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**GANDHISM VS. GANDHIGIRI:  
THE LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF THE MAHATMA<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper, which contrasts Rajkumar Hirani's *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006) with Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982), is as much a celebration of Bollywood as of Gandhi. It is to the former that the credit for most effectively resurrecting the Mahatma should go, certainly much more so than to Gandhians or academics. For Bollywood literally revives the spirit of Gandhi by showing how irresistibly he continues to haunt India today. Not just in giving us *Gandhigiri*—a totally new way of *doing* Gandhi in the world—but in its perceptive representation of the threat that modernity poses to Gandhian thought is *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* remarkable. What is more, it also draws out the distinction between Gandhi as hallucination and the real afterlife of the Mahatma. The film's enormous popularity at the box office—it grossed close to a billion rupees—is not just an index of its commercial success, but also proof of the responsive chord it struck in Indian audiences. But it is not just the genius and inventiveness of Bollywood cinema that is demonstrated in the film as much as the persistence and potency of Gandhi's own ideas, which have the capacity to adapt themselves to unusual circumstances and times. Both Richard Attenborough's Oscar-winning epic, and Rajkumar Hirani's *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* show that Gandhi remains as media-savvy after his death as he was during his life.

**KEYWORDS:** Gandhi goes to the movies; Hollywood/Bollywood; Rajkumar Hirani; *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006); Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982)

**RESUMEN** *Gandhiismo vs. Gandhigiri: El Mahatma, antes y después de su muerte*

Este artículo, que contrasta dos películas, *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006) de Rajkumar Hirani y *Gandhi* (1982) de Richard Attenborough, celebra tanto el cine de Bollywood como la figura de Gandhi. El mérito por haber resucitado al Mahatma de una forma muy eficaz debería adjudicarse a la primera de las dos, mucho más que a los expertos de Gandhi o a los académicos. Esto es debido a que Bollywood literalmente reanima el espíritu de Gandhi demostrando cómo la sombra de su persona persiste en la India de hoy. *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* destaca no solamente porque nos presenta *Gandhigiri* – una manera totalmente nueva de hacer de Gandhi en el mundo – sino en la representación suspicaz de la amenaza que el pensamiento de Gandhi plantea para la modernidad.

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<sup>1</sup> This excerpt is Section XIII of the first part of a work in progress called “The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi.” The subtitle of the section is also the subtitle of Claude Markovits's revisionist history called *The Un-Gandhian Gandhi*. The book was first published in India by Permanent Black with the subtitle “*Gandhi's Posthumous Life*,” which changed the following year in the Anthem Press London imprint. Markovits, attempting a “non-traditional biography,” tries to go beyond—or beneath—perceptions to locate the “real” Gandhi in history.

Además traza una diferencia entre Gandhi como una alucinación y la existencia del Mahatma después de su muerte. La buena aceptación de la película – las ganancias de los cines ascendieron a casi un billón de rupias — no solamente indica el éxito comercial, sino que pone de manifiesto hasta qué punto caló hondo entre el público indio. Sin embargo, la película no demuestra solo el genio y la inventiva del cine de Bollywood, también celebra la persistencia y el poder de las ideas de Gandhi, que han podido adaptarse a unas circunstancias y a un tiempo poco corrientes. Tanto la épica de Richard Attenborough, ganadora de un óscar, y *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* de Rajkumar Hirani demuestran que Gandhi sigue sabiendo utilizar los medios de comunicación con la misma astucia que empleaba durante su vida que después de su muerte.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Gandhi y el cine; Hollywood/Bollywood; el Gandhi de Richard Attenborough; Rajkumar Hirani; *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*

As he approaches the end of his monumental monograph on *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi*, Robert Payne concludes somewhat wistfully,

The years passed, and the murder of Gandhi became a fact of history, strangely remote and strangely final. The case was closed, the murderers have been punished, many of the witnesses were dead, and it seemed hopeless to revive an inquiry which must in the nature of things remain incomplete and insubstantial. (1969: 646)

I have, quite in contrast to Payne, endeavoured to show that the case is far from closed; the Mahatma's death continues to haunt and tantalize us. The almost compulsive return to this topic, witnessed in the number of books and studies, decade after decade, is only one proof of this fact. Another, perhaps more substantial, corroboration of this is the spurt of interest in Gandhi from two most unexpected of sources, Hollywood and Bollywood. Though there have been many celluloid depictions of Gandhi, two stand out as being especially notable, Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982) and Rajkumar Hirani's *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006). Of the many attempts to capture Gandhi on celluloid, I consider these two feature films to be not only the most successful and spectacular, but also most inviting of our special consideration. That is because they employ two different narrative modes and mimetic styles of representing Gandhi, thus, albeit unintentionally, complementing one another with uncanny symmetry.

Movies had already become the world's newest and most powerful medium during Gandhi's life. He himself was filmed several times, starting with some American news and documentary companies' attempts to interview him for Western audiences. One of these early efforts is commonly available on YouTube. This supposedly earliest talkie on Gandhi was shot by Fox Movietone in May 1931 at Borsad, near Anand in South Gujarat, on the eve of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Round Table Conference which took place in London. It begins with the journalist unloading his heavy cinematographic equipment from a bullock cart after he arrives through the Borsad ashram gates. This rather self-conscious self-representation functions both as a

means to familiarize the audience with the new medium of film, and to show viewers the great efforts that the media has taken to reach and film Gandhi. Gandhi speaks very softly, in a whisper, while the journalist tries his best to draw him out. Earlier, Gandhi had insisted that his interviewer walk with him, so as not to take up too much of his time or cut too much into his schedule, during one of the former's constitutional. The journalist finds Gandhi walking too briskly for his (the journalist's) comfort. Eventually, the two end up sitting on the floor, Gandhi, bare-chested, spinning as he talks, while his interlocutor, quite uncomfortable and overdressed, tries cleverly to "trap" Gandhi with some of his questions. Gandhi, on the other hand, already a past master at this game, not only disarms him with his humour but, when required, evades answering directly or being drawn into saying anything controversial. Without actually knowing it, Gandhi is revealed to be quite media-savvy.

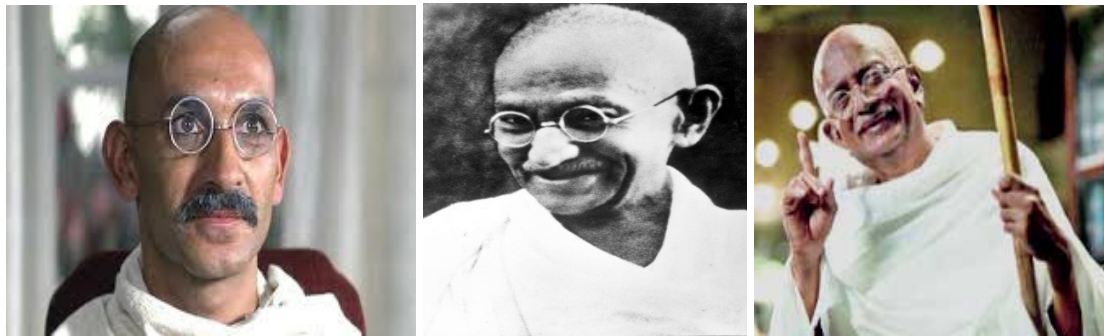
Called "Gandhi Talks," the film shows a still sprightly if ageing Mahatma of feeble voice, quite averse to being photographed. As he said in the *Harijan* of 21<sup>st</sup> September 1947, opposing the proposal to make his statue in Bombay, "I must say that I have dislike even for being photographed; nevertheless, photographs have been taken of me" (Gandhi, 1999, V.96: 366). To return to this first talkie on Gandhi, except for the dynamic opening sequence, the film is rather static, with the two figures almost frozen on the floor. Gandhi, we quickly realize, is rather easy to exoticize to the West: prohibition, child marriages, and sartorial peculiarities—all become grist to the journalistic mill. Of course, to add to his exoticism, Gandhi does not sit still, but plays, now and then, with his toes as he talks. His interviewer asks him whether it would be proper for him to dress as he does when attends the Round Table Conference. Gandhi replies that he would be uncomfortable wearing anything else than his customary attire, which, of course, is also a political statement in that it represents how a majority of the masses of colonized India dress, in bare essentials, upper bodies bare. Politics and piety, the two themes of Gandhi's life—civil disobedience and *satyagraha*—form part of the exchange, which is marked by wit and humour, so typical of Gandhi. When asked if Government will yield to his demands, Gandhi says he doesn't know. "But you are hopeful?" Gandhi replies with a smile, "I am an optimist." On the other hand, what if he is imprisoned? "I am always prepared to go to jail" retorts the clever Mahatma. Indeed, the exchange shows how carefully he measures his words. When the journalist attempts to plant words into his mouth, Gandhi returns, "That is more than I can say." Quite prophetic and essential to our inquiry is the unexpected question, "Would you be prepared to die in the cause of India's freedom?" At that time, in the early thirties, Gandhi does not seem to be too pleased: "It is a bad question" he says, neither negating nor affirming its implications. Perhaps, what he wants

to say is “I hope it will not be necessary, which is why I prefer not to think of it.” But it is quite likely that somewhere deep inside him he *knows* but does not wish to face up to that knowledge.

While Gandhi speaking to the press was often filmed, it was something rather functional rather than artistic as far as he was concerned. He simply wanted to get his message across and did not hesitate to do so through the new medium. Gandhi’s attitude to feature films, however, was not very flattering. In June 1944, after Kasturba’s death, Gandhi spent some time with a prominent Porbandar business family, the Morarjees, in their Juhu mansion. His hosts arranged for him to see the movie *Mission to Moscow*, the special screening of which was attended by about a hundred prominent Bombayites along with Gandhi. The film was a big hit in those days. Sarojini Naidu was also present. It seems that Gandhi objected to the low dresses of the ladies and to couples in a close embrace (Payne 1969: 509). He thought that such films would have a negative effect on public morality. He also saw *Ram Rajya*, a mythological, which he liked better, but, according to Payne, “to the end of his life he showed a deep dislike for films and cameramen” (1969: 509). I am not quite sure that this is true because whether it was the radio, which he used quite effectively, or movies, Gandhi, the great communicator, was not averse to trying the latest media. He knew the advantage of reaching millions through them.

One way to enter into the question of how Gandhi was depicted in the movies is to examine the following three images, which signify three different attempts to frame Gandhi on the silver screen. All of them, obviously, resemble the Mahatma, but which one is the “real” Gandhi? On looking closely, we will be able to identify these images. The still on the left is from Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi*, while the one on the right is from *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*. In both these movies, Gandhi is played by actors, the then unknown, but now famous Ben Kingsley and, the still obscure, Dilip Prabhavalkar respectively. But what of the photo in the middle? That image represents Gandhi as himself. But the question remains: why is that representation more “real” than the other two? Is it because in it Gandhi plays himself while in the other two he is portrayed by professional actors? Playing himself, however, we may not forget, is also a form of portrayal. Self-representation is also representation; there is no way to get to the “real” Gandhi without some process of mediation. Even a photo of Gandhi, so accurate and life-like to all appearances, is also a text that invites interpretation. In this case, the “real” images of Gandhi that were crafted during his own lifetime become the sources of the later cinematic depictions, thus basing the “reel” Gandhi on the “real” Gandhi.

