

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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MOTHER INDIA 1957

Mehboob Khan

(Hindi language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

If only one film could be selected to represent Indian cinema, at least before the Bollywood era, it would have to be *Mother India*. Despite its early release date, and its now out-dated acting styles, the story of a woman who loses half her family and yet has the courage to save a village has continued to beguile and entertain audiences over the decades. That woman is Radha, who suffers the disappearance of her husband and the death of two of her sons. Her family are exploited by a money-lender and come close to extinction by starvation; and yet, she refuses to give up. Her hard work brings happy days, until one of her sons becomes a criminal (to avenge the wrongs done to her) and she is forced to kill him. Her achievements are great, but she wears a weary face at the end when a new dam brings prosperity to her village. *Mother India* is one of only three Indian films to be nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards ceremony.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

It is impossible to exaggerate the status of this film in Indian culture. It dramatises the story of the nation through the image of the suffering and self-sacrificing woman, which has tremendous political and religious resonance. On the one hand, the film is a deliberate riposte to Katherine Mayo's 1927 book of the same name, which denigrated Indian culture and religion by pointing to caste injustice and mistreatment of women. The book caused an outrage, and when Mehboob Khan first conceived of the film, he said that it was intended to remove the negative image of India created by Mayo's book in the minds of Indians.

The character of the selfless woman, on the other hand, draws on deep strata of Indian mythology and religion. In the film, Radha is married to Shamu (or Shyam), which are the names of famous lovers in Hindu mythology. The cinema character of Radha also imitates the strength and resilience of Sita and Savitri, who are icons of female devotion to their families. Most important, and as explained in the section on themes (see below), Radha is 'mother India,' a religious-cum-political figure who inspired the nationalist movement before Independence

STORY

The present The story begins in 1957, in a village, where politicians gather to celebrate the construction of a new dam that will bring much-needed water to irrigate drought-plagued fields. The army of elites, clad in their obligatory Gandhian handloom cloth, hover over an old woman, begging her to be present at the inauguration. 'After all,' one says, 'you're the mother of this village.' She is reluctant but eventually gives in. Then, when the officials honour her with a flower garland, the film shifts back to a scene when another garland was placed around her neck: her own wedding, decades earlier.

Debt Radha is taken as a beautiful bride to the house of her husband's family, where she learns that her mother-in-law has mortgaged the family land to a money-lender named Sukhilala. The final piece of his land has been used to get money necessary to pay for Radha's wedding. 'But, if the bride is fortunate,' someone says, 'all will be fine.' When her husband, Shamu, tells Radha to wear her wedding jewellery, she tells him to sell it in order to pay off the mortgage. More misery is heaped on her as her mother-in-law criticises her housekeeping. Next, she has a run-in with the greedy and lecherous Sukhilala.

Harvest For time being, however, life is good for Radha and Shamu. They help to gather the

wheat harvest, despite the ancient technology of drawing up water from a well using animals or their own hands. Sukhilala then demands three-quarters of the harvest as interest on their loan (given to them to pay for the wedding) and waves a written document in the face of Shamu's mother. At a village council, Shamu's mother claims that Sukhilala lied to her, that she didn't know what she was signing, but the council supports the money-lender.

Hard times The happy couple work their own land, groaning as they plough in the hot sun. They raise just enough food to feed their three little children. One of the sons, Birju, destroys Sukhilala's umbrella, the cost of which Sukhilala adds to their loan. For his punishment, Birju is tied to a stake and left unfed by his grandmother. When Sukhilala takes more and more of their possessions as payment for the loan, the couple try to plant more crops, but their strenuous labours fail. Shamu is injured trying to move a huge boulder and is later humiliated when Sukhilala takes his bullocks and hangs the animals' collar around his neck.

Tragedies Shamu is unable to work because of his injury and, feeling useless, abandons his family. His disappearance, and presumed death, is quickly followed by the death of Radha's third son and then her mother-in-law from starvation. As if that were not enough, bad weather and floods destroy Radha's crop and home, with her infant baby dying in the process. Reduced to nothing, Radha nevertheless rejects the charity offered by Sukhilala, and when he tries to sexually abuse her, she beats him.

