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

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Abstract

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

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

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> "The theory of the instincts is, so to say, our mythology. Instincts are mythical entities, magnificent in their indefiniteness". Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis
>
> "Tu toh hamari maa hai, saare gaon ki maa hai" *(You are our mother, the whole village's mother)* - from the film "Mother India", 1957

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

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

Locating "Mother India"

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

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

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

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

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

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