

Neta—Abhineta: Bollywood Star Power in Indian Politics

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[The Case for Speaking up](#) [Bibliography Acknowledgements](#) [Author's Note](#) Although politics has been integral to the film industry since its very inception, active political participation by film personalities is a comparatively recent phenomenon. The interplay of politics and cinema has always been curious and absorbing, but what makes this link truly unique in India is that the Indian political system is inherently conducive to a shift from a star-fan relationship to a politician-voter one. As a political reporter and a film enthusiast, I have always been fascinated by the presence of film celebrities in politics; not just in India, but across the world, particularly in the United States of America. In 1937, Ronald Reagan made his Hollywood debut in *Love Is in the Air*; in 1981, he became the fortieth American President, going on to win a second term in office, and holding the top post until 1989. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sonny Bono and several other American actors too have utilized their charisma and popularity to push socially desirable agendas from public offices; Schwarzenegger was the thirty-eighth Governor of California State (2003-2011) while Bono was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from California till his death in 1998. In the Indian context, several states came into existence after 1947 in a manner that led to a leadership void in several regions, especially in southern India. As M. Madhava Prasad observes in his seminal work *Cine-Politics: Film Stars and Political Existence in Southern India*, the emergence of star-politicians; such as M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), N.T. Rama Rao (NTR), M. Karunanidhi and Jayalalithaa; who went on to make a mark at a federal level is unique to the region. They owed not a little of their advent and evolution as hugely popular and influential leaders to their tremendous influence as stars of regional cinema. The genre of DMK films; became extremely popular whereby cinema was used as a medium to convey the message of social change and justice for socially and economically backward castes. NTR was loved by the masses, especially for his rhetoric of Telugu language and Telugu nationalism. In neighbouring Karnataka, Rajkumar was identified with his philosophy of protecting and preserving Kannada interests. It may seem that the entry of actors into politics took some time in other regions in India, but in reality the influence had been prevalent since before India's Independence. Prithviraj Kapoor and, later, Nargis Dutt drew wide acclaim on the grounds of their social work. Several of the causes they espoused were influenced by their unwavering belief in the idea of India advocated by the makers of the Constitution of India and in the politicians who led the nation. Superstar Amitabh Bachchan created a sensation when he humbled the towering politician Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna in their hometown, Allahabad, in the 1984 elections. Bahuguna had mocked Amitabh throughout the election campaign, questioning the presence of a *bhand* (jester) in politics. The erudite Bahuguna, who had been the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh twice, used to laugh at Amitabh's declarations of it being a no-contest election. That indeed turned out to be the case, though not quite in the way he had envisaged, with Amitabh winning 68.2 per cent of the

votes cast, thereby ending Bahuguna's political career rather abruptly. Sunil Dutt, Vinod Khanna, Shatrughan Sinha and the erstwhile television actress, everyone's favourite *bahu*, Smriti Irani too have proved their mettle as ministers at the federal level. Rajesh Khanna was a seasoned campaigner for the Congress party, holding public meetings and addressing crowds in every state and before parliamentary polls. Although he did not eventually become a minister, his parliamentary career was rather impressive. In his debut polls, he almost defeated the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stalwart L.K. Advani and then defeated BJP's Shatrughan Sinha. By the time the 16th Lok Sabha polls were held, 67 years after India's Independence, film stars had created a niche for themselves as able ministers and parliamentarians and become integral to the world's biggest democracy. This interlinking dates back to film-makers of the pre-Independence era. Throughout this book, I have laid down, with examples, theories and hypothesis, why I believe that Indian cinema, since its inception, has been political and deeply influenced by politicians, beginning with Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. The freedom movement, as described by historian Bipan Chandra, was one in which the socially downtrodden sought self-respect, women sought agency to voice their suppressed feelings and the young fought for autonomy. The Indian film industry reflected this collective aspiration; cinema was regarded by the masses as a universal medium that cut across caste, creed, gender, community and class, influencing all walks of life. Dadasaheb Phalke has often been quoted as saying, 'My films are Swadeshi in the sense that the capital, ownership, employees and stories are all Swadeshi'; a sentiment resonating with Gandhian ideals. Before Independence, Bombay's film industry had many major production houses headed by Mehboob Khan, V. Shantaram, Sohrab Modi and Devika Rani. As a film-maker, V. Shantaram remained steadfastly committed to meaningful cinema that espoused Gandhian values. *Amar Jyoti*, *Padosi* and *Do Ankhen Barah Haath* are a few examples of this. Sohrab Modi was another such figure whose film *Sikandar* was released when World War II was at its peak and the Indian political atmosphere was charged with the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi's Civil Disobedience and Quit India movements. Gandhian ideology influenced a host of film-makers, including Raj Kapoor, and is also very much alive today, as is evident in films such as *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*, *Maine Gandhi ko Nahin Mara*, *Gandhi versus Gandhi* and *The Making of the Mahatma*. Jawaharlal Nehru's socialist idealism too permeated the film industry deeply. When the Indian Constitution was drafted, presenting a range of individual rights that made India a socialist, democratic republic, Indian cinema rose to be the first institution that effectively highlighted the gap between the letter and the spirit of the Constitution. Raj Kapoor, for instance, whom many consider Hindi cinema's first star, showcased through his cinema how authoritarian families, conservative minds and obsessive attitudes were the main threats to the realization of a Nehruvian utopia. Another big name whose films documented Nehruvian India from 1947 to 1964 is Bimal Roy. According to film-maker Jahnu Barua, by some uncanny predisposition, the Nehruvian era coincided almost perfectly with Roy's cinematic predisposition. His films, such as *Do Bigha Zameen*, *Devdas*, *Sujata* and *Bandini*, all reflected the ideals of a young republic struggling with the harsh realities of poverty, despair, prejudice and injustice. While *Naya Daur* by B.R. Chopra and Mehboob's *Mother India* were odes to Nehruvian ideals, Ramesh Sehgal's *Phir Subah Hogi* and Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* critiqued the Nehruvian era and the loss of ideals by the end of the 1950s. When India fought wars in 1948, 1962, 1965 and 1971, film-makers adapted the events to the silver screen. The most memorable film on the war of 1962 is 1964's *Haqeeqat*, made with government assistance just two years after the war. It was essentially a dramatized account of the heroic resistance put up by the Indian Army against invading Chinese troops in the Ladakh region. According to journalist-writer, Sandeep Unnithan, it was the first full-length depiction of war in Indian cinema. Writing in *India Today* to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Indo-China conflict in 2012, Unnithan observed, '[For] Most Indians who remember, India and China went to war a half-century ago; the only movie reference [to this war is in] *Haqeeqat*, a black-and-white Hindi film made by Chetan Anand in 1964. The movie portrayed actor Balraj Sahni as the major of a company facing Chinese aggression. *Haqeeqat* was, however, silent about the war in Arunachal Pradesh, then known as the North East Frontier Agency