Defiance When the whole village starts to migrate elsewhere, Radha stands defiant and convinces them to return to the land. Time passes and she raises a good crop with her two grown-up sons. She still pays three-quarters to Sukhilala, which angers Birju, while Ramu, who is the married, older son, tries to calm him.

Birju Birju becomes more and more unpredictable and violent. Still stinging from the insults of Sukhilala, he attacks the money-lender and his daughter, Rupa. Then he steals back his mother's wedding jewels that were pawned to Sukhilala. Radha helps him to escape by hiding him in a haystack, and when all the haystacks are set alight by Sukhilala's men, she carries him to safety on her back while swimming across a river. Now, Birju becomes a bandit. Returning on the day of Sukhilala's daughter's wedding, he kills the money-lender and runs off with Rupa. Attempting to escape on horseback, he is shot by his own mother and dies in her arms.

Return to the present That terrible scene takes us back to the present, where Radha looks out on the new dam and irrigation canals with a sad face.

THEMES

Technology and human labour The overall theme of this iconic film is that the future of India depends on a combination of technology and human labour. Historical context is important here: the film was released a decade after Independence, when Prime Minister Nehru prioritised technology and heavy industry over Gandhi's vision of an agrarian society with traditional values. The film argues that both these visions are necessary for the country to prosper. The film begins and ends with the newly-constructed dam, showing water running into the fields through irrigation channels and crops growing in the sun. However, that infrastructure will only make a difference if the people work the land, as the bulk of the film shows. For example, before the dam is built, we see that people draw water from a deep well, either by using animals or their own labour, in either case a time-consuming and arduous exercise. At the same time, climatic events, such as the storms and flooding that ruin the harvest and lead to starvation, cannot be prevented by technology alone; the resilience of people like Radha is equally necessary to produce food and make the country prosper. In other scenes, Radha herself pulls the plough through the field, like a bullock, straining her body with every sinew. This kind of back-breaking labour, the film suggests, will be replaced by more efficient and humane technology, but her determination is also essential. The final shots show that the water flowing through the irrigation channel is mixed with blood, which recalls the previous scene in which Radha kills her own son and has her hands covered with his blood. The message could not be clearer. Technology, prosperity and harvests depend on the sacrifice of the people who live on the land. Nehru's dam and Gandhi's peasants are both needed to take the country forward.

Mother and sons This combined Nehru-Gandhi image of the nation is dramatised in terms of a family, which is an equally important theme in the film. The title itself, *Mother India*, points to the identification of the nation with a family, in this case a mother and her (two surviving) sons. The

identity of India as a 'mother' dates from at least as early as the mid-nineteenth century, after which it gained popularity during the campaign for nationalism and culminated in the song that became the national anthem: 'Vande Mataram' or 'Mother, I bow to thee.' Images of Bharat Mata ('Mother India' in the form of a goddess) then appeared on calendars and leaflets, in fiction and in film. However, and as the film shows, the mother needs the support of her sons, who stand for the people of the nation. One of the sons goes morally off the rails, and the mother is forced to discipline him, just as the state is expected to maintain law and order among its people. That is why Radha must kill her own son when he threatens the honour of the village. When Birju says that she cannot kill him because he is her son, she replies, 'I am also a mother. I can lose a son, but I cannot sacrifice the honour of the village.'

Feudal agrarian system A third theme depicted in the film is the injustice of the feudal agrarian system. Illiterate peasants, like Radha's mother-in-law, are cheated by money-lenders. Caste domination is upheld by traditional village councils run by men. Poverty, exploitation, displacement and starvation are the result of this feudal patriarchy. These evils are all packed into the single character of Sukhilala, the money-lender, who is destroyed by another lawless character, Birju, in an act of revenge. This murder creates ambiguity in an otherwise morally simplistic tale. Technology and hard labour are said to bring prosperity, but what can uproot the evil of the money-lenders? Not the rule of law or the compromised village council. In fact, the corrupt money-lender is killed by a corrupted character, who says, 'You are a thief. And I am a thief.' All the dams in the world will not, it seems, change human nature.

CHARACTERS

Radha Radha is 'mother India.' Radha is the strong but suffering woman, wife and mother whose courage animates the film. She is demure and pious yet defiant and outspoken when necessary. She is hard-working, practical and, above all else, ethical even when it comes to her own family.

Practical Although Radha is the village belle, she is extremely hard-working and practical. As soon as the wedding is over, she is shown churning milk, husking grain and sweeping floors. Her husband sails in and insists that she wear her wedding jewels, which he presents to her. Her response is immediate and startling. 'Sell them,' she says in a low voice, turning her head away from him. 'Your mother has mortgaged the land and we need to get it back.' Her husband dismisses the mortgage as 'rumour' and lovingly asks that she wear the bangles for him. He embraces her and the camera focuses on the beautiful bracelets on her wrists. It is (in the conventions of 1950s Indian cinema) an erotic scene, and she is nearly overcome with emotion, but she regains her senses and restates her desire to sell the jewels, which are powerful symbols of status, marriage and sensuality. Even in this opening sequence, we see that Radha is willing to sacrifice her own desires for the good of the family.

Ethical Radha always acts justly, whether dealing with friends or enemies. For instance, although she speaks out against the tyranny of the money-lender, she abides by the ruling of the village council that the family must pay him an exorbitant interest on a loan. However, an even more dramatic illustration of her ethical behaviour comes at the very end of the story. Birju, her younger son, has become a bandit, raiding the village, killing the money-lender and recovering his mother's wedding jewels. In the penultimate scene, he rides into the village, scoops up another man's wife and rides away. But Radha shoots him in the back with a rifle. He falls off the horse, staggers to his feet and dies in her arms. Radha had ordered him to stop his banditry, arguing that a gun solves nothing, but he wouldn't listen. And so the mother kills her son in order to prevent lawlessness in the village. She is devastated by her action, forced to resort to the violence that she has condemned, but she stands for virtue. If she allowed looting, she would be little different to the greedy money-lender.

Defiant Perhaps the single word that best describes Radha is defiance. Throughout the film, we watch her refuse to surrender, despite the long list of tragedies that blight her life. A dramatic illustration of her steely defiance occurs in a scene in which she persuades the villagers not to abandon the village. A fierce storm has destroyed the harvest and everyone packs up and is moving off in their bullock carts, but Radha remains scrabbling in the mud to find a large root to boil for food. 'Radha!' the women scream. 'You must come. You'll starve here, no harvest for at least two years.' She replies, 'I cannot give up my home. And my husband may come back [he doesn't].' Then comes a stunning panoramic shot of lines and lines of bullock carts slowly moving across the landscape, a mass exodus. 'Do not abandon your fields, my villagers,' Radha cries, with a hoe over her shoulder and two thin children by her side. 'This land is your mother. Do not abandon her.' With those words,

which echo the theme of the film, she stands resolute, an unforgettable symbol of defiance.

Humble Beautiful and virtuous, Radha never lets herself get above her station. She may be the one who saves the village, but she remains humble. This is her enduring image, a sad and aged face that both opens and closes the film. In the opening scene, she is asked by politicians to grace the inauguration of the new dam with her presence, but she says no. When they insist, saying she is the 'mother of the village,' she hobbles forward but then waves away the huge flower garland that is placed around her neck. She wears that same face at the very end, when, after all she has experienced in this long story, the dam is opened and the water irrigates the fields. Crops grow due to her heroic struggle, but she remains humble.

Birju Birju is Radha's rebellious younger son. Of the other characters, only Birju has sufficient depth to analyse. He is the younger of the two sons who survive the tragedies that beset the family. Unlike his older brother, Birju is rebellious and charming, impetuous and playful in equal measure. He is intensely loyal to his mother, a bond that brings his own destruction.

Loyal Birju is protective of his mother from the very beginning, even when he is a small boy. He knows that the money-lender is her enemy, so he taunts him, breaks his umbrella and shoots him with his sling-shot. But the most vivid illustration of his loyalty to his mother occurs much later, when the family are on the edge of starvation. They are huddled in a leaky hut, trying to keep warm, when the smarmy Sukhilala arrives and says that he pities the poor children. Sitting his well-fed body down next to the little Birju, he offers the boy some grain, but the child says, 'I eat only what my mother gives me.' Then Birju wanders over to the pot on a fire and peers in. 'It's empty,' he says, 'I'm starving.' When Sukhilala gives him another handful of food, Birju raises it to his mouth, but Radha tells him to throw it away. Pain creases the face of the malnourished child, but he obeys his mother and lets the food drop through his fingers and onto the ground.

Vengeful From the very beginning of the story, we sense that Birju is destined to confront Sukhilala. Birju, as a little boy, breaks the man's umbrella and humiliates him by shooting him with his sling-shot. Then, when Birju is a grown man and a bandit, he takes his revenge to the ultimate degree and kills the avaricious money-lender. Birju doesn't just take the man's life, he also destroys his business, burning all his papers and documents. And the culmination of his revenge comes when he reclaims his mother's wedding jewels (which she had pawned to offset interest payments on the family loan). In this scene, Birju is a violent man, but his actions have the mitigating motive of righteous revenge.

Sukhilala Sukhilala is the devious money-lender. Sukhilala is an avaricious and lecherous money-lender, who is the somewhat one-dimensional villain of this story. He talks with an ingratiating tone that attempts to charm but ends up revealing his venal qualities. Even when he shows 'charity' to those who owe him money, it is clear that he has ulterior motives.

Duplicitous Sukhilala is a deceptive man, who relies on manipulating illiterate villagers to amass his fortune. His devious nature is clearly illustrated in a scene, in which the loan agreement between him and Radha's mother-in-law is debated. The harvest is in, and Shamu (Radha's husband) is joyously allotting shares to everyone who helped bring in the crop. Then Sukhilala pops up and says, 'Not so fast. Three-quarters of this is mine.' The disagreement is taken to the village council, where Sukhilala shows a document signed by Radha's mother-in-law, that guarantees him $\frac{3}{4}$ of the family harvest as interest on a loan given to them to pay for the wedding of Shamu and Radha. Shamu's mother says that Sukhilala did not tell her about that provision of the agreement. 'I don't know what you've written,' she says, 'but I know what you told me. You're a liar.' Sukhilala wins the case, since the document is duly signed, but it is clear that he deceived an illiterate woman.

Predatory More than simply deceitful, Sukhilala is also predatory. A sliver of this dark streak in his character is revealed early on when he ogles the women passing him as they carry water-pots on their heads. A more full-blown example occurs later, when Radha and her children are starving and Sukhilala arrives with an offer to marry her. 'I will protect you all,' he says, 'make you rich and feed you.' Radha is tempted, sorely tempted, to accept his proposal in order to save her children, but she wavers and then he physically attacks her. Her own strength enables her to fend him off and push him headlong into an opened bale of cotton. The scene ends with the money-lender stumbling around in a costume of white fluff, like a chicken, but there is little humour in his predatory intentions.

Ramu Ramu is Radha's older son, who is less violent.
Shamu Shamu is Radha's husband.
Sundar-Chach Sundar-chachi is the mother-in-law of Radha.
Champa Champu is Ramu's wife.
Rupa Rupa is Sukhilala's daughter.



(modern image of Bharata Mata, 'Mother India')



(Radha, when she and her family are near starvation)



(Radha and her sons ploughing the field)



(Radha, with her two young sons)



(Birju, in a heated argument)



(Sukhilala tempts a desperate Radha)