

## The Glorification of Bhagat Singh

*A passionately-argued piece on The Legend of Bhagat Singh directed by Raj Kumar Santoshi. Santoshi's dismissal of Gandhi as an ineffectual leader in comparison to Bhagat Singh lacks conviction. The film offers no arguments to justify this belief, especially with several historians insisting that the twenty-four-year-old revolutionary Bhagat Singh's hanging in 1931 could not have been averted even if Gandhi had interceded on his behalf with the British.*

Even as time marches on, there is an air of intellectual stasis in our analysis and assessment of several critical questions pertaining to India's freedom movement. The differences between Gandhi and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Gandhi and Bhagat Singh, Gandhi and Veer Savarkar, Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar have only now begun to be discussed outside academic cloisters and political seminars.

Thanks to the series of feature films that have now been made on protagonists critical of the leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, we have begun to return to these historical questions in a broader area of debate than in the past fifty years.

Yet this is only the beginning of the re-evaluation of personalities and issues. Consequently, the arguments put forth on behalf of protagonists such as Bhagat Singh, Veer Savarkar, and Dr Ambedkar, and against M.K. Gandhi, are still imbued with the political folklore of the first half of the twentieth century.

The contempt with which Raj Kumar Santoshi's film *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* dismisses Gandhi—as a weak, ineffectual leader—is an attitude that has been maintained by Gandhi's critics ever since he took over leadership of the freedom movement led by the Congress. Over the last seventy-five years, Gandhi has been derided by the Communists, by Veer Savarkar and the Hindu Mahasabha, by the RSS and the Jana Sangh, by armed revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh, and by certain Dalit ideologues. As late as 1970, the Marxist film-maker Ritwik Ghatak described him as a 'suarr ka

*bachha*'. Raj Kumar Santoshi is not, therefore, being particularly courageous in his denunciation!

Gandhi aroused these fulminations for two reasons. First, he believed that only a long, protracted struggle that was an 'unarmed' political protest could overthrow the British India government. His politics was the politics of a centrist and so attracted the condemnation of all those who believed in extremist and militant politics.

Second, Gandhi refused to offer lip-sympathy to peers who disagreed with his political strategy. He was perhaps as bluntly honest as any extremist leader—a quality not generally appreciated in a centrist politician by educated Indians, who prefer that the right noises are made publicly, even if hypocritical.

Fifty-four years after Gandhi's death, fifty-four years after urban Indian society turned its back on Gandhi's ideas of economic development in village India, a half century after we dumped his concept of public morality and simple living, Gandhi's critics have kept Gandhi alive as a man, political leader, and social commentator. Ironically, this is something that Gandhians and Gandhites were reluctant to undertake after 1948, except when it was politically expedient for them.

Santoshi's film *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* blames Gandhi for not saving Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, and Rajguru from death by hanging. The film categorically states that if Gandhi had not signed the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of 1931, the British India government would not have carried out the death sentence against the three great revolutionaries. However, it offers no arguments to justify this belief. Nor does it offer any reason to show us why Gandhi did not move heaven and earth to prevent these executions.

*The Legend of Bhagat Singh* tells us that Bhagat Singh was consistently derisive of Gandhi's political beliefs and strategies. Indeed, as far as the revolutionaries of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) were concerned, Gandhi's *satyagrahas* and non-violent protest would never win Mother India its freedom from British rule.

Santoshi's film also declares that in the opinion of the HSRA revolutionaries, the freedom struggle led by Gandhi was little more than a 'stooge' movement, a placatory device suiting to the British Indian government. Yet Santoshi's film complains Gandhi did not do enough to save Bhagat Singh's life. Is that logical? If Gandhi and the movement he led were but convenient devices for the British rulers, would the British India government have set aside the three death sentences at the behest of its own political stooge? The emotionalism of Santoshi's film is understandable. It is a mere reflection of many common Indian's 'folklore' that Gandhi could have 'saved' Bhagat Singh if he had wanted to. This is presuming that there was nothing that Gandhi could not achieve; which again is illogical.

Film-maker Santoshi has done a disservice to the historical re-evaluation of the Gandhi-Bhagat Singh difference of opinion by simplistically projecting Gandhi as a convenient stooge of British India. Evidently, Santoshi has not read enough historical data in this connection. He seems ignorant of the fact that many a critic of Gandhi was supported in oblique ways by the British India government to be publicly critical of Gandhi.

The more important question is whether Bhagat Singh and the HSRA revolutionaries were correct in believing that only an armed revolution could free India or whether this was merely a passionate belief held by young revolutionaries? The facts are that the First War of Freedom in 1857, led by Jhansi Ki Rani, Tantia Tope, and others, was crushed by the East India Company; and armed revolts in various parts of the country were repeatedly put down by the British. After 1947, the communist armed struggle in Telengana did not succeed either. The insurgencies in Nagaland and the north-east have not won the secessionists the 'independence' they sought. Nor have General Musharraf's 'freedom fighters' made substantial headway towards their goal of '*azadi*' in Jammu and Kashmir.

Modern Indian history is replete with armed revolts that failed. It is simplistic, therefore, to believe that if Bhagat Singh had not

been hanged by the British rulers, he would have been proved right in believing that only an armed revolt could have won India its freedom.

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### Three Films about Gandhi

*A critique of three films made about Mahatma Gandhi in the last decade. The most nuanced portrait of Gandhi to emerge on the film screen is an indirect one, in a film on the great Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar, directed by Jabbar Patel. Richard Attenborough's Gandhi proffers a heroic Gandhi and Kamal Haasan's Hey Ram shows Gandhi only as a concept rather than as the dynamic man he really was.*

Three recent films in India have attempted a reconsideration and review of the personality of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi—Jabbar Patel's *Dr Balsehab Ambedkar* which has been running in theatres across India in 2001; Shyam Benegal's *The Making of the Mahatma*, an Indo-South African co-production of a couple of years earlier; and Kamal Haasan's *Hey Ram* which has been the focus of media attention for well over a year now.

Not just in contemporary Indian cinema but across the intellectual landscape of the country (if not the subcontinent), there seems to be a compulsion to come to grips with the political profile of an enigmatic man whose memory, some fifty years after his death, still seems to haunt the Indian intellect.

Perhaps the fourth and final draft of Sir Richard Attenborough and John Briley's script for the big-budget, Oscar-winning *Gandhi* (1982) was the opening of the floodgates. Attenborough descended out of the blue as it were in 1979–80 upon an India which had by then almost forgotten M.K. Gandhi, though official doles and

stipends were still being regularly collected by a mute but populous tribe of so-called Gandhites. And on the other side of the ideological fence, a hostility to Gandhi's supposedly soft stance towards Muslims (and Pakistan) still rankled in the heart of traditionalist Hindu ideologues.

It took close to twenty years after the international success of the Attenborough *Gandhi* before serious Indian film-makers could muster the pecuniary nerve to bring to celluloid some of their own perceptions about the man who had dominated the freedom struggle, whom the Indian political establishment then treated as a mythic figure who ought to remain above for critical review.

Indian film financiers and entrepreneurs were no doubt hesitant to invest in a subject which, in real terms, they felt was probably not within the scope of our film-makers. The Hindi version of the Attenborough *Gandhi* had a contorted, un-colloquial translation of the film's original dialogues and much of it was so abstruse as to quite escape the intelligence of those who went to see the dubbed Hindi version. The film did not have impressive grosses and this must have frightened off any thoughts about a fresh venture concerning M.K. Gandhi.

Not surprisingly, of the three recent films in which Gandhi's historical personality features, only one, Shyam Benegal's *The Making of the Mahatma*, relates primarily to Gandhi. Both Jabbar Patel's *Dr Balasaheb Ambedkar* and Kamal Haasan's *Hey Ram* focus on other aspects and personalities of recent Indian history. They touch upon Gandhi obliquely, on the sidelines of their primary subject.

In my opinion, as one individual filmgoer, perhaps the one that most effectively states its point of view on Gandhi is *Dr Balasaheb Ambedkar*. Gandhi figures briefly in the film, in the context of Dr Ambedkar's meetings with him and in the brief comment Ambedkar makes about Gandhi. As a bio-pic on the great Dalit intellectual and leader, Jabbar Patel's film has the commendable cinematic merit of brilliant simplicity. It sets out to lucidly re-enact the life story of Dr Ambedkar with a plausible ring of authenticity.

The history of the man's life and thoughts and his political activities is retold with conceptual finesse, dramatic alertness, detailed and impressive production values, and marvellous portraits by Mammooty (as Dr Ambedkar) and other members of the cast.

First-rate research on the subject and a finely tuned script by Sooni Taraporewala, Arun Sadhu, and other subject consultants enabled the director—along with his team of production advisers and consultants (including Shyam Benegal) and his lead players—to tell the story of Dr Ambedkar's life with some of the power of the man's own journey from a humble origin to his emergence as a national leader of substance and considerable achievement.

The sweep of the film's precisely structured narrative is complemented in terms of its cinematic drama by the fact that for most members of India's intelligentsia, the film also brings home unknown aspects of the history of our freedom struggle. It thus unveils aspects of events and people of which many of us were ignorant heretofore.

Dr Ambedkar's and Gandhi's conflict, their world views and political strategies, come across in the film as pitting two powerful, evenly matched public personalities representing diverse political forces against each other. It is for historians to evaluate the authenticity of this brief but meaningful confrontation between the two Indian leaders; but as a filmgoer one may say that there were shades to Gandhi's personality which we were generally not aware of till this film came to us.

The most telling lines in the film come from Gandhi himself, when he irascibly asks his aides, after his first encounter with Dr Ambedkar, 'Why didn't somebody tell me that Ambedkar is a Dalit?' It is a line in the script which opens much up to speculation—How would Gandhi have handled Ambedkar in that first meeting if he had known better his visitor's social identity? Then, we have Ambedkar's ambiguous reaction on being told of Gandhi's death—revealing Ambedkar's instinctive realization that with the death of Gandhi, he, Ambedkar, had lost the one upper caste Hindu

leader with whom he could have argued in the hope of persuading him to concede his own point of view: Gandhi had the courage no other upper caste Indian leader had, of taking a stand when convinced against mainstream opinion.

On the other hand, Kamal Haasan's film *Hey Ram* would, in my opinion, have been more cohesive if Kamal, as its scriptwriter, had wholly avoided bringing in Gandhi as a character in the film. Kamal Haasan's Gandhi is extremely one-dimensional, though the script intends its Gandhi figure to provoke the climatic turnabout in its protagonist, Saket Ram, the would-be assassin, who is intellectually overwhelmed by the sheer presence of his potential target.

*Hey Ram* would have stood out as a coherent statement and a dramatically integrated film if it had limited itself to the transmutation of an educated, Westernized archaeologist into a person haunted by a personal tragedy and sucked therefore into the vortex of revenge. There are sequences in the film that are outstanding in the repository of Indian political cinema. There is the depiction of the communal riot in Kolkata during which Saket Ram's first wife (played by Rani Mukherjee) is massacred, of Saket Ram's encounter and continuing dialogue with his new mentor, and his disturbing, tortuous transition into a would-be assassin.

Regrettably, this, the longer and predominant content of the film is set against a fleeting and rather inexplicable turnaround which is supposedly set off by the narrative device of the Gandhi figure. But why does Gandhi—or, rather the concept of Gandhi held in 1948 by the majority of the Indian people—prevail upon Saket Ram at the ostensible climax of his mission? This is a question that the film raises but does not analyse or answer. In terms of narrative drama, for over two hours the film's protagonist moves convincingly down the anti-Gandhi path. Then suddenly a generalization about the Gandhi of 1948 is thrown in and this is to be accepted as the pivot for the narrative's miraculous catharsis.

Kamal Haasan's *Hey Ram* ought to have eschewed the Gandhi character altogether, in my opinion. Or it should have developed

the Gandhi characterization with the fullness which would justify why one of Gandhi's would-be assassins turned finally into an obsequious clone of the man he wanted to gun down.

Kamal Haasan is unable to do any better than prop up a clichéd Gandhi as defined by jaded Gandhites. That, as modern Indian historians attest, and as Sir Richard Attenborough and John Briley's script so clearly delineates, was not the Gandhi who could inspire the greater number of the Indian masses participating in the freedom struggle. The Gandhi of the effete Gandhites, and of Kamal Haasan's script, could not have been the man capable of heading the freedom movement! Kamal Haasan's screenplay uses some of Gandhi's political statements in isolation, without being able to elaborate or suggest Gandhi's motives or the thought processes involved in the taking up of his political stances during that frenzied era of the subcontinent's Partition and its Independence.

In the post-Gandhi era, Gandhites have refused to analytically explain Gandhi's concepts and public stances and Kamal Haasan's screenplay errs in not being one better than them, seeking out its own comprehension of the man. In twentieth-century Indian history, Gandhi was too important a political personality to be represented sweepingly by a cliché in a film focusing largely on his intellectual opponents.

Shyam Benegal's *The Making of the Mahatma* has the merit of being the first public endeavour to scrutinize the complex, often antagonistic relations between Mohandas Karamchand and his eldest son, as well as to dwell on the all too human differences that occasionally erupted in the course of their marriage, between Gandhi and Kasturba.

The quintessence of Benegal's film, its subject, was and is extremely relevant to the contemporary Indian scene. Not just because it demystifies the personality of a man who has all too often been the victim of pseudo-intellectual deification by Gandhites but also because in contemporary Indian society the theme of antagonism between a public figure and his progeny is in itself a

theme of import and relevance. It is a social phenomenon which we need to understand for our own reasons, too.

Unfortunately, as has happened with some other Benegal films in recent times, *The Making of the Mahatma* does not quite achieve the dramatic impact it intends to. We are therefore left with only a partial and not wholly convincing denouement of the whys and wherefores of the very human conflict within the family of a public person, who is lauded by his followers in the outside world as an idealistic figure.

For what the opinion of a little man is worth, I would say that there will be other times and other films, when we may perhaps arrive at a fuller, more credible comprehension of what made Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

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### What Went Wrong with Bhansali's *Devdas*?

*A level-headed criticism of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's screen version of Devdas based on the novel written by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee in 1915. The piece was written days after the film's release and reveals doubts about it ever becoming a popular success. The doubts were unfounded. Devdas did roaring business despite its dodgy aesthetics.*

There is an axiom of literary criticism, expounded by the American scholar Yvon Winters, that should be posted at every film school in the world. Winters insisted that all poetry should make sense in terms of the living experience; even a poem written by T.S. Eliot or Gerald Manley Hopkins.