But the cinematic Gandhis also depart in significant ways from the documentary Gandhis. All, in the end, invite interpretations, including comparisons between them. The documentaries serve as a rich archive of images which are later adapted for a variety of purposes, including sculpture and portraiture. But this ensemble is itself subject to interrogation in the manner in which it seeks to frame and signify the Mahatma's life.



1. Ben Kingsley as Gandhi in Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982). Credits: *Gandhi* (1982) From: *Gandhi*. Directed by: Richard Attenborough. [Film still] USA: Columbia Pictures. At: <http://www.thecareermuse.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/movieleadership.jpg> (Accessed 5 November 2013).
2. A Portrait of Gandhi as Himself (late 1930s). Credits: Unknown (circa late 1930s). *Portrait Gandhi*. [photograph]. At: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait\\_Gandhi.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_Gandhi.jpg) (Accessed 5 November 2013).
3. Dilip Phabhavalkar as Gandhi in Rajkumar Hirani's *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006). Credits: *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006). From: *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*. Directed by: Rajkumar Hirani. [Film still] India: Yash Raj Films. At: [http://media.indiatimes.in/media/content/2012/Oct/dilip-prabhavalkar-as-mahatma-gandhi-in-lage-raho-munna-bhai\\_1349153958\\_640x640.gif](http://media.indiatimes.in/media/content/2012/Oct/dilip-prabhavalkar-as-mahatma-gandhi-in-lage-raho-munna-bhai_1349153958_640x640.gif) (Accessed 5 November 2013).

Of the various attempts to portray the “real” Gandhi on “reel,” the best instance is clearly the *Mahatma: Life of Gandhi 1869-1948*. This is a hugely ambitious, comprehensive, and painstaking assemblage of a vast array of audio-visual material that constitutes possibly the longest of biographical documentaries ever. Made in 1968 by the Gandhi National Memorial Fund in cooperation with the Films Division of the Government of India, it was scripted and directed by Vithalbai Jhaveri who also recorded the audio commentary that runs through it. This 30,000 feet documentary was divided into thirty-three reels. The initial six reels cover a little over the first half of Gandhi's life till he is forty-five. These years include the twenty-one he spent in South Africa. The remaining thirty-three years of his life from his return to India 1915 to his murder in January 1948 extend over some twenty-seven reels that also depict important facets of the history of India's freedom struggle. With a total length of about 330 minutes, the film is over six-and-a-half hours long. It also includes the earliest filming of Gandhi in 1912 during G. K. Gokhale's visit to South Africa. Overall, *Mahatma: Life of Gandhi 1869-1948* embodies the most carefully collated and reliable visual

archive on Gandhi. As such it is a “source” of most other cinematic representations of Gandhi, including the two I shall discuss.

The three photos serve to remind us not only of the relationship between the two fictional accounts of Gandhi, Attenborough’s and Hirani’s, but also how they engage with what we know about the historical figure. But without trying to gauge the “reliability” or “authenticity” of the two feature films or to evaluate their truth value or mimetic accuracy, it might be instructive to juxtapose the two modes of representation and the two narrative grammars, with the two ways of recuperating Gandhi’s legacy so as to draw larger lessons from them. The first question that strikes us is the challenge of filming Gandhi. From Jhaveri’s text, we realize that though photographed a lot, Gandhi was not filmed as often. Actual “talkies” of him are even fewer. From scant live records in the first half of his life when he was relatively less famous to later cinematic depictions is thus quite a leap.

That is one reason why Richard Attenborough’s *Gandhi* becomes so important, even epochal. It is *the* ultimate biopic. An expensive multi-national effort, combining expertise and actors from five continents, the film became somewhat controversial because it was filmed with Government of India support and investment. Quite naturally India-detractors, not to mention Gandhi-baiters, dismissed it as propaganda. Longer than most Hollywood movies, it stretches into three hours and eleven minutes, thus requiring special screening times all over the world. It is a lavish production in 70 mm, with six track sound. Shot on a massive scale, often on actual locations specially made available by the Indian government, it not only featured world famous actors and an international star-studded cast, but also thousands of extras that made up crowds, mobs, and background fillers. *Gandhi* was a great success, with world-wide impact. Nominated for nine Oscars, it won the Academy awards sweepstakes, bagging eight awards, including one for the best picture. Its global collections exceeded \$100 million; the film is still in circulation and continues to move international audiences. One of its greatest contributions was that it made Gandhi a global icon thirty-five years after his death.

Attenborough’s *Gandhi*, I would argue, is very much about the *life* of Gandhi seen through Western eyes. As Attenborough himself put it in the companion book published when the movie was released, “We were attempting to discover, and then dramatise, the spirit of this extraordinary man” (1982: 101). Indeed, Attenborough’s retelling removes the Mahatma from a limited, exotic, anti-colonial context and reterritorializes him as a 20<sup>th</sup> century saint. As Darius Cooper in a review of the film observes, “Attenborough's three-hour

film on Gandhi concentrates primarily on the Mahatmaness of the man, obliterating most human nuances that made Gandhi the unique person that he was” (1983: 47). The narrative follows Christian hagiographical conventions, making it essentially the vindication of a saintly life. Such an interpretation is possible, in the first place, because Gandhi’s remarkable life—and martyr’s death—lends itself so readily to this. In what was one of the most astute obituaries on him, George Orwell, who rejected sainthood as an ideal, famously quipped that “Saints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent...” but went on to pronounce a favourable verdict on Gandhi (2003: 347; 347-57).

The image of Gandhi as a modern-day saint is a common one. Markovits shows how Gandhi was iconized in a bewildering, sometimes contradictory, array of images: “as a Bolshevik, a fanatic, a trouble-maker, a hypocrite, an eccentric, a reactionary, a revolutionary, a saint, a renouncer, a messiah, an avatar. He was likened both to Lenin and Jesus Christ, indicating the whole scope of representations” (2004: 13). These various perceptions, however settle into two major tropes after his death: within India, he was the “Father of the Nation” and outside “an apostle of non-violence” (ibid). The growth of the latter iconography of the saintly Gandhi in the West, Markovits shows, had many contributors including the Rev. Joseph J. Doke, an English Baptist missionary in South Africa, who wrote a book eulogising Gandhi as early as 1909. Doke did not stop short of comparing Gandhi with Christ (Markovits, 2004: 15-16). In an essay significantly titled “Saint Gandhi” Mark Jurgensmeyer traces the canonization of Gandhi in the West as a saintly figure in the Christian tradition. A Unitarian pastor, Rev. John Hayne Holmes declared in a sermon in New York in April 1921 that Gandhi was not only a saint, but a saviour (ibid: 17). Earlier, Willy Pearson, another English clergyman, was the first to proclaim Gandhi’s sainthood, comparing him with St. Francis of Assisi (Markovits, 2004: 16) while later Romain Rolland’s immensely influential book, *Mahatma Gandhi* (1924), translated in many European languages, was to confirm this iconization (ibid:17). Attenborough’s cinematic hagiography clearly belongs to this tradition.

Of course, Attenborough used Hollywood filmmaking conventions, staging his scenes elaborately, as other makers of “epics” such as David Lean had done before him. *Gandhi*, though hagiographical, follows a mimetic style of filmmaking in which cinema, the visual image itself, is supposed to portray or reflect “reality.” Cinematic realism is shored up by accurate set and costume design, painstaking research, art direction, method acting, shooting on location, adherence to “unities” of time and space, and “documentary” style camera work and editing.

When Attenborough discussed the project with Nehru way back in 1963, the latter told him that “the spirit and fundamental truth of Gandhiji's life should be apparent in all that we might attempt to convey” (Attenborough, 1982: 68). Later, Indira Gandhi, who actually sanctioned the funds for the film, was also keen that the Government not interfere with the script, but “merely satisfy themselves that, related to the subject matter, the manner in which the film was envisaged was a proper one” (Hay, 1983: 86). After she had seen the film, a satisfied Indira Gandhi publically declared, “The film has captured the spirit of Gandhiji” (Attenborough, 1982: 228). Attenborough’s own aims were also clearly stated at the start of the film: “to try to find one's way into the heart of the man,” and to be “faithful in spirit to the record” (Hay, 1983: 87). In his review, noted historian of South Asia, Stephen Hay, shows how the film often took liberties with history, compressing, amalgamating, exaggerating, inventing, as the narrative need arose (1983: 87-88). Attenborough himself was quoted in the *New York Times* as admitting “we cheat[ed] like mad” in compressing and combining historical events (ibid: 90). But though the film was riddled with inaccuracies, it came across as being historically accurate and psychologically credible.

*Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006), in contrast, is not about the Mahatma’s life at all though it is most certainly about his *afterlife*. We might also consider it a hugely successful and popular attempt to represent Gandhi, but from a totally different style of filmmaking than Attenborough’s. Some might dismiss it as another Bollywood potboiler, with an improbable plot, full of strange happenings.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as we shall see, the film has much going in its favour. The basic story concerns the transformation of a lovable Bombay hoodlum called Munna, whose normal business is threat, extortion, “protection,” and other such illegal activities. However, he falls in love with the voice of a radio jockey named Jahnvi, who has a popular radio programme called “Good Morning Mumbai.” On the occasion of Gandhi’s birthday, she decides to run a special quiz on the Father of the Nation. Munna, wishing to impress her, kidnaps several professors and forces them to give him all the right answers. The result is that he wins the quiz and is invited to Jahnvi’s show. There, believing his bluff that he is a Professor of Gandhian studies, Jahnvi unexpectedly requests him to speak on Gandhi, his “favourite” topic, to some seniors in the “Second Innings House,” where she also resides. Munna now realizes that he must read up on Gandhi or face exposure. In the process of spending three days and nights at a Gandhi library, which no one else frequents, he begins to “see” Gandhi. This figure of Gandhi, whom he first thinks is a ghost, supplies him with the

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<sup>2</sup> For some hard-hitting criticism against the film, see Duara (2006) and Ganesh (2006).



answers to his and others' questions. Gandhi now promises to help him out during his talk at the Second Innings House." Of course, only he can "see" Gandhi so his secret is not revealed. But unknown to Munna, his sidekick and friend, Circuit, has accepted the commission of clearing the "Second Innings House" for an illegal takeover by a real estate tycoon, and the "villain" of the movie, Lucky Singh. This is how the plot unfolds, gradually "forcing" Munna to adopt Gandhigiri (the Gandhian way of doing things) as opposed to Gundagiri, or the gangster's way, all in order to woo his ladylove.

Despite such an improbable plot, I believe this film needs to be taken seriously for a variety of reasons. A purely practical one is its great impact factor. It is among the highest grossing Indian films, with a revenue of over 100 crores or a billion rupees according to Box Office India figures (boxofficeindia.com). Audiences all around the world, not only in India, loved it, going to see it several times. It won several national awards and was shown tax-free in Mumbai and Delhi. It now has regular reruns on TV and during flights, having become somewhat of a classic. That its subject is Gandhi, obviously, distinguishes it from other "hits" that performed similarly at the box office. That a Gandhian film could do so well is thus not just noteworthy, but invites further analysis. It was as if it became India's answer to Attenborough's *Gandhi*, but offered a new way of "doing" Gandhi in our times, suggested by the neologism it coined, "Gandhigiri." The film, moreover, inspired copy-cat instances of this method, with several reports of how one of its techniques, sending roses to adversaries, was successfully duplicated in many parts of the world. According to newspaper reports, the film caused a spurt in the sales of books on Gandhi and several schools organized group screenings (Zeeshan, 2006). Summing up its unusually strong impact, Sudha Ramachandran quoting from *Outlook* magazine, says, "*Lage raho Munnabhai* marks the magnificent, fun-filled return of Gandhi to mass consciousness."

The film was well-received and reviewed not just nationally, but also internationally. Amelia Gentleman in the *International Herald Tribune* lauded the film's special appeal and achievement; *Lage Raho* caused "real excitement" and became "the unexpected box-office hit of the year":

With its big Bollywood soundtrack and dance routines, the movie brings Gandhi firmly into the mainstream and theaters have been packed for the past three weeks. The Congress Party recommended that all party members see the film. The Delhi authorities declared that tickets to the film would be sold tax free because of its assiduous promotion of Gandhian values. (Gentleman, 2006)

Similarly, Mark Sappenfield of the *Christian Science Monitor* pointed out how the film was not piously preachy but a hands-on way of engaging with Gandhi: "Gandhi gets his hands

dirty. He appears as an apparition only visible to the wayward gangster, counselling him on how to help others deal with everyday problems” (Sappenfield, 2006). Swati Gauri Sharma in *The Boston Globe* wanted a version of Gandhigiri in the United States which “encourages people to take up Gandhigiri, Kinggiri, or Kennedygiri. If it worked for Bollywood, it could work for Hollywood” (Sharma, 2006). A few months after its release, a special screening of the film was arranged on 10 November 2006 at the United Nations. Introduced by the then U.N. Under-Secretary Shashi Tharoor, this was the first Hindi film to be shown at the U.N.O. Director Rajkumar Hirani, writer Abhijat Joshi, and actor Boman Irani were present as the film met with thunderous applause (Gits4u.com, 2006). As the Indo-Asian News Service (IANS) reported, “An evening that had started with massive security arrangements in the sombre UN setting, concluded in a festive atmosphere in the lounge of the UN with diplomats from other tables joining in raising a toast for the film” (Indo-Asian News Service, 2006). Eventually, the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, also got to see the film. He said it “captures Bapu's message about the power of truth and humanism” (Gits4u.com, 2006). The following year, on 15 June 2007, the U.N. General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution declaring 2nd October, Gandhi’s birthday, as the “International Day of Non-Violence” (Chaudhury, 2007). The film was also a great hit at Cannes and has been shown in university campuses all over the world.

But what is also remarkable is that it seemed to have been made with the conscious attempt to recuperate Gandhi for contemporary India, as its director Rajkumar Hirani said. He was shocked at how little Indians knew about Gandhi and this prompted him to do something about it. Hirani narrates an incident during the filming which to him was symptomatic of this ignorance. The boy who served tea on the sets kept asking for the name of the film, which was still tentative then, “Munnabhai Meets Mahatma Gandhi.” When told by the music director, Shantanu Moitra, the boy said, “*Munnabhai to theek hai, yeh Mahatma Gandhi kaun hai?*” [Munnabhai is fine, but who is this Mahatma Gandhi?] (Sen, 2006a). Hirani continues:

So this is the sad state of affairs today. I was shocked. And it's not just the *chai-wallah*. A few days ago on TV a lot of politicians were asked India-related questions on the news channels, and I can't believe a lot of them don't know October 2 is Gandhiji's birthday! Many didn't know his first name. They kept saying, “What's in a name, we respect his ideals,” but come on! How can you not know his name? (ibid)

Hirani plays on these incidents in the quiz in the movie where viewers are asked the name of Gandhi’s mother. Given the constraints of the medium, Hirani could not be overtly didactic; instead he had to create a story that would enable him to interpret and expound his own ideas of Gandhi: “If I stop you and say something about Mahatma Gandhi, you'll brush me off

saying ‘boring’. To preach is very boring, and nobody wants free advice. But if it's entertainment, then this changes. If you explain something to a kid through an interesting story, he'll be hooked” (Sen 2006b). But there is no doubt that given his sense of purpose, Hirani was repaying a traditional Hindu debt not just to his forefathers but also to the “Father of the Nation.” His act of remembering Gandhi was a way not just to pay tribute to, but to revitalize the Gandhian spirit as a way to reiterate current-day India’s connection with the Mahatma.

The writer of the film, Abhijat Joshi, himself a professor of English and Creative Writing at Otterbein College, Ohio, spent several years researching on Gandhi before working on the script for *Munna Bhai*. Joshi, growing up in Ahmedabad and imbibing a good deal of Gandhian ideas, actually wrote a screenplay for a TV series on Gandhi called “Post-dated Cheque.” This was a phrase that Gandhi himself had used to describe the promises of Dominion and autonomy in the Simon Commission’s proposals in March 1942, which he likened to a “post-dated cheque on a failing bank” (Frykenberg, 1972: 468). Unfortunately, Joshi could not encash his post-dated cheque; the project was abandoned. But he persisted in his pursuit of Gandhi inspired by some of the surviving freedom fighters he had interviewed in 1997: “These people fought hard for the country's freedom. They are also witness to the present sorry state of the nation, but they refused to give up hope” (Joshi, 2006). When it came to *Lage Raho*, Joshi shared the concern of the producer Vidhu Vinod Chopra and the director Rajkumar Hirani that the film not become too solemn: “It was important for us to dispel the myth about Gandhi being a sedate, ascetic person. We wanted to show his other side – witty, humorous, light-hearted and creative” (ibid). Thus, unlike some typical Bollywood film, *Lage Raho* is well-researched and has a serious academician as its script writer.

Bollywood, no doubt, does not pretend to be a realist cinema; instead, it is sentimental, not mimetic, but mythic, aiming at simulation (also stimulation) not fidelity. Hirani quotes one of his own lead actors, Boman Irani, who played Lucky Singh, about the kind of movie he was trying to make: “Boman put it very well that day, when he said that there are some comedies described as ‘Leave your brains at home when you go to watch this film.’ He said, ‘No, for this film take your brains with you; it'll touch you.’ And take your heart along too” (Sen, 2006a). That is why *Lage Raho* is as much about Bollywood as it is about Gandhi.

The film was a sequel to the immensely popular *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S*. The main character and his associate were already well-known, as was the antagonist, played once

again by Boman Irani. Given the compulsions of the star system, the main character could not be Gandhi at all, but the already popular Munna Bhai, the petty Bombay gangster, with a heart of gold. Gandhi, in that sense, is almost an “extra,” in this case quite literally a poltergeist if not extra-terrestrial. He haunts the lead character as a “ghost” or apparition, as he has done the whole nation since his death. Only in this film the haunting is made literal, actually shown on the screen in the form of Prabhavalkar who plays Gandhi. Furthermore, as the hero pretends to be a Gandhian, an expert on Gandhi, a professor, the whole film therefore becomes a Gandhian tutorial, disguised as mass entertainment. Bollywood, as I have always maintained, is not just a cinema of entertainment, but of edification.<sup>3</sup> Gandhi as a “haunting presence” in a corrupt post-colonial nation becomes an instantly recognizable and powerful tool for the director to bring out the ills of society and to propose solutions. Gandhi, as the film shows, is not so much an iconic external presence, but rather a “chemical *locha*” (dissonance), an internal, conscience-arousing, destabilizing force in the body politic. Such a representation brings to mind Sarojini Naidu’s eulogy on Gandhi’s death: “May the soul of my master, my leader, my father rest not in peace, not in peace, but let his ashes be so dynamically alive that the charred ashes of the sandalwood, let the powder of his bones be so charged with life and inspiration that the whole of India, will after his death be revitalised into the reality of freedom. ... My father, do not rest. Do not allow us to rest” (Naidu & Paranjape, 2010: 289). A Mahatma is not just a great soul, but someone who may be defined as more active and powerful after his death than when alive.

When we compare *Lage Raho* to *Gandhi* we see that the Bollywood blockbuster is not hagiographical, but practical; it is not about Gandhism, but *Gandhigiri*, a new coinage that signifies *doing* Gandhi in the real world. It shows how Gandhi the exemplar resists appropriation but invites transformation. The film is by no means naïve. It squarely shows modernity’s challenge to Gandhi. As the scenes with the psychiatrists are meant to ask, is Munna’s Gandhi merely a hallucination, easily dismissed as the hero’s pathology? Is the rest of corrupt society sane, while Munna is clearly in need of medical attention? Or is Gandhi much more than a hallucination—is he actually Munna’s and the nation’s “conscience” which once awakened, will never be silenced like Gandhi’s own still, small, but extremely insistent and powerful inner voice? Going by the action of the movie, Gandhi’s ghost cannot so easily be exorcised. Gandhi is not merely an illusion or a figment of Munna’s imagination, because he produces a chain reaction not only in Munna but in several other characters. Gandhi is a

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<sup>3</sup> See *Bollywood in Australia: Transnationalism and Culture*, edited by Andrew Hassam and Makarand Paranjape (2010) for a more detailed version of this argument.

positive force for change—the “conversion” of Lucky Singh (tribute to Bollywood’s power of make-believe) is his final triumph.

The import of this entertaining “tutorial” on Gandhi is thus nothing short of an enquiry into Gandhian praxis through a rejection of both *Gundagiri* (gangsterism), Munna’s original vocation, and Gandhism (*Gandhivaad*), Munna’s fake “profession” of Gandhian values. Through actual praxis, Munna makes Gandhi his own lived experience and reality, rather than merely spouting the Mahatma’s words. Munna becomes a neo-Gandhian himself, fighting Lucky Singh and the whole Indian establishment, which uses money and muscle power to rule over and exploit the disempowered masses. That is why, in the end, Jahnvi calls him the “best Professor ever” because Munna, like Gandhi, practices, and does not merely preach. In the film, both the instrumental use of violence and cynical lip-service to Gandhi are rejected in favour of a genuine “satyagraha,” insistence on the force of truth. In the end we realize that Gandhi is neither ghost, nor apparition, but an idea that will not be easily killed. In a deeper sense, Gandhi cannot be “framed,” boxed, contained, or packaged and the film testifies to his continuing relevance: “I was shot down many years ago,” says his character in the film, “but my ideas will not die by three bullets, my thoughts will create a chemical imbalance in some mind or the other. Either you put me inside a frame and hang me up on your wall or think over my thoughts.” Doing Gandhi (*Gandhigiri*), the film suggests, is the way that a new generation must think through Gandhi or put his ideas in practice. Indeed, this is the only way to “exorcise” his disturbing presence in our midst. Munna’s transformation is not from gangster to decent bourgeois, law-abiding citizen; it is from a violent thug to a viable *satyagrahi*, who also questions and struggles against bourgeois complacency and reaction. It is this demonstration of the viability of *satyagraha* in contemporary India that gives the film its more serious underpinning. Gandhism vs. Gandhigiri is actually doxa vs. praxis, therefore going to the very heart of the Gandhian project.

The appeal of *Lage Raho* is so special because it does not fetishize Gandhi but liberates him from statues and portraits, thus recuperating his energy to real-life struggles. Hirani does so in the comic as opposed to Attenborough’s solemn mode, thus humanizing and familiarizing Gandhi—hence Bapu, term of endearment, not Mahatma, a distancing honorific, is used throughout the film for him. Gandhi’s legacy is thereby harnessed to critique post-colonial India. Through multiple examples of corruption and callousness, *Lage Raho*, like Gandhi’s own *Hind Swaraj*, foregrounds the “condition of India” in our own times. It also shows how Gandhian efforts in non-violence and truth force can still help

transform the situation, if applied diligently, sincerely—and with good humour. If nothing else, the film shows how the afterlife of Gandhi still continues to influence and correct our conduct in contemporary India.

I have said that *Lage Raho* is as much a celebration of Bollywood as of Gandhi. That is because it is to the former that the credit for most effectively resurrecting the Mahatma should go, certainly much more than to Gandhians or academics. For Bollywood literally revives the spirit of Gandhi by showing how irresistibly he continues to haunt India today. Not just in giving us *Gandhigiri*—a totally new way of *doing* Gandhi in the world—but in its perceptive representation of the threat that modernity poses to Gandhian thought is *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* remarkable. What is more, it also draws out the distinction between Gandhi as hallucination and the real afterlife of the Mahatma, which is no illusion or pathology at all, but really the repressed conscience of the nation roused once again in the service of the nation. The film's enormous popularity at the box office is not just an index of its commercial success, but also proof of the responsive chord it struck in Indian audiences. But it is not just the genius and inventiveness of Bollywood cinema that is demonstrated in the film as much as the persistence and potency of Gandhi's own ideas, which have the capacity to adapt themselves to unusual circumstances and times. Both Richard Attenborough's Oscar-winning epic, and Rajkumar Hirani's *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* show that Gandhi remains as media-savvy after his death as he was during his life.

To this end, the film deliberately questions the fetishization of Gandhi, his appropriation by the state. It critiques the Gandhi of statues and portraits and banknotes, and instead recuperates his energy to real-life struggles. By making Gandhi if not its central character, at least its driving force, *Lage Raho* engages with the history of contemporary India going back to colonial times; to where we must go in order to trace the roots of the current Indian state. As an eloquent critique of the various corruptions and inefficiencies of post-colonial India, the film evokes Gandhi as an alternative and exemplar. The current state of affairs is shown to be deplorable; all three branches of the government, the executive the legislature and the judiciary, are shown to be either corrupt or hamstrung by bureaucratic and procedural bottlenecks. They are incapable of serving the needs of the common people of India, the *aam aadmi*, or of upholding the rights and dignity of the poorest of the poor. It is in such a scenario of all-pervading inefficiency, lack of accountability, and the consequent prevalent cynicism in society that we see the space for a “fixer” like Munna Bhai and an unscrupulous real estate developer like Lucky Singh. The latter wants to occupy and usurp

land and properties in Bombay and the former with his muscle power, obliges by evicting tenants, securing permissions, and smoothening irregularities. The strong prey on the weak in such a society as is evident when Lucky Singh takes over the “Second Innings House,” forging its lease documents and evicting its senior citizen occupants when they are on a holiday in Goa. It is a world in which pensioners are denied their right to livelihood because some corrupt official is sitting on their files in the hope of a bribe. It is a world in which municipal officers are kidnapped and released only when they agree to bend the rules or look the other way when rich builders and contractors violate the building laws and the zoning regulations. Every man has his price and the rich and the powerful have the ability to pay it.

In a telling scene, Munna’s endearingly loyal sidekick Circuit (short for Sarkateshwar—“lord of the beheaded”) tells Munna that he knows how to take care of Gandhi’s ghost: when Gandhi sees the “*durdasha*” (the degeneration) of contemporary India, he will flee right back into the books from which he has emerged to haunt Munna. Gradually the film shows Gandhi on celluloid, not so much addressing the nation as helping its contemporary citizens tackle their civic as well as social problems. Gandhi becomes an antidote, a way of countering some of the worst ills that plague India today. He thus becomes the means of not just critiquing post-colonial India but of improving it. Just as Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* started with a reflection on the condition of colonized India, *Lage Raho* uses the metaphor of Gandhi also to comment on and examine the condition of contemporary, post-colonial India. In choosing a low-life protagonist such as Munna and showing his gradual transformation into a *satyagrahi*, the film becomes a Gandhian text of struggle and hope.

I have been trying to argue that the film though aimed at popular audiences does not necessarily trivialize either Gandhi’s legacy or his thought. On the contrary it is a serious engagement with the Mahatma in the form of not so much a resurrection but his afterlife. The very familiar Mahatma becomes more than just a “familiar,” that is the friendly neighbourhood ghost, but an enduring, challenging and even vexing presence in the national consciousness. Literally he is a ghost that cannot be laid to rest. The film reminds us of Sarojini’s statement on Gandhi’s death. Gandhi does not allow us to rest but creates a chemical *locha* (dissonance) in our brains if we are to go by what happens in the film. Bollywood is not known for serious content. Indeed one might despair of the possibility of a profound engagement with any issue of note in a medium that is supposed to cater to the lowest common denominator and whose common currency is cheap and meretricious doling outs of clichés and trivialities. Indeed the central question for us in this film is, how authentic

is its treatment of Gandhi? Is it a fake and counterfeit sop to the masses, which may be cynically exploited for the masses? Is the film just about the marketing of the Mahatma?

My conclusion is that while the film does engage with Gandhian thoughts seriously, it cannot be pigeon-holed as a traditionalist or purist exposition either. The film, it seems to me, displays a great deal of ambivalence towards violence in its scheme of things, repeatedly showing the efficacy of violence and the defeat, at least partial, of non-violence. Instead of fetishizing non-violence, Munna Bhai looks at it as a part of a larger arsenal that needs to be employed to combat social evils and corruption. To that extent, the film's take on non-violence is less Gandhian and more in keeping with the traditional Sanatani practices. While the traditional expounds the dictum "*ahimsa paroma dharma*" (truth is the highest dharma), it does not rule out righteous violence altogether, especially, and as a last resort, according to the Mahabharata, when all other recourses have failed. Sanatana dharma, it would seem, espouses the ultimacy of non-violence even if it is somewhat ambivalent as to its immediacy; Gandhi on the other hand upheld both the immediacy and ultimacy of non-violence. Yet Gandhi also supported the use of armed forces to repulse the Pakistani mercenaries' invasion of Kashmir. So there does seem to remain a certain degree of doubt in the movie about Gandhi's non-compromising abhorrence of violence, either at the personal or national level. Munna Bhai, in contrast to Gandhi, seems to adopt a more contemporary, even practical approach, preferring non-violence, endorsing and espousing it, but not ruling out the use of mock-violence to threaten adversaries into submission, as in the climax of the movie. One is reminded of Sri Ramakrishna's advice to the snake that was converted to non-violence and found itself almost battered to death. The sage said to the snake "I asked you not to bite, but I did not ask you not to hiss." In Gandhi's world, both biting and hissing seem to be forbidden. The practice of *ahimsa* does not accommodate either. But as far as Munna is concerned, even if he has given up biting, he still retains the option of hissing rather effectively now and then, especially with the aid of Circuit. While it would be erroneous to conclude that the film merely instrumentalizes non-violence reducing it from a defining principle in action to a practical ruse, it would still be fair to say that its commitment to non-violence is neither as uncompromising nor as faithful as Gandhi's.

When it comes to the other foundational idea, truth, Munna Bhai shows a much greater consistence and adherence to it, quite in keeping with the Gandhian ideal. In fact if we were to go by the film's idea of what constitutes Gandhism, not just Gandhigiri, then it would be an abiding and enduring commitment to truth, both at the practical (*vyavaharik*) level and



the spiritual (*adhayatmik*) level. From Jahnvi's declaration at the beginning of the film, through Munna's admission that he is not the professor he pretends to be, to Simran's admitting that she is a *manglik* at the end of the film, it is truth that emerges as the highest value. To that extent, the film's understanding of Gandhi is centred more on truth than on non-violence. Thus we even get a contemporary adaptation of Gandhism for our times, where despite the exigencies, contingencies and temptations of a materialist-consumerist ethos, maintaining faith in truth becomes the way out of both the morass of individual inertia and civic dysfunctionality. Gandhian ortho-praxy is observed as an adherence to truth more than to non-violence: this becomes its defining characteristic. The afterlife of the Mahatma, then, is a call not just to non-violent action, but even more so to *satyagraha* in the original sense of the word, as an insistence on truth. The film suggests that we can repay our *rishi rn*, our debt to the Mahatma, by giving up a life lived in "bad faith" to achieve an existential authenticity which can only derive from the renewal of our commitment, both as individuals and as a nation, to truth. The film, in other words, reminds us that it is only when we walk the path of truth that we will attain Svaraj. When we turn our backs to truth, we will lose much that the founding fathers of our nation achieved through their struggle and sacrifice.

The film is therefore a uniquely creative exposition on neo-Gandhism. To be neo-Gandhian is not to parrot old shibboleths and slogans; it is not to imitate the external appurtenances of the Mahatma's life. Rather it is to become exemplars ourselves at whatever level it is given to us to do so. Munna Bhai is an exemplary re-definition of the efficacy of Gandhi in our times. That it made a lot of money only shows that Gandhi still sells; it does not mean that the film has merely and cynically commoditized him or has marketed a stereotypical version of him. For years I harboured the feeling that Gandhi was becoming more and more irrelevant to India, that we were turning our backs on him, that Gandhian institutions were declining, that Gandhians were dying out and the new breed of politicians using Gandhi as a smokescreen for their misdeeds had taken their place. But Munna Bhai has demonstrated in unexpected ways that it is not so easy to finish off the mahatma. That indeed his *afterlife* will continue to inspire if not haunt us for many years to come. Perhaps, the best recent example of this is the Aam Aadmi Party, a newly formed political outfit, which has ridden to power in the national capital territory of Delhi in 2014 on a wave of popular protest against the dominant political culture of the land.

I elaborated Gandhi's life through *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* because it shows us one way to counter the after-effects of Nathuram's parricide. The mass repression of the murder of Gandhi may be undone by his continuous resurrection through our own form of



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