

Cinematic Narrative of Disability in Post-Independent India

A Case Study of *Mother India*

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ABSTRACT

Jenny Morris argues that cultural representations of disability mostly centre on the feelings of the non-disabled and their reactions to disability, instead of focusing on the disability itself. Addressing Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), a movie based on an agrarian society of Western Gujarat in the newly independent India, the paper examines the implied meaning of being disabled in a socialist society of India through its cinematic narrations. Post-independent Hindi popular cinema embraced farming life as its fundamental narrative trope to disseminate the idea of a self-sufficient independent nation, especially in the wake of Jawaharlal Nehru's Five-Year Plan for industrial development. Interspersed between nationalism and the myth of socialism, the subject of disability has, however, been overlooked over the years. This paper, thereby, examines the rural/peasant/agrarian nexus within the conflicting cinematic representations of the absent-disabled citizen as a lacuna in this newly emerging independent India.

INTRODUCTION

Concerns about disability have attracted the attention of filmmakers throughout the world, and Indian cinema is no exception. However, extant critical studies of disability in cinematic representation have portrayed the medium's perpetuation of repressive social attitudes geared towards the disabled. Addressing Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), a mega-hit movie based on newly independent India's misty socialism in agrarian society of Western Gujarat, this paper examines the implied meaning of being disabled. Written and directed by Mehboob Khan and starring Nargis, Sunil Dutt, Rajendra Kumar, and Raj Kumar, *Mother India* was inspired by the Italian neo-realism cinema of Europe. The movie, therefore, became more of a critical social commentary on the economic reforms implemented in Indian society rather than a mere reflection of the values and views of the agrarian society of the

time. However, while *Mother India* remains one of the greatest examples of cinematic triumph for its socialist representation, how far does it reinforce the disabled body as an object of pity in terms of the disabled husband who walks to his own death after having lost his arms? Can we infer through such cinematic representations of disability that, the more disability is used to induce a sense of unease, the more cultural stereotypes are confirmed?

The cultural representations of disability mostly centre on the feelings of the non-disabled and their reactions to disability, instead of focusing on the disability itself. Disability, in turn, becomes "a metaphor . . . the message the non-disabled writer wishes to get across . . . In doing this, the writer draws on prejudice, ignorance and fear that generally exist towards disabled people" (Morris 93). In a similar vein, while the title of

the movie *Mother India* coalesces both “Mother” and “India,” portraying women as the ultimate sacrificer, caregiver, and nurturer in Hindu society, the disabled husband, in comparison, is associated with terms like “*besharam*” (00:44:53) literally translating as shameless while denigrating him as a liability to his wife, a helpless victim, and an unproductive citizen and an unproductive citizen of this newly formed nation against which prowess of his wife or the “Mother India” is situated. The film’s tendency to disincarnate the experience of the disabled (and later, absent) husband raises questions about disability more as a social phenomenon, and not merely as a medical one. Related to this concern is first, questions of stigma: people with disabilities are shown as being in desperate need of charity or help. Secondly, the public’s thirst for disabled characters performed by popular actors perpetuates a cycle of disability discrimination, paradoxically creating able-bodied actors with disability drag. Throughout film history, disabled lead roles have been played by nondisabled actors with only rare exceptions. Since 1987, over twenty Oscar nominations for leading actors and actresses have gone to thespians portraying disabled characters (Crutchfield 284-289). In *Mother India*, the character of Shamu was played effectively by the abled-bodied Raj Kumar. The portrayal of the character’s disability by this iconic actor and the reaction towards it is such that the societal norms and attitudes of the days get reaffirmed in the minds of the viewers, i.e., it is better to choose death over living the life of a crippled man, as represented in the film. The film, however, remained a trendsetter, and became the first Indian movie to be nominated at the Oscars in 1957. This paper, thereby, delves into how disability in *Mother India* becomes both a private and a public experience. Disability in the movie is represented through the personal catastrophe of the husband, Shamu. The amputation of both his arms in an accident while tilling the unproductive land is, in fact, portrayed as a humiliating experience—associating it with stigma, shame and blame, and not merely a medical injury. This association of disability with disgrace remains another pivotal point of analysis here.

It is noteworthy that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, administered the iconic ideas of socialism and employment of human resources in nation-building process immediately after independence. The concept of *aam admi* or common man was championed by him in facilitating equal priority for every citizen. Thus, in a country where the majority of people belonged to the agrarian community, a socialist theme of governance remained indispensable for future growth and development. This article thereby uncovers how both cinematic representations in the newly independent India as well as Nehruvian socialist ideals stood for the cause of developing a new nation through initiation of agricultural enterprises and equal participation of working-class citizens. Yet what remains problematic is, for instance, within the context of movies like *Mother India*, while the protagonist Radha (Nargis Dutt) is portrayed as the exemplary mother and wife through her irrefutable associations with the archetypes of mythical Hindu femininity, disability is a significant issue

that is widely misunderstood—an issue continues to be observed even in the contemporary Indian movies like *Aadmi* (1968), *Koshish* (1972), *Netrikkan* (1981), *Kasam* (1988), *Koyla* (1997). The traditional association of disability with *karma*, where disability is often perceived as a punishment for misdeeds in past lives, renders these representations even more complex in this socialist representation of nation-building.

TRACING THE PORTRAYAL OF DISABILITY IN INDIAN CINEMA

In movies of the 80s, we see how the cinematic representations of the disabled have quite evidently focused on the way they are ostracized from society. Not just compassion and sympathy, but emotions like pity and sadness are always associated with disability. A significant way of analyzing cinematic representations of disability would be to see it as a mirror reflecting society’s outlook towards the subject. While examining the relationship of disability to cinema, Jenny Morris explains,

Disability in film has become a metaphor for the message that the non-disabled writer wishes to get across in the same way that beauty is used. In doing this, movie makers draw on the prejudice, ignorance and fear that generally exist towards disabled people, knowing that to portray a character with humped back, with a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings with the audience. Unfortunately, the more disability is used as a metaphor for evil or just to induce a sense of unease, the more the cultural stereotype is confirmed. (22)

Mass media’s inducement of ideas of disease and related themes is significant, which in turn, blurs the line between the traditional social imagination of disability and what is induced by contemporary social belief influenced by screen portrayals. Since the beginning of Bollywood in the 1930s, filmmakers have attempted to portray diseases in varied thematic ways, and disability occupies a central place among all the diseases ever represented on the screen, primarily by showing the condition of the disabled either as a punishment or as a state of dependence.

There have been observably two extreme trends in Bollywood films as far as the portrayal of disability is concerned. While several filmmakers have represented disability in terms of comic interlude or to set into motion a series of dramatic action, there have been others who have used disability to spin a tale around the insensitivity of society and their reaction towards the disabled. Disability has also been widely portrayed as chastisement and as social taboos in Indian movies. In *Mother India*, the character’s disability is used as a dramatic trope, and the reaction towards the disabled body is portrayed in such a way that the societal attitudes of the day get re-affirmed in the minds of the audience, i.e., it is better to die than to survive as a cripple. Thus, on one hand, the movie can be seen as an exploitation of the disabled in the mythologization of “Mother India”—the nation as untainted, pure, and self-sacrificing, but also as able-bodied and self-sufficient. On

the other hand, Shamu's escape from this seemingly burdened life unfortunately could be seen in alignment with the filmmaker's attempt at engaging with the minds of the audience and establishing a connection with them in a more intimate way by evoking emotions of pity and empathy in them, and in turn, strengthening the existing disability myths and stereotypes.

In *Mother India*, there is a tension between amputated Shamu living in this world and exiting the social order, and the manner in which those dialectics are carefully plotted. While Shamu is shown departing from the plot of the movie (Fig. 1), insofar as the scene shows the figure of Shamu disappearing against the early sunrise, one is not sure if he committed suicide (Fig. 2). This ambiguity could be read as a deliberate plotting of the filmmaker, keeping in view the Hindu mythology—which this movie is replete with—that considers suicide as sinful and spiritually unacceptable.

According to Hindu philosophy, suicide is referred to as *atmahatya*, a Sanskrit word literally translating as soul-murder (where *atma* means soul and *hatya* means murder)—suicide as an action prevents the soul from obtaining liberation. Thus, while this narrative can be characteristic of Shamu's renunciation of the world, it is noteworthy that this renunciation is not self-induced but is, instead, imposed by society. Although we see Shamu leaving behind the social order at a time when India was going through a tremendous change in terms of development, once Shamu disappears from the village, whether he commits suicide or not, he goes out of the social order that controls village life. Since Shamu cannot fight the feudal order, especially since he is disabled and ousted from society, we see him renouncing its very structure. This, the filmmaker shows, is important for nation-building and for the hopeful world to usher in new possibilities in the future. Shamu leaves his family, and this departure is, hence, illustrated as a necessity so that the revolution to destroy the feudal system can take place effectively. Thus, while *Mother India* continues to be celebrated as the struggle against the tyranny of feudal colonialism, what remains overlooked is the ostensible struggle of the disabled that escaped the governance of Indian society. Thus, another aspect of the revolution, since its very inception, has been seen in eliminating the participation of the disabled lot in society, as symbolically reflected in the renunciation of the world by Shamu, which remains a subplot in this epic narrative. This subplot, which has been given inconsequential value to the underlying revolutionary impulse of the main text, has in reality played the role of a trigger in the cinematic narrative involving the terrible crisis of agrarian revolution in a post-colonial world.

POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIAN CINEMA AND BEING DISABLED IN NEHRU'S SOCIALIST SOCIETY

The idea of *nation* has remained a contested reference, for it is "an imagined community" (Anderson), constructed, debated, and recreated in socio-cultural representations across the world. In the Indian context, *nation* is inherently intertwined with the idea of land relations and peasant life as a cultural policy.



Fig. 1 | Shamu leaves behind his village and family in *Mother India*, 00:53:46. Mehboob Productions, 2018.

The film's tendency to disincorporate the experience of the disabