deep structure which hold Indian society together. This is, of course, the conflict between living in this world (*pravritti*) and renunciation (*nivritti*).<sup>22</sup> In *Mother India* there is considerable cultural unity in the sense that Birju's renunciation from the affairs of the world (insofar as he leaves the social order of the village to become a bandit) is carefully plotted. This narrative is characteristic of one way of renouncing the world, although this is not the renunciation which is endorsed by Birju himself. But once he does become a bandit and therefore outside the social order that controls village life, he must be denied first of all love of woman and second pro-creation. In other words, the avenger must first renounce before he can upset the world order. To destroy a feudal system, the person from within must renounce its structures; onslaught is possible only by someone who has no real 'familial' constraints. This is very important for Birju. He leaves his Mother, but his departure is necessary before the so-called revolution can take place.

But renunciation and through it revolution by the free floating social agent is ultimately side-stepped by the text. If Sukhilala is the ultimate feudal lord, he is a father as well; if he wishes to defile other women, he has a daughter as well. Between the roles of feudal lord and father, between the lecher and the father it is the figure of the Father which acquires greater significance. Thus *Mother India* – ostensibly about struggle against tyranny/feudal colonialism – cannot escape past the larger underlying categories which govern (and in turn subdue) Indian society. Thus the film can resolve (or neutralise) the urge towards revolution only by distorting the dominant

epic narrative. This is done through the introduction of a sub-plot about the honour of a village girl (the landlord's daughter in fact) who is abducted, towards the very end of the film, by Birju the renouncer/revolutionary. It is this sub-plot – so far completely irrelevant to the underlying revolutionary impulse of the text – which suddenly becomes the narrative in terms of which *Mother India* resolves the terrible crisis of the Indian revolutionary in a post-colonial world.<sup>23</sup> Mehboob Khan's ploy here is to introduce a facet of *Mother India* we've already outlined. In the face of the 'rape' of the village girl, 'Mother India' must now be reinscribed into her role as the Law, as the upholder of *dharma*. Thus in re-introducing the notion of Law as *dharma*, the film returns 'Mother India' to the larger paradigmatic narrative, the founding narrative, which generates (perhaps illusorily so) this complex discourse. The end of the feudal world-order comes not because Birju kills Sukhilala and abducts his daughter, but because in upholding the eternal *dharma*, the Indian body politic effectively demonstrates its own moral uprighteousness.

It is this specific conjunction of Mother as upholder of the Law and Mother as the avenger which leads to the radical impossibility of action in Indian society. United India after independence needs a guerrilla war like a hole in the head. In allowing a son to be killed by a mother, *Mother India*, the epic of post-colonial India, bares open the contradictions upon which this massive civilization is based. One remembers Hegel's incisive critique of Indian society: 'The Hindoo race has consequently proved itself unable to comprehend either persons or events as parts of a continuous history...'<sup>24</sup> And so ritual enactment, ritual treatment replace history. Ritual overcomes the processes by which history itself can fulfil its own teleological designs. The questions we now ask are what happens to history in *Mother India*? What happens to history in Indian texts? Why is it that the details of struggle against an outmoded system of feudalism are not given their full representation? How can the Indian peasant triumph over that kind of economic exploitation? These questions are tantalisingly present in *Mother India*; they surface so many times and yet they are never really resolved, and the resolution, when it comes just before Birju's death at the hands of his Mother, remains incomplete and is not really a resolution of a massive contradiction in Indian society. The immemorial difference between the serf and his feudal lord remains virtually untouched.

## VI

There are two dialogic situations, occurring within about five minutes of each other, which I should now like to examine to show the deep-seated

ambiguities of Indian culture and how these ambiguities ultimately preclude the revolutionary act. In other words, popular Indian Cinema is so conservative and culture-specific as to make a radical post-colonial Indian Cinema impossible – and not only that, it tries to subvert the radical, as in *Mother India*, by drawing it into its fold and then neutralising it or reabsorbing it back into Hindu culture. The first dialogic ‘moment’ is the death of Sukhilala at the hands of Birju; the second is Birju’s own death at the hands of his Mother.

The struggle between Birju, the renouncer/revolutionary/bandit and Sukhilala, the feudal lord, takes place in Sukhilala’s house and it is about what constitutes true knowledge. Faced with Birju’s hatred of the written word (Birju after all is illiterate), Sukhilala insists that his books of accountancy, his ledger books, are in fact repositories of knowledge and as knowledge they should not be defiled. To this Birju replies, ‘I have no time for this knowledge (*vidya*), this is the knowledge that took my land away, this is the knowledge that took my bullocks away, this is the knowledge that led to the defilement of my Mother’. Birju declares that he will not forgive and concludes before stabbing him, ‘You are a bandit, and I too am a bandit; the law (*kanun* not *dharma*) will not leave you alone, it will not leave me alone’. Birju’s obsession with another version of law, colonial law (as *kanun*) as distinct from the Law (*dharma*), is raised here.

The second dialogic situation may be translated as follows:

- Girl: Radha Auntie, Radha Auntie, save me!  
Mother: Birju, leave Rupa alone or else I’ll kill you.  
Birju: You can’t kill me, you are my Mother.  
Mother: I am also a woman.  
Birju: I am your son.  
Mother: Rupa is the daughter of the entire village, she is my honour too. Birju, I can lose a son, I cannot sacrifice my honour.  
Birju: If you dare, shoot – shoot, I too shall not break my vow.  
(Mother screams ‘Birju’ and fires).

The final triumph of the Mother confuses and places into disarray the revolutionary act essential for post-colonial reconstruction. And the purely cinematic (technical) aspects of representation clearly problematises the political questions about culture-specific images and their place in a definable post-colonial discourse. In upholding *dharma* as Law (in the form of Mother as Durga), as in fact a typically Indian Androgynous Law, the film refuses to accept the concept of action based upon political (rather than cultural) necessity. Yet so far as the spectator is concerned, his or her specular identification is always with Birju. Thus in allowing this kind of

identification to take place, the director's complicity in subverting the Law of the Mother (and of Culture) comes into play. In shot after shot suture is maintained; Birju's gaze is the spectator's gaze even whilst he denounces Hindu ideology and contradicts the spectator's age-old cultural assumptions. In the process the film is shot through with contradictions precisely of the kind endorsed by Krishna in the battle of the *Mahabharata*. Your action has a legitimacy if it has moral force – in terms of purity of action (*karmaphalatya*) it is Birju who triumphs and not the Mother. Perhaps it is the only way in which Mehboob Khan can make his political statement about India: let the Mother affirm the Law, *dharma*, but let the spectator *confirm* Birju's actions. Couched in such a contradictory epistemology, *Mother India* becomes so outrageously 'conforming' and yet so defiantly subversive.

## NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 226. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' was originally published in 1936.
2. Quoted in Benjamin, p. 241.
3. Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema* (London: MacMillan, 1981), p. 9.
4. Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 62.
5. Eagleton, p. 48.
6. Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Textual Strategies*, ed. J.V. Harari (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 148ff.
7. Palatal and retroflex sibilants have been transliterated as *sh*; the retroflex vowel as *ri*; and the voiceless unaspirated palatal consonant as *ch*. I have kept Bombay Film's original transliterations of films throughout.
8. 'Selling Dreams', *Asiaweek* (May 4, 1984), 38-44.
9. *India 1982: A Reference Annual* (Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1982), p. 153.
10. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 270-81.
11. 'Big Budget Survivors', *India Today* (May 31, 1984), 32-40.
12. *Asiaweek* (May 4, 1984), 40.
13. Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema*, trans. Donna Jean Uniker-Seboek (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), pp. 96-105.
14. *Time Magazine* (July 19, 1976), 9.
15. *India 1982: A Reference Annual*, p. 152.
16. Edward Said, 'Orientalism Reconsidered', *Race and Class* 27 (Autumn 1985), p. 7.
17. A later film version of Maxim Gorky's *Mother*, directed by Donskoy, was released in 1956. In the Russian *Mother* (as in Gorky's original) it is the Mother who is converted to the path of revolution.
18. Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1927). This book went through eight impressions in six months.

19. *The Ramayana of Valmiki – Vol I Balakanda*, trans. Robert P. Goldman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); *sarga* 4, *shloka* 8.
20. Rosie Thomas *et al*, *Cinema, Cinema*, Channel 4 Television (London, 1983).
21. See Vijay Mishra, Peter Jeffery and Brian Shoesmith, 'The Actor as Parallel Text in Bombay Cinema', *The Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, forthcoming.
22. Vijay Mishra, 'Towards a Theoretical Critique of Bombay Cinema', *Screen*, XXVI, 3-4 (May-August 1985), p. 139.
23. Peter Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot', in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 292. According to Peter Brooks, the sub-plot usually suggests 'a different solution to the problem worked through the main plot, and often illustrates the danger of short-circuit'.
24. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F.P.B. Osmaston (1835-38; New York: Hacker Books, 1975), II, p. 49.