(NEFA), where an entire Indian division of over 15,000 soldiers had retreated. Cinema and the workings of the nation came together, especially in times of strife. This is evident in the efforts of Sunil and Nargis Dutt who toured war-torn zones to entertain jawans during the 1962 Indo-China conflict. The idea came to them when the Dutt presented Nehru with a cheque of one lakh rupees for the National Defence Fund, and Nehru spoke about the harsh conditions that the jawans had to live and serve in. Dutt proposed trips to the area to boost the morale of the forces and Nehru happily agreed. Indira Gandhi, who became the prime minister of India in 1966, continued to encourage the Dutt in these efforts. During the Indo-Pak war of 1971 that led to the creation of Bangladesh, Waheeda Rehman along with Pran and Shammi Kapoor, formed the Bangladesh Sahayak Samiti of Maharashtra with the express purpose of collecting funds with their cultural troupes. The group included Sunil Dutt, Nargis, Lata Mangeshkar, Kalyanji Anandji and many others. In December 2012, when Bangladesh honoured Anandji in Dhaka, he reminded the then Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of the time when women attending music concerts in aid of Bangladesh would, smilingly, remove their gold ornaments and give them as donation. In the 1940s and 1950s, Hindi films played a pivotal role in strengthening cultural diplomacy, particularly with the then USSR. In her article 'Bollywood Affair: How Indian Cinema Arrived in the USSR' in *Calvert Journal*, Deepa Bhashti recalls how in the 1950s and 1960s, Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand and Dilip Kumar elicited a fan frenzy that could be compared to the madness that followed the Liverpool boys and the Beatles on the other side of the world. She writes, 'Storylines that predictably swirled around the themes of sympathy for the oppressed, socialist egalitarianism and the triumph of good over evil resonated with Russians, whose only other option at cinema was the propaganda movies. When Raj Kapoor, and his later counterparts, romanced their heroines, they did so surrounded by the Swiss Alps and pretty flowers, in a manner that was depicted as wholly sustainable, even essential, in the pursuit of true love. It allowed a sweet path to escapism for a population otherwise fed on the state's idea of love for the motherland.' At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Bollywood film-makers woke up to the possibilities of real-life heroism of the country's freedom struggle, and films such as J.P. Dutta's *Border* and *L.O.C. Kargil*, Anil Sharma's *Hero: Love Story of a Spy* and other less-publicized ventures like *Maa Tujhe Salaam*, were released. There was the runaway success of the Partition-based love story *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* followed by a spate of films based on the life of Bhagat Singh, and Ketan Mehta's *Mangal Pandey*. In state politics too cinema played a fundamental role at multiple levels. While this book extensively covers the stars of the Hindi film industry, it does not extend its scope to the role played by the non-Hindi cinema and actors in politics; that is fertile premise for another book. A small introduction is given to hint at the broad and multifaceted interlinking between the film industry and state politics, focussing mainly on Tamil Nadu, and its neighbouring states Andhra Pradesh and the recently formed Telangana. MGR's assertion that arts and politics are two sides of the same coin was proved during the 2014 general election campaign when India's present prime minister, Narendra Modi, drastically different from its first, Jawaharlal Nehru, in terms of stature, ideology and style, mirrored one of the latter's strong political tactics when he succeeded in bringing together a wide array of film personalities for his political and social campaigns, a feat attempted successfully only by the first prime minister thus far. It seems that Modi was quick to understand that political leaders alone would be insufficient to get his message across to the masses. There was an undeniable pattern to be seen, as actors and actresses who performed in films and television soaps featuring Hindu mythological stories joined the BJP. Polly Dutta, author of a paper on the subject at the South Asian Institute, Heidelberg University, Germany, argues that these religion-mythology-based films and television serials reinforced religious beliefs in the lives of the people. Actor and BJP Member of Parliament Paresh Rawal offers a different perspective on this, 'There is a world of difference between being an actor who is revered and an elected representative who is accountable to voters. I can cite my own example.' Rawal recalls how people used to gather together in his campaigning days just to see him, or take selfies with him, or ask for autographs, but then quickly moved on to inquiring about the promises made during the

campaigns and the delay in getting things done afterwards. The aura and halo melts rather quickly, Rawal said, asserting that, once elected, there is no difference between an actor and a politician, as far as people's expectations are concerned. Rawal's stand has been reiterated by actress-turned-politician Hema Malini as well. The BJP relied heavily on star power in its attempt to project itself as a credible alternative to the Congress. The Congress was successful in drawing a vast pool of highly successful actors from Prithviraj Kapoor to Rajesh Khanna, but the 1990s saw established stars such as Hema Malini, Dharmendra, Vinod Khanna and Shatrughan Sinha joining the BJP. This caravan became bigger when Narendra Modi became a major player in national politics. A number of cinema artists, film-makers, directors, musicians and others joined the BJP bandwagon, seemingly viewing Modi as a messiah. Modi did not miss any opportunity in adding celebrity quotient to his flagship schemes, political campaign and key appointments. Soon after taking over as prime minister, he launched his dream project, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (nationwide cleanliness drive). A clean India would be the best tribute India could pay to Mahatma Gandhi on his 150th birth anniversary in 2019, Modi said while launching the campaign at Rajpath in New Delhi, on 2 October 2014. He invited nine leading film celebrities to join the cleanliness drive and requested each of them to draw nine more into the initiative. Many other Bollywood celebrities quickly expressed their support. Social media was flooded with messages supporting the campaign, with celebrities enthusiastically endorsing it. While in-house support from Anupam and Kirron Kher, Paresh Rawal, Manoj Tiwari and other popular personalities was always vocal and visible, the prime minister's photo-ops with the likes of Priyanka Chopra and Amitabh Bachchan provided heft to the drive. Also, at other levels, towering film personalities like Akshay Kumar, singers Sonu Nigam and Kavita Krishnamurthy, and others such as Salim Khan, Madhur Bhandarkar, Vivek Oberoi, Preity Zinta and Raveena Tandon extended support to the BJP on many sensitive issues. It has taken me six years to complete *Neta Abhineta*. In this book, I have made a modest attempt to tell the story of film actors who have tried their hand at politics, driven by a combination of factors, including, among others, illusions of grandeur, public adulation and selfless service. The book is not a history of Indian cinema, nor is it an academic exercise tracing the journey of film stars in politics, as there are dozens of brilliant academic books on Indian cinema that have ably covered that topic, catering to the needs of expert readers. Essentially, this book is for the audience who have had great exposure to Indian cinema, but might not be aware of certain facts, trivia and anecdotes. The tone is deliberately light, and I have made every attempt to keep my approach non-judgemental, so as to present a picture to the readers, not to colour their opinions. The selection of politically inclined film personalities for this book has been done on the basis of their presence in the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha. They are presented here in the chronological order of their appearance in Bollywood. The notable exception is Dev Anand, who has been included because he holds the unique distinction of having floated a political party in his time. The narrative also includes more recent trends of film stars giving voice to various causes that may not be political in nature but remain true to the spirit of democracy that is the foundation of India's political system. For reasons best known to them, many personalities featured in the book were not enthusiastic about giving formal and structured interviews. However, I am grateful to them for the warmth in their responses, their willingness to share off the record conversations and their informal go-ahead to access their personal websites and reference material on them. Utmost care has been taken not to incorporate the usual film-magazine gossip here, but if in the process of keeping the readers' interest alive any sort of *Laxman rekha* has been crossed, I hope I shall be forgiven.

[I IN THE BEGINNING one The Early Years](#)

The year was 1913; the venue, Coronation cinema hall in Bombay (now Mumbai), where Dadasaheb Phalke, who would come to be known as the doyen of Indian cinema, had just released the country's first full-length feature film *Raja Harishchandra*. Around this time, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was 7,045 km away from his homeland, carrying out his last political campaign in Durban, South Africa, where he had spent a good twenty years fighting for the rights of Indians settled in that country. Now, the lawyer from Porbandar was contemplating his return to India. On his way back home, Gandhi first travelled to England, where he was hailed for the first time as the Mahatma; or

‘great soul’– a title that became synonymous with his very identity for the rest of his life. Gandhi brought home with him the strategy of non-violent resistance that he had perfected in South Africa. It was a matter of pure chance that his return to his motherland coincided with the advent of Indian cinema, however, it was certainly portentous. His impact on films, although indirect, is considerable. And in order to understand the deep and complex relationship between cinema and politics in India, we must keep going back to the ‘Father of the Nation’. In the decade that followed the release of the first Indian film (1913–1922), over ninety films were produced in the country. Most of them were based on Indian mythology – an enduring theme that was also used quite liberally by Gandhi in his political and social discourses. In those days, cinema halls did not exist. Films would be screened in the open after sunset, with a tent covering the space where the ‘show’ was held. This arrangement called for considerable courage on the part of rural folk as they had to venture out after dark and return home late at night on foot, with no street lights to guide their way. Film historian, distributor, producer and writer Jaiprakash Chouksey was generous in granting more credit to the Mahatma than was probably warranted when he claimed that during the first phase of Indian cinema, the masses, especially from the working class, were emboldened to conquer their fear of the dark, primarily at Gandhi’s urging, and come out in droves to watch mythological movies across the country. He also argued that the Mahatma’s emphasis on religion and mythology in his political agitation against the British helped generate a great deal of interest in the films of that era. Gandhi’s political meetings would begin with multi-faith prayers, a practice that encouraged participants to respect religion and plurality – something the film-makers of the time leveraged to the hilt. Interestingly, given his influence on the moral values depicted in Indian films, Gandhi remained highly sceptical of the moral impact of cinema on the masses. Film-maker Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and several others tried their best to convince him otherwise. They argued that cinema was a force to contend with and could be used to advantage in disseminating his ideas, but a dubious Gandhi preferred to rely on the efficacy of print media. It is irony that the man who could not sit through *Ram Rajya* – the only film he was made to watch in 1944 – would turn out to be a source of inspiration for an entire galaxy of film-makers known for their meaningful cinema. In 1927, a questionnaire was sent to Gandhi by the Indian Cinematograph Committee. A Bombay daily sought Gandhi’s message on the occasion of the 25th year of Indian cinema. Mahadev Desai who was serving as Gandhi’s secretary, responded that Gandhi had no interest in cinema and a word of appreciation should not be expected. However, that Gandhi was not an avid film watcher had no bearing on a sizeable number of film-makers throughout history – from V. Shantaram to Rajkumar Hirani – who consciously worked Gandhian principles and teachings into their celluloid ventures. The Mahatma’s impact is evident in the work of many, from Dadasaheb Phalke to Aamir Khan. The films of V. Shantaram, Mehboob Khan, Raj Kapoor and, more recently, Vidhu Vinod Chopra, among others, dealt with the core themes of Gandhian ideology – non-violence, love and sacrifice, Hindu–Muslim unity, the rural–urban divide, rejection of crass commercialism, women’s emancipation and fear of moral decay. It was through their movies that Gandhi emerged as a towering moral force. While these film-makers may not have imbibed his ideas consciously, their films revealed his influence, all the same, and it became a guarantee for success. Gandhism was, after all, too dominant an idea for idealistic film-makers not to be swayed by it. Till the 1960s, at least, it made good commercial sense to permeate their films with the Mahatma’s ideals because of the adulation he enjoyed among the masses. Gandhi’s ideas about communal harmony, the need to eradicate untouchability and the transformation of evil into good through sheer moral persuasion resonated profoundly with the cinema-going audience. The era’s ethos of freedom, as described by historian Bipan Chandra, was not merely about the country’s liberation from foreign rule – the socially downtrodden sought self-respect, women sought agency and the young fought for autonomy. The Indian film industry was regarded by the masses as a universal medium that cut across caste, creed, gender, community and class, influencing all walks of life. Films based on related themes – and they were not insignificant in number – proved,

unsurprisingly, to be great successes. Even years later, film-makers like Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani, Rajkumar Hirani and Aamir Khan would become the proud torchbearers of Gandhian idealism. Debaki Bose was one of the thousands of students who heeded Gandhi's call. The son of a successful lawyer, he joined the non-cooperation movement and dropped out of college in the 1930s. He went on to produce *Chandidas* (1932), a film that was based on a love story between a Brahmin man and a 'low-caste' washerwoman. Gandhi's influence on the film, especially his views on untouchability and the coining of the term 'Harijans' ('children of God') to denote members of the Dalit caste in an effort to remove the stigma of their identity as 'untouchables', was unmistakable. Another significant film that bore the imprint of Gandhian teachings on untouchability was the Ashok Kumar starrer *Acchut Kanya* (1936). Around this time, an idealistic film-maker would appear on the scene. V. Shantaram was destined for a long innings, producing and directing several films, many of which bore an indelible Gandhian mark. His *Duniya Na Mane* (1937), originally made in Marathi, dealt with an incongruous marriage between a minor girl and an aged widower and was inspired by Gandhi's call to eradicate inequality in society. The film won critical acclaim and it was also a commercial success. Critics of that era lauded *Duniya Na Mane* as a 'daring attack on the treatment of women in Indian society' for being critical of child marriage and mismatched unions. In his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi wrote extensively against child marriage and mismatched union, 'It is my painful duty to have to record here my marriage at the age of thirteen. As I see the youngsters of the same age about me who are under my care, and think of my own marriage, I am inclined to pity myself and to congratulate them on having escaped my lot. I can see no moral argument in support of such a preposterously early marriage.' Gandhi also observed, 'A girl of fifteen can never be fit for delivery. A child born of such a girl is deficient in vitality. Our children are so sickly that bringing them up becomes a veritable job indeed, with the result that many children die within a year of their birth. Along with child-marriage, we should hold ill-matched unions responsible for the deaths of a great many infants. It is not at all surprising that the children of men who marry when they are no longer fit for marriage do not survive.' Films like these helped promote recognition of the growing role of women in modern Indian society, a theme especially espoused by the Mahatma. As a result, a large number of women emerged from the privacy of their homes to watch films like *Duniya Na Mane*, *Balayogini* (1937), *Sumangali* (1940), *Indira M.A.* (1934) or *Apna Ghar* (1942) and, according to Gautam Kaul, quietly endorsed the work of their men folk who were often to be found in the streets, participating in demonstrations and other political activities. In his article, 'Cinema and Freedom Struggle', published in the *Tribune* of 22 August 1998, the film historian wrote: 'Women also took to education in a big way. Certainly their new participation, contrasting [with] the earlier total absence from schools, was a new phenomenon. As this generation grew, it also began to work actively in the freedom struggle as field activists, courting arrests and undergoing jail terms which not many European women did.' According to Kaul, these films also reinforced national pride, challenging social taboos, antiquated customs, conventions and practices that had a negative impact on individuals and society. With Indian cinema of this era serving as a recorder of its times, *Bhakta Vidur* (1921), a silent film directed by Kanjibhai Rathod, was banned when the British censors felt that the character of Vidur, from the epic Mahabharata, spouted suspiciously patriotic dialogues, closely resembled Mahatma Gandhi and was too contemporary-sounding for comfort. *Udaykal* (1930) was a silent film starring Shantaram as Shivaji. It met with a similar fate as British censors saw in it an attempt to rouse modern-day feelings of patriotism while retaining the guise of a film with an innocuous historical theme. It was banned and no amount of revision to appease the censors could salvage it. However, by the 1940s, the British had relaxed this form of surveillance to some extent, allowing composer Anil Biswas and lyricist Pradeep to get away with the highly inflammatory song 'Aaj Himalaya ki choti se hum ne yeh lalkara hai; Dur hato, dur hato ae duniya walon Hindustan hamara hai ... (From the peak of the Himalayas we are warning other countries to stay away from India as it is our country)' in *Kismet* (1943), a film that, otherwise, had very little to do with the freedom movement. After cinema found its voice, Gandhi's message became bolder and easier to

interpret. The release on 14 March 1931 of the first Indian talkie, Ardeshir Irani's *Alam Ara*, would be followed, not long afterwards, by a serendipitous meeting in London between Charlie Chaplin and Gandhi in September 1931. Five years later, in 1936, Chaplin produced what was to eventually become a cult classic: *Modern Times*. Depicting the dehumanizing effects of the machine that was increasingly replacing manual labour, the film endorsed, in a way, Gandhi's opposition to rampant mechanization. In fact, several Chaplin films, notably, *The Kid* (1921), *City Lights* (1931) and *Limelight* (1952), championed the importance of human compassion in our lives, a theme that was central to Gandhi's philosophy. The fact that the first two films predated the actor-director's meeting with the Mahatma merely goes to show how uncannily similar the two men were in their perspective on life. The Gandhi-Chaplin meeting provides an interesting anecdote for Indian history. According to a programme on BBC Radio 4, 'Making History: Gandhi and Chaplin', the Mahatma was in London to attend the Second Round Table Conference and had refused to stay in a West End hotel, instead choosing to be with people from the working class at Kingsley Hall in East London. The Kingsley Hall Community Centre in Bow was run by Muriel Lester, a Christian pacifist who had visited Gandhi's ashram in India in 1925. She shared his political beliefs and his idealism. In her book *Entertaining Gandhi*, published in 1932, Lester tells the story of the Mahatma's visit and his meeting with Chaplin. 'One of my clearest mental pictures, she writes, is of Mr Gandhi sitting with a telegram in his hand looking distinctly puzzled. Grouped round him were secretaries awaiting his answer. As I came in, the silence was being broken by a disapproving voice saying, 'But he's only a buffoon, there is no point in going to meet him.' The telegram was being handed over for the necessary refusal when I saw the name. 'But don't you know that name, Bapu?' I inquired, immensely intrigued. 'No,' he answered, taking back the flimsy form and looking at me for the enlightenment that his secretaries could not give. 'Charlie Chaplin! He's the world's hero. You simply must meet him. His art is rooted in the life of working people, he understands the poor as well as you do, he honours them always in his pictures.' So, on 22 September 1931, at Dr Katial's house in Beckton Road, Canning Town, the local people were given the double thrill of welcoming both men. According to the same programme on Chaplin and Gandhi, hundreds of people crowded around the house to catch a glimpse of the famous visitors. Some even clambered over garden fences to look through the windows of the house. It was only a brief meeting, but it made the front pages of the newspapers. After it was over, Gandhi asked Chaplin, 'Would you like to see the demonstration of our prayers? But there is no room for you. You sit on the sofa; we will sit down on the floor.' Chaplin later wrote, 'Gandhi and his men did not feel embarrassed to sit on the floor in front of me but I literally felt embarrassed to sit on the sofa and look down upon Gandhi and his colleagues.' In his book *Chaplin in the Sound Era*, Eric L. Flom would provide more details of the meeting. 'Curiously, they discussed the impact of machinery on human life,' he writes. 'Chaplin recalled saying, 'I should like to know why you are opposed to machinery. After all, it's the natural outcome of man's genius and part of his evolutionary progress. It is here to free him of the bondage of slavery, to help him to leisure and higher culture.' You must progress like the Western world. Sooner or later you will adopt machinery.' Gandhi accepted his criticism graciously and, many years later, Chaplin would use the discussion and his comments about the absurdity of the machine age in his film *Modern Times*. Joyce Milton in her book *Tramp: The Life of Charlie Chaplin* quotes the actor telling Winston Churchill, (in 1931, when Churchill was in a political wilderness) 'The Gandhis and Lenins do not start revolutions. They are forced up by the masses and usually voice the wants of a people.' Premen Addy, a visiting tutor in Modern Asian History at Kellogg College, Oxford, wrote in the *Hindu BusinessLine* on 30 July 2002: 'There was enjoyment and laughter on the faces of the Great Soul and the Immortal Tramp. Gandhiji knew nothing of Chaplin's world, and Chaplin had no special knowledge or understanding of Gandhiji's. But they were kindred spirits drawn instinctively to each other by a common concern for suffering humanity and a shared sense of fun. They both loved a good joke, and one at their own expense was to be

relished most of all. The Gandhian imprint was also apparent in films based on women's emancipation, marking a significant departure from the way the growing industry had progressed till then. Shantaram's *Amar Jyoti* (1936), for instance, dealt with the heroine's revolt against her alcoholic husband, marking a trend in a period during which a large number of women had cast off the yoke of social restrictions to take part in the freedom movement. Though it was a period film, the heroine's resistance to extreme patriarchal laws was the central plot of the film. The 1940s witnessed an unusual development in the Indian film industry due to the arrival of share-market player Chandulal Shah, who was instrumental in commercializing cinema. His ventures also marked a clear departure from the mythology-based films that had previously enjoyed a dominant position. Almost simultaneously, Indian cinema acquired an element of glamour with the launch of the film magazine *Cinevoice*, on 7 June 1947, at the central hall of Taj Mahal Hotel, Bombay. The publication introduced the concept of cover girls in Indian film magazines, with a stewardess from Air India, the country's national airline, gracing the cover of its inaugural issue. Shantaram had, in the years leading up to this breakaway trend, remained steadfastly committed to meaningful cinema that espoused Gandhian values and Chandulal Shah's advent made no difference to his vision as a film-maker. His film *Padosi* (1941) was a strong plea for Hindu-Muslim unity, another powerful message from the Mahatma. *Do Anken Barah Haath* (1957) is also considered a quintessential Gandhian film. Inspired by the Mahatma's ideals, the jail warden in the film sets out to reform six hardened criminals, sacrificing his life in the pursuit of his noble mission. There were others who shared Shantaram's worldview and cinematic convictions. A few years earlier, Sohrab Modi's *Pukar* (1939) had created a major flutter, depicting Emperor Jahangir's readiness to redress the complaint of a poor Hindu woman against his beloved wife Nurjehan's transgression by offering to lay down his own life as a form of atonement. But the most revolutionary film of the times was, perhaps, Mehboob Khan's *Roti* (1942), which strengthened Gandhi's cause by subtly exposing the divide-and-rule policy of the British. *Najma* (1943), another of his films, was way ahead of its time. Within its larger context, where ill-fated lovers were married off against their will to partners chosen by their respective families, it depicted a progressive Muslim woman defying the diktat of her community and opposing the veil. Eventually, she manages to convert her conservative in-laws to her point of view. Though not a self-avowed Gandhian, the films made by Modi's production house Movietone at his studio Minerva dealt with contemporary social issues like the evils of alcoholism (*Meetha Zahar*, 1938) and women's rights (*Talaq*, 1938). Shocking for its time, *Bharosa* (1940) incorporated the themes of forbidden love, incest and single motherhood. *Sikandar* (1941) depicted the life of patriot king Porus and his courage in battle against the mighty Alexander the Great. Released when World War II was at its peak and the Indian political atmosphere was charged by Gandhi's civil disobedience movement, the film's nationalist appeal was heightened by the histrionics and declamatory dialogues of its two main actors Prithviraj Kapoor and Sohrab Modi. Although the Censor Board (replaced by the Central Board of Film Certification which formed in 1951, but is still popularly referred to as Censor Board) in Bombay had given *Sikandar* an all-India screening certificate, the British authorities banned it in some theatres that served army cantonments. The film turned out to be a huge box-office draw, with the *American Motion Picture Magazine*'s October 1941 issue describing it as a 'million rupee movie marvel' and a 'great epic of a great epoch'. In 1953, Modi made a film on the legendary Indian warrior queen who had taken on the might of the British in the 1857 war of independence, also referred to as the Sepoy Mutiny. In *Jhansi ki Rani*, Modi would interpret history on a grand scale after undertaking arduous research on the subject and allocating a lavish budget for the making of the film. According to Amrit Gangar in his book *Sohrab Modi*, published in 2008, the film-maker reminisced while reflecting on the central protagonist of his biopic, 'When I read her history, I wondered how a woman barely 20 years of age could stand against the mighty British Empire of those days. She told the British, 'I would not give you my Jhansi'. Bravo! What character and courage that woman had! This way, I made pictures on historical personages and tried to evoke great historical

memories in the collective mind. Gangar had many more interesting details to offer on the film. *Jhansi ki Rani* was India's first Technicolor film shot in 35 mm. Although Modi and American cinematographer Ernest Haller had visited Jhansi on a location-scouting trip, the film was ultimately shot in Mhow, Madhya Pradesh. For the sake of authenticity, Modi used real weaponry in the film, hired from the Indian Defence Ministry at a cost of Rs 66,000, an amount he deemed excessive, particularly as *Jhansi ki Rani* was dedicated to the country's historical past. The eponymous role was played by his wife Mehtab. The film-maker himself had a role in the film, alongside those of other known actors of that era such as Ulhas, Mubarak, Sapru, Khote and Nayampalli. Sadly, the film which went on to win both Gold and Silver President's awards, failed to connect with the audience and proved to be a costly misfire for Modi. Nationalism was very much a part of our consciousness when India fought wars against hostile neighbours in 1948, 1962, 1965 and 1971. Film-makers of the time mined these events for their inherent dramatic potential and catered to the country's patriotic sentiments by adapting them for the silver screen. *Haqueeqat* (1964), made with government assistance just two years after the war with China, was essentially a dramatized account of the heroic resistance put up by the Indian Army against invading Chinese troops in the Ladakh region. That cinema and the workings of the nation came together, especially in times of strife, is evident in the efforts of Sunil and Nargis Dutt who toured war-torn zones to entertain jawans during the 1962 Indo-China conflict. Fellow artistes, like Lata Mangeshkar, Kishore Kumar and Waheeda Rehman, joined Dutt to do the same. Indira Gandhi continued to encourage the Dutt in these efforts. During the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war that led to the creation of Bangladesh, actress Waheeda Rehman, along with her colleagues Pran and Shammi Kapoor, formed the Bangladesh Sahayak Samiti of Maharashtra with the express purpose of collecting funds with their cultural troupes. From the time of Nehru's death in 1964 to the Emergency imposed on the country by Indira Gandhi (1975-76), Mahatma Gandhi's influence would retain its hold on Indian society, manifesting itself not only in patriotic films, but also in those remarkable ones inspired by bold social themes, the most representative among them being *Guide* (1965) and *Satyakam* (1969). The process of economic liberalization in the early 1990s introduced certain hedonistic changes in the cinematic preferences of the masses. The Mahatma's ideal of simple living and high thinking was no longer as abiding an inspiration for the cinema-going public as it had once been. Declining interest was increasingly evident in the low viewership for films on Gandhi. While an earlier film on the Mahatma, Sir Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982), had turned out to be one of the most successful international films ever made, the times were changing. Fourteen years later, *The Making of the Mahatma* (1996) by Shyam Benegal turned out to be a commercial failure. Kamal Haasan's *Hey Ram* (2000), with Naseeruddin Shah in the role of Gandhi, also proved to be a flop. Gandhi, however, would be reinvented and his image resurrected by Rajkumar Hirani. With his film *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006), the director gave an irresistible contemporary twist to the Mahatma's message that caught the imagination of the masses. In fact, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, Bollywood film-makers began waking up to the possibilities of real-life heroism in the country's freedom struggle. Certain films focussed on nationalism, projecting a negative image of neighbouring Pakistan with whom India had fought three wars. These films include J.P. Dutta's *Border* (1997) and *LOC Kargil* (2003), Anil Sharma's *Hero: Love Story of a Spy* (2003), the Farhan Akhtar-directed *Lakshya* (2004) and other less-publicized ventures like *Maa Tujhe Salaam* (2002). The runaway success of *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), a Partition-based love story, was followed by a spate of films on Bhagat Singh. Ketan Mehta's *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005) was also released around this time. *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* did a net box office business of Rs 10 crore over the long 4-day weekend around August 15, 2005 in spite of getting indifferent reviews and let-down feelings surrounding the movie. Mehta was contemplating making two more films to complete the trilogy on the heroes of the 1857 war; one on Lakshmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi, and the other on the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. The first, *Rani of Jhansi: The Warrior Queen*, that was supposed to star actress Kangana Ranaut in the title role, never did take off. There are reports that due to a disagreement with Mehta on the script, the actress dropped out of the project, only to accept the offer of playing

the same role in a biopic on the queen titled *Manikarnika: the Queen of Jhansi* helmed by Telugu director Krish. Her move apparently prompted Mehta to send her a legal notice for hijacking his dream project. As for his avowed intention of making a film on Bahadur Shah Zafar, nothing further has been heard on the subject. The revival of Gandhian nationalism in Indian cinema of the twenty-first century, along with the positivity that drove it, was a heartening phenomenon indeed, coming as it did in the wake of declining interest in the Father of the Nation, a trend apparent in the films of the 1990s. Ironically, that optimism had been absent from the films that were made in the wake of Independence, a period that had begun on a note of abiding optimism. Indian cinema of that era reflected, instead, the despair, disillusionment and anger of the country's suffering citizens, faced with a grim economic scenario following the end of colonial rule.

[two Cinema and the Building of a Nation](#) Given the initial euphoria surrounding India's independence that had ushered in new aspirations for its people, few anticipated the problems that lay in wait for them. The future looked promising. Almost overnight, the Indian Constitution had granted a range of fundamental rights to all citizens and declared the country a secular, socialist and democratic republic. Being, in some ways, ahead of its times, it also provided a seamless link between tradition and modernity. Its implementation, however, left much to be desired. The era's socio-economic milieu was reflected in Indian cinema, with films laying bare the country's dire problems. The economic scene in 1950 was grim. The country's population was around 360 million while the rate of literacy was barely 18 per cent. Per capita income was no more than Rs 1,127. Most villages lacked motorable roads and electricity. Railroads covered a mere 54,000 km of the vast country. Banks had about 5,000 branches in all. Till 1969, only State Bank of India was not privately owned. Fourteen major private banks held over 70 per cent of deposits while catering to the large industries and businesses. Agriculture, as a sector, was largely ignored. From 1950 to 1967, only 2.2 per cent of the bank loans were given to farmers. Pricing policy was based on administered prices as India continued with tight war-time controls on prices and movements of most essential commodities. As a result, the country's citizens had to face major problems like cost and pricing, as well as discriminatory and dual pricing because of the absence of free trade and alternative options. Even film material, equipment and so on had to be purchased at more than the market price and that too with government approval. Industrial policy was introduced at the same time, drawing on the principles of licensing and clearances, with the focus on a centralized investment policy. Agrarian policy was founded on irrigation and land reforms. Labour and employment policies were based on monopolized government-owned insurance agencies, with social-security provisions being made for organized labour. While high on ideals, all these institutions were low on delivery. In the circumstances, it was Hindi cinema that rose to the occasion, turning out to be the first effective medium through which the discrepancy between the Constitution's letter and spirit was highlighted and attention brought to bear on the agricultural and rural sector. The two non-mainstream films that sought to bring these economic problems into focus were both surprisingly released in 1946, just a year before Independence: Chetan Anand's *Neecha Nagar* and film-maker and writer Khwaja Ahmad Abbas's *Dharti ke Lal*. Writing about *Neecha Nagar*, Sumita S. Chakravarty observed in her book *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-87*: 'The central image is that of water, the source of life, contaminated by big industry and turned into a life-threatening hazard for the poor. The pollution of water is both the effect and the analogy of bourgeois oppression of the working class. The world depicted in this film is separated into *ooncha nagar* (upper town/ area) and *neecha nagar* (lower town/ area) inhabited by the very rich and the struggling poor, respectively. The source of conflict between these groups is a dirty stream that a rich industrialist known as Sarkarji (Your Lordship) is diverting to pass through the poor section of town so that new houses can be constructed in the cleaned-up upper section.' In *Dharti ke Lal*, the focus was on the human dimensions of the devastating Bengal famine of 1943 that had led to the death by starvation of about three million people. In Abbas's film, however, the British were not depicted as the sole oppressors and perpetrators of this monumental disaster. Several Indian characters — moneylenders, landlords and grain dealers — were also deemed responsible for the great human tragedy.

The film seems to have missed out, though, on the government's role, involving restrictive regulations and controls, in contributing to it. Economist Oktay Yenal had argued in *Freeing Agricultural Markets* that in theory, these controls might have been justified on the grounds of providing protection to the poor, but in actual fact, the farmers would have greatly benefited, had their productive resources of land, labour, capital and technology been available in the free market. Deeply inspired by Nehruvian ideals, the film's director K.A. Abbas would contribute in a myriad ways to the Indian film industry, though his foray into film-making and film direction began in a rather unexpected manner. While working as a film reviewer with the *Bombay Chronicle*, Abbas had been forthright in his criticism of the films made by the era's reigning producers and directors. Stung by his comments, they would throw him a challenge to beat them at their game. In response, Abbas began writing scripts and directing and producing films himself. He also directed films for other producers and for the Children's Film Society. There were, moreover, the short films he wrote, produced and directed for his own Naya Sansaar Trust and the Films Division, along with those he wrote and directed for National Education and Information Films. He also produced and directed television films for T.V. Centre, Bombay, and wrote stories and screenplays for the films of other producers. In addition, he wrote ceaselessly on Indian cinema and on his experiments on the silver screen. Khwaja, as he was endearingly known among his friends, devoted 41 years of his life to film-making, pursuing, all the while, India's socialistic aspirations and Nehruvian aesthetics. In *Abbas and Nehruvian Aesthetics in Indian Cinema*, journalist and human-rights activist John Dayal describes how Khwaja had become involved in mainstream cinema as a scriptwriter and made a seminal contribution by giving actors a specific image. 'Awaraz' created the now legendary Raj Kapoor's hobo image; he writes. 'Dharti ke Lal' sloganeered unity despite famine, *Saat Hindustani* gave Amitabh Bachchan and then Mithun Chakraborty [in], *Do Boond Pani* a new development *verite*. *Munna* [introduced] a new concept in cinema with the [role of the] child, [and] even *Bobby* [brought in] some sort of a new romanticism, and above all, [there was] *Shahar aur Sapna* (The City and the Dream) which, despite the technical limitations of its time and the honest naiveté of its maker, remains one of the most worthwhile pieces of realism and social comment in Indian cinema... When *Munna* was released, Abbas was witness to an incident involving both Nehru and his daughter Indira that left a mark on him. It is particularly relevant to our times, considering how often present-day politicians are in the news for their unaccounted wealth, flashiness and extravagance. In his book *That Woman: Indira Gandhi's Seven Years in Power*, published by Indian Books Company in 1973, the film-maker relates how in August 1954, he had just screened *Munna*; the industry's first Hindi film that did not feature a single song; for a select audience that included Nehru. Nehru was apparently so moved by child star Master Romi's performance that he invited him home for breakfast the next morning. Abbas then asked Nehru if the entire unit, including the other actors and technicians, could accompany Romi. Before answering him, the then prime minister called up his daughter Indira and asked her in an undertone, 'Indu, have we got enough cereal and eggs to invite this whole gang for breakfast?' When Abbas met her later and asked why she had failed to come up with an outright 'yes'; in response to her father's query, her reply surprised him greatly. 'It's no joke running the house of a hospitable and large-hearted man like my father on the fixed salary that he gets!'; Indira, who managed her father's household at Teen Murti Bhavan, reportedly told the film-maker. She went on to add that there were times when the prime minister's salary was insufficient to cover even the grocer's bills. Moreover, at the end of the year, Nehru invariably owed a substantial amount of money to various creditors. The accumulating debts were paid when the prime minister received his annual royalties from the foreign publishers of his various books. Personally, as reflected in his writings, Abbas remained a strong advocate for uniting the communist movement with the Indian national mainstream, as represented by the Congress. But as a film critic for popular newspapers of the day, Khwaja identified social relevance and critical realism as the mainstays of any kind of cinema, particularly of an emerging tradition like India's. Craftsmanship, he decided, had to take second place to the message and not

become a vehicle for indulgence. Eventually, of course, the starkness of his films and their lack of technical finesse and technological exhibitionism was as much an outcome of his convictions as of the fact that he did not have the money to splurge on gilding the substance. His first three films, of which he was either the writer or the director, served as a platform for unreservedly articulating his concerns. His visit to China inspired him to write about an Indian who had joined Mao in the Long March of 1934; *Dr. Kotnis ki Amar Kahani* was directed by V. Shantaram, who also played the eponymous role in the film. Shantaram's distinctive brand of acting and the theatrical roots of his direction may make the film seem somewhat stilted in retrospect, but Khwaja's script reflected Indian political aspirations with rare strength and integrity and showcased Asian solidarity in the struggle for freedom and secularism. Abbas also wrote a film for Raj Kapoor that would change the course of Indian cinema history: *Awara* (1951). Though its roots can be traced to the Chaplinesque 'strong little misfit', they were also embedded in Nehru's slogan of equality and socialism which allowed the poor to not just dream, but aspire. The story of a poor man in love with a young woman from an affluent background was reinterpreted as a socialist document. An inspired Raj Kapoor synthesized Khwaja's script with some sterling poetry and music, introducing, along with them, a rare lyricism. The reasons for the ineffectual implementation of the key points laid down in the Constitution were brought to the fore in films featuring the era's leading stars. Raj Kapoor, for example, highlighted the crisis of the system, addressing himself to the rationale of the cinema-going masses. Dev Anand, for his part, took on the theme of corruption, exposing the double standards of those occupying high positions and the callousness of people in power. Unlike Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru was an avid watcher of films. His passion turned out to be a blessing for the industry, as other influential leaders of the time, such as C. Rajagopalachari and Morarji Desai, were not interested in encouraging the growth of cinema, viewing it as a dark world wallowing in sin. The Censor Board in those days was unduly strict and the entertainment tax imposed on films was as high as 150 per cent in certain states. But these odds failed to daunt film-makers or hold back film production. Nehru's cabinet colleague Dr Balakrishnan Vishwanath Keskar who held the information and broadcasting portfolio, was personally responsible for blocking *Ganga Jumna* (1961). Keskar's dislike for Hindi cinema was so intense that at one point he had banned film songs from being played on All India Radio (AIR). The ban had resulted in Radio Ceylon becoming a commercial success as it broadcast popular filmi songs. A Maharashtrian Brahmin, Keskar, who had worked at Kashi Vidyapith, Banaras, was also responsible for banning cricket radio commentary and harmonium on AIR. In his opinion, the mission of the public broadcaster was to encourage only classical music. In spite of these aberrations, Nehruvian socialism as a theme appealed to many film makers, especially in the initial years after Independence. Nehru was, in fact, the darling of the masses and the socio-political milieu of the time was suffused with optimism. At the same time, the undercurrent of Gandhian idealism continued to motivate film-makers like V. Shantaram. Consider *Dahej* (1950), his film on dowry, which rather melodramatically depicts the heroine's suicide following her impoverished father's failure to satiate the greed of her in-laws. Kedar Sharma's film *Jogan* (1950) went a step further; in the film, a debauched landlord is seen marrying off his beautiful and talented sister to a wealthy family in the hope of improving his own desperate financial situation. The heroine, however, rebels against her brother's machinations and renounces the material world to become a *jogan* - an ascetic. Rising to prominence around this time was Bimal Roy, whose films document Nehruvian India from 1947 to 1964. According to Jahnu Barua in his essay 'Bimal Roy: The Humanist', which features in the compilation *The Man Who Spoke in Pictures*, edited by Rinki Roy Bhattacharya, by some uncanny predestination, the Nehruvian era coincided almost perfectly with Roy's cinematic career. His films, which included *Do Bigha Zameen* (1953), *Devdas* (1955), *Sujata* (1959) and *Bandini* (1963), all reflected the ideals of a young republic struggling with the harsh realities of poverty, despair, prejudice and injustice. As an artiste, Roy was deeply influenced by Italy's neo-realist cinema. At the same time, he was in tune with the aspirations of a young India in transition. His protagonist Shambhu in *Do Bigha Zamin* is caught in a situation laden with irony; he loses his land, because the agrarian reforms proposed

by the government to protect farmers like him from the prevailing Zamindari writ that has, for years, empowered the landowner to usurp any plot of land at will, have yet to be legitimized by law. As the film draws to a close, the land is auctioned off and the plot that had once belonged to Shambhu ends up as an industrial estate. The poor man is shown lost in contemplation, a fistful of soil in his hand. By going back to the village at the end of the film, Roy establishes a powerful connection between the feudal exploitation of villagers and urban poverty. His *Devdas* (1955), essentially a love story, is presented, on the other hand, from the perspective of the landed gentry. The 1950s were also marked by three developments of widespread significance for the film industry: the holding of the first international film festival, former Congress leader and three-time mayor of Bombay S.K. Patil's report on the industry and the screening of the classic film *Awara*. The Nehru-led government amended the Cinematograph Act of 1918 to control the screening of films for the public, creating a new Board of Films Censors, setting new guidelines on the classification of films for public screening and introducing new controls on the release of film raw stock and equipment for film-making. In 1955, *Pather Panchali*, a film directed by Satyajit Ray and produced by the Government of West Bengal, but shot in phases due to the paucity of available funds, altered the grammar of Indian cinema. Ray made a total of 28 feature films until his death in 1991. By introducing the element of realism, so integral to the writings of noted Bangla authors on which he based his films, Ray would make an unrivalled contribution to Indian cinema and leave a lasting impact on the directors who followed in his wake. Coincidentally, in 1952, the work of another novelist was adapted to screen. S.S. Vasan made *Mr. Sampat* based on R.K. Narayan's 1949 novel *Mr. Sampath*; *The Printer of Malgudi*. The film was a social satire and received rave reviews, but failed commercially. It was, however, Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), an eternal classic of India cinema bearing the imprint of Marxism and Gandhism in equal measure, that would be regarded as the most trenchant and shocking exposé, by far, of the Indian peasantry's wretched plight. Brought up in a Gujarat village, the director revealed a special affinity for the earthy lifestyle of the country's rural folk, not unusual in a man whose story was the quintessential rags-to-riches one. The illiterate son of a small-time shopkeeper in Baroda, Mehboob arrived in Bombay with precisely three rupees in his pocket. Starting his career as a junior artiste in a film studio, he eventually rose to become a director in the same company. There are many views about the source of his film *Mother India*. Some maintain that it was inspired by *The Good Earth*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by American writer Pearl S. Buck, published in 1931, that would become an influential factor in its author being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature seven years later. Others claim, however, that Khan, who had made *Aurat* in 1940 with Sardar Akhtar, Yakub and Surendra, was driven by the urge to remake the same film as *Mother India* in a bid to counter what he felt was American author Katherine Mayo's vilification of Indian culture in her book *Mother India*, published in 1927. The director may well have had reasons to support his conviction, for even Mahatma Gandhi is said to have denounced the book's contents as being far removed from reality. Its key theme projected India as a country unprepared for independence, most of its author's opinions being based on the tradition of child marriage, the prevalence of premature pregnancy and the exploitation of women. The book aroused great public indignation, resulting in copies being burnt, along with Mayo's effigy, both in India and in New York City. It may not have been a coincidence, though, that following the book's release, the minimum age for marriage in India was raised to fourteen for girls and eighteen for boys. Mehboob Khan was keen on casting Dilip Kumar in the role of the vagabond son in *Mother India*. Nargis, however, who had been selected for the mother's role, had well-founded reservations about her director's choice; she had already been romantically paired with the actor in several films. Mehboob did consider Hollywood actor Saboo, but following a screen test, the director was unsure of his ability to do justice to the interpretation of a complex character. Khan then homed in on a less renowned actor, Sunil Dutt, who would not only play the son's role, but go on to become Nargis's real-life husband and, eventually, social worker, Parliamentarian and Cabinet minister. Nargis herself was only 28 years old when *Mother India* released, but hers was the performance of a lifetime; covering all the behavioural

nuances of a young bride with painted eyebrows to those of a matriarchal figure who is so focussed on her struggle that she seems to have neither the leisure nor the inclination to even run a comb through her hair. Her unique ability to portray strength of purpose at a time when most heroines were pliant and marshmallow-soft made her perfect for the role. *Mother India* was the first Indian film ever to be nominated for an Oscar award in the Best Foreign Film category. Editor of *Filmindia* Baburao Patel, who had unfavourably critiqued Mehboob Khan's work in the past, described *Mother India* as "an unforgettable epic..."; There was more, however, to Patel than his identity as a film critic and publisher. In *The Patels of Filmindia: Pioneers of Indian Film Journalism* (first edition published in 2015), author Sidharth Bhatia tracks Baburao's extraordinary journey and ambitions that covered many spheres. The man had fought elections, lost and won to eventually become a Member of Parliament. His political allegiances wavered as time went on, but nothing dimmed his fondness for broadcasting his opinion. Unlettered though he was, Khan was deeply influenced by Jawaharlal Nehru's ideals of socialism. He would go on to make *Son of India* (1962), a film that dealt with the issues of black money, corruption, dishonest politicians and rigged elections. Many implied that it was a tribute to Panditji, his real-life hero, who made it a point to attend the film's screening. So devoted, in fact, was Mehboob Khan to his idol that he was often heard to exclaim, "Nehru, tu mera mehboob hai (Nehru, you are dear to me)."; In what can only be described as a quirk of fate, the director would pass away on 28 May 1964 at the age of 57, devastated by the news of his hero's demise a day earlier. By Lata Mangeshkar's own admission, it was Mehboob Khan who introduced her to Nehru. In 1963, as part of the Republic Day celebrations in Delhi, she performed in front of an audience that comprised President S. Radhakrishnan, Prime Minister Nehru, Indira Gandhi and many distinguished guests. Opening with the bhajan "Allah tero naam"; on Dilip Kumar's request, she followed it up with "Ae mere watan ke logon";. Later, the singer reportedly confessed to journalist Subhash K. Jha, "I was much relieved to get it over with. After I finished my two songs, I went backstage to relax with a cup of coffee, unaware [of] what an enduring impact the song had created. Suddenly, I heard Mehboob Khan saab calling for me. He caught hold of my hand and said, "Chalo, Panditji ne bulaya hai (Come on, Panditji has sent for you)."; I wondered why he wanted to see me. When I went out, everyone, including Panditji, his daughter Indiraji, Radhakrishnanji stood up courteously to greet me. Mehboob Khan saab said, "Yeh rehi hamari Lata. Aapko kaisa laga uska gaana (This is our Lata. How did you like her performance)?"; Panditji said, "Bahut achcha. Mere aankhon mein paani aa gaya (Wonderful! She moved me to tears)."; The singer was subsequently invited by Nehru for tea at Teen Murti Bhavan, the Prime Minister's residence in New Delhi at the time. Recalling the occasion, Lata said, "While the rest of the entourage spoke eagerly with Panditji, I stood in a dark corner, hesitant to make my presence felt. Suddenly, I heard Panditji say, "Lata kahaan hai (Where is Lata)?"; I kept standing where I was. Then Mrs Indira Gandhi came and took my hands saying, "I want you to meet two of your little fans."; She introduced me to little Rajiv and Sanjay Gandhi. They did namaste and ran away. Then Panditji again asked for me. Mehboob Khan saab came and took me to Panditji. Panditji asked, "Are you going to go back to Mumbai and sing "Ae mere watan ke logon"?"; I replied, "No, it was meant to be a one-off thing."; He wanted a picture with me. We posed for a keepsake and then I quietly left. I had to rush back because it was my sister Meena's wedding in Kolhapur. When I returned to Mumbai the next day with my friend Nalini, I had no idea that the song had already become a rage. When we reached Mumbai, the city and the media were buzzing with the impact that the song had made in Delhi, how Panditji broke down, etc."; Lending Nehru's brand of patriotic idealism a leftist dimension was the communism-inspired Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which placed great emphasis in its plays and films on the plight of the country's peasants. When war broke out with Pakistan in 1948, Russi Karanjia, a close friend of Nehru and editor of the news magazine *Blitz*, teamed up with Bollywood to provide relief and succour to the civilian population of Kashmir battling a surprise invasion that was barbaric in nature. The big question he had to tackle at the time was whether film stars, self-centred and egoistic for the most part and

preoccupied with their films, would set time aside to participate in 'A nite with stars'. Raj Kapoor, Nargis, Kamini Kaushal, Geeta Bali, Sitara Devi, Agha Jan Baig, I.S. Johar, Kishore Sahu, Mukesh and several others agreed to do so without any hesitation. Sitara Devi gave a Kathak performance, while Kamini Kaushal danced the Bharatanatyam and Mukesh sang. Framroze Sidhwa, then proprietor of Regal Cinema, offered the premises free of charge for holding the event. The IPTA provided lights, curtains, stagehands and so on. According to Sanjit Narwekar, a National Award-winning author and film-maker, politics figured high on the list of priorities during the early days of Indian cinema. 'The first few years of the 1950s were a rather fecund period for patriotic films,' he writes, 'the newly-won independence still ringing in most ears and Hindi cinema still a decade away from its inane formulaic colourful star-spangled extravaganzas which would soon define Bollywood on the world map.' The year 1951 marked the release of Phani Majumdar's *Andolan*, a stridently nationalistic story of India's freedom struggle. Satyajit Ray's *Shatranj ke Khiladi* (1977) covered the period leading up to the country's first war of independence. Based on a short story by the famed Hindi writer Premchand, the film starred Sanjeev Kumar and Saeed Jaffrey as two Awadhi noblemen who are quick to draw their swords to defend their chessboard, but are too uncaring to defend their motherland against the machinations of the British. While *Andolan* covered the period between 1885 and 1947, both movies had their primary focus on the movement for India's quest for independence. With an increasing number of films being made during the initial years of India's independence, actors like Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor and Dev Anand began to emerge as 'stars'. This was a time of great expectation, marked by Nehru's focus on the neo-Marxist Mahalanobis Plan presented by P. C. Mahalanobis, a distinguished economist who had advised the then prime minister to set up five-year plans for the country's economic development. Raj Kapoor showcased himself in his films as an ideal citizen, joyous of spirit, full of faith and devoid of conventional conservatism. Dilip Kumar's films, on the other hand, projected an inclusive modernity which tried to incorporate rural India into the dominant urban and Western ethos of emerging Indian society. The hero argued that for the country to be inclusive, a 'seamless web' of cooperation between urban and rural traditions was indispensable. Dev Anand's films portrayed the common man's gradual disillusionment with the state in the wake of corruption and its inability to resolve the problems that poverty, hunger and scarcity of essential commodities had spawned. More importantly, not only was the male protagonist, an individual who acquired a heroic image, shown taking the law into his own hands, but his actions seemed to question the very authority of the Nehruvian state. The message conveyed to the viewers seemed to be that it was not in an individual's intrinsic nature to disrupt order and deviate from the norm, but unfavourable social conditions often compelled him to break free from social conventions. Guru Dutt's *Pyasa*, which released in 1957, offered a realistic portrait of a society that lauded commercial success, while disdaining talent. In the film, a prostitute (Waheeda Rehman) uses her hard-earned money to get the book of poetry written by her lover (played by Dutt himself) published. The book goes on to become a bestseller, proving that a prostitute's understanding of a poet's worth is superior to that of the publishers who had rejected him. Continuing the central theme, Dutt's *Kaagaz ke Phool* (1959) depicted the rejection of individual creativity in favour of the pursuit of wealth and social status. In his article 'The Great Four of the Golden Fifties' in *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*, edited by Aruna Vasudev, film critic and columnist Iqbal Masud observes that the films of Mehboob Khan, Bimal Roy, Guru Dutt and Raj Kapoor shared common traits. 'There are many common traits in the works of these directors. The foremost is that much abused word, humanism'. In the 1940s 'humanism' had a specific connotation. It was fuelled by outrage against India's savage poverty and inequalities. A second element was its deep awareness of India's past and present cultures; both 'high' and 'popular'. A third was the skill in communicating the outrage and call for change to the masses. This last element has been called 'entertainment'. But in the 1940s and 1950s this had an aspirational touch about it which has vanished long ago from our

cinema.’ On the social front too, the 1950s witnessed the introduction of legislation codifying personal laws. The Special Marriage Act of 1954, for instance, legally sanctioned the marriage between a man and a woman in a civil ceremony, irrespective of the community each belonged to, automatically rendering the individual laws pertaining to the matter of divorce and succession null and void. In this connection, one of the era’s more important social issues involved the tradition of dowry. In fact, several Hindi films of the time depicted the evils committed in its name, including victimization of young women by their in-laws. Addressing the issue with due seriousness, the Nehru-led government would pass the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961. With time, economic concerns gained precedence over social issues. By 1969, when private banks were nationalized and the rupee devalued, money had become so important a priority that the popularity of a song from the film *Sabse Bada Rupaiya* (1976) would reach anthemic heights. ‘Na biwi na bachcha; Na baap bada na maiya,’ it went, ‘the whole thing is that ke; bhaiya sabse bada rupaiya’. From pre-Independence nationalism to post-Independence euphoria, from Nehruvian idealism to disillusionment and cynicism, Indian cinema has reflected every change in the country’s socio-political climate with the passage of time. Its heroes and heroines too have evolved over the years. If actors of a certain generation played the roles of rulers or mythological figures and were revered as near deities, those who followed understood the changing mood of their audience and preferred to portray down-to-earth protagonists whose problems the masses could relate to. There were those who sought to leave an impact and a message; others were content to entertain. The idealist, the cynic, the angry young man, the anti-hero and the endearing innocent at sea in an uncaring urban environment are among the popular roles that Bollywood’s most loved stars have taken up through the years to keep their audience captivated. Many of them chose to carry forward their onscreen roles into public life – with varying degrees of success. As the following chapters will reveal, their reasons for doing so were just as diverse: a few were keen on contributing to the progress of the nation; some were committed to doing their bit for the society in which they lived; others were desperate to regain their place in the limelight as their stardom faded; and many more jumped into the political fray, simply because they believed it would be in keeping with the trend of the times. [three Dynasties and the Undying Link between Cinema and Politics](#)

The most important name that comes to mind when considering actors-turned-politicians of a certain generation is that of Prithviraj Kapoor, the patriarch of the Kapoor clan and a staunch Congressman. About the same age as Jawaharlal Nehru, he shared the latter’s ideals. At Prithvi Theatres, the Bombay-based travelling theatre he had founded in 1944, Kapoor would play out the socialist vision and ideals of secular society. Both Nehru and his daughter Indira had great respect and admiration for the Kapoor family. In *The Kapoors: The First Family of Indian Cinema*, Madhu Jain recounts how Indira had even contemplated a matrimonial alliance between her first-born Rajiv and Raj Kapoor’s elder daughter Ritu. Jain writes that it was not as if Indira Gandhi was star-struck or looking for a daughter-in-law with Bollywood antecedents. Her deep regard and respect for the Kapoor name was less related to its widespread renown (thanks, partly, to the popularity of Raj Kapoor’s film *Awara*), not only in India, but in the Soviet Union, China, North Africa and South Asia, than to the rapport between the two families that went all the way back to Prithviraj’s association with her grandfather Motilal Nehru. The ‘dream alliance’ between her son and Raj Kapoor’s daughter would come to naught, however; while Rajiv was away at Cambridge for higher studies, he met Sonia Maino and fell in love with her. They were married in 1968. Years later, with speculation arising over Rajiv’s son Rahul’s interest in Ritu’s actress niece Kareena Kapoor, it seemed as if the Kapoor–Gandhi matrimonial alliance so dear to Indira’s heart might actually become a reality. Rahul was allegedly so keen on the actress that he would seek first-day first-show tickets to watch her films. Kareena was single then and P.P. Madhavan, Rahul’s close aide at the time, was of the view that the Gandhi scion’s ‘initial’ interest in the actress had been triggered by the utterances of Kareena herself during an appearance in early 2002 on the popular TV show *Rendezvous with Simi Garewal*. As reported in the 7 March 2002 issue of the *Times of India*, the conversation between Garewal and her guest went as follows: *Simi*: What about marriage? *Kareena*: I don’t have

the time to get married right now. I cannot give up my career for a man. I'm going to concentrate solely on my work for the next five years at least. *Simi*: If there was one man in the whole world that you could date, who would you choose? *Kareena*: Shall I say this? I don't know whether I should... it's controversial... Rahul Gandhi... I don't mind getting to know him. I've seen his pictures... and have thought what it would be like to get to know him... I come from a film lineage, he comes from a political lineage... so maybe we'd make interesting conversation. By 2009, Kareena had partly retracted her statements. During the making of *Omkara*, the petite actress, while talking to the media about her size-zero figure and much-hyped love life, was asked about her earlier statement regarding her interest in dating Rahul Gandhi. According to the 23 May 2009 issue of the *Times of India*, she replied, "That was a long time back. I said that because we both have famous surnames. I would love to host him someday and see him as our prime minister, but definitely I do not want to date him." The relations between the Nehru-Gandhis and the Kapoors have endured over generations. Nehru, who had often relied on Prithviraj Kapoor's services for cultural diplomacy, sent him on one such mission to South East Asia. And his association with the Kapoors was such an abiding one that when the Prime Minister met Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator is supposed to have plied him with questions about Raj Kapoor and his film *Awara*. In her book, *Raj Kapoor Speaks*, the actor's daughter Ritu quotes Nehru asking her grandfather Prithviraj, "What is this vagabond [*Awara*] that your son has made? Stalin was talking about it all the time." Like his father, Raj Kapoor was a great admirer of Nehru and had almost succeeded in featuring the Prime Minister on screen. The movie was *Ab Dilli Dur Nahin* (1957) and Vishwa Mehra, a Kapoor relative working with R.K. Films, insisted that Nehru had agreed to appear in it. "Rajji [Raj Kapoor] had met Panditji [Nehru]. The film was about a boy who goes to see Chacha Nehru with a letter for him, hoping to get his innocent father released from jail. The episode was to be shot in Teen Murti [the Prime Minister's official residence in New Delhi at the time]. But then, others advised the Prime Minister not to appear in a film." At some level, the close connection between the Gandhis and the Kapoors appears spontaneous and natural. In her book on the Kapoors, Madhu Jain points out that the Nehru-Gandhis and the Kapoors represent two dynasties ruling the country's popular imagination. "While the political family impinges on our public lives she writes, the show business originals inveigle themselves into our intimate lives and fantasies, feeding our notion of romance and even our notions of history. Akbar, historians tell us, was barely five feet tall, but after K. Asif's 1960 epic *Mughal-e-Azam*, many people began to believe that the great Mughal was tall and imposing, with a booming voice like Prithviraj Kapoor who played him so memorably in the film." Jain claims that both the Kapoors and the Gandhis made concerted efforts to lay the foundations for their heirs. "Indira Gandhi was as different from her father as Raj Kapoor and his brothers Shammi and Shashi were from theirs," writes the author. "Idealism had lost some of its shine by the time they took up the reins. By the time the Gandhis were represented by Rajiv and Sanjay Gandhi and the Kapoors by Randhir and Rishi Kapoor, the heroic was no longer in vogue, nor were patriarchs. It was time for pragmatism." This meant that the idolization of public figures like them was in decline and there was a growing inclination to see them as fallible beings whose shortcomings were open to scrutiny and criticism. Even the patriarch Prithviraj Kapoor would come under fire as his rights as a nominated Member of Parliament (MP) were questioned. It is understood that nominated MPs enjoy the same rights and privileges as other members, except for the right to elect the President of India by casting their vote. But within a fortnight of the Rajya Sabha's constitution being formulated, a member of the House expressed his scepticism about the independence of nominated members. His target was Prithviraj and he went on to allege that Kapoor being an actor and not a politician was bound to "sing praise of his bosses." Possibly, what the concerned member had in mind was that status as a nominated member may oblige such member to act at somebody else's behest in the House. Firmly refuting the charge that such members were answerable to the bosses who controlled them, Prithviraj Kapoor had presented an appropriate outline of the role played by him and his fellow nominated

members. I believe that these nominated members, scientists, eminent historians, literary men, poets, dancers and actors like my humble self; they are here just to play their part when the soul gets parched up in these days of political tangles and passions; he is reported to have said. Explaining his responsibility as an artiste to turn the attention of politicians to areas where their positive contribution would benefit the nation, Kapoor had used his sonorous voice and mesmerizing style of delivery to his advantage while touching upon certain issues, including the insatiable hankering for mundane and material comforts that were beginning to overshadow human values. We may be flying to the skies; he had declared, but our contact with the earth must never be lost. But if we read too much of economics and politics, our contact with the earth begins to disappear; our soul gets parched and dried up. It is from that drying up of the soul that our politician friends have to be guarded and saved; and it is for that purpose that the nominated Members, the educationists, scientists, poets, writers and artistes are here;

In a nation singularly obsessed with politics on the one hand and cinema on the other, the point where the two intersect arouses avid curiosity and interest. What draws the larger-than-life personalities who entertain us on screen to the world of governance and politics off-screen? Neta Abhineta: Bollywood Star Power in Indian Politics traces this phenomenon through intimate and compelling portrayals of some of the most popular actors in Hindi cinema who have, from the years leading up to India's independence in 1947, entered Indian politics for reasons ranging from a sense of social commitment to a desperate quest for a second chance at fame when their star power dimmed. Dilip Kumar, Nargis and Sunil Dutt, Rajesh Khanna, Jaya and Amitabh Bachchan, Shatrughan Sinha, Hema Malini, Mithun Chakraborty, Jaya Prada, Vinod Khanna, Govinda, Raj Babbar and Paresh Rawal are some of the more prominent names that feature in this engaging account involving film veterans, superstars and also-rans. Blending history with hard facts and entertaining anecdotes about personal and professional rivalries, clandestine romantic liaisons and cruel betrayals, Rasheed Kidwai's latest offering presents a potent cocktail. With its clear-eyed perspective on the peculiar nature of Indian politics and its newfound addiction to social media, as well as fresh and fascinating insights into the power games that drive show business and politics, this book reveals what ensues when the two worlds ? as intensely alluring as they are dangerously fickle ? merge.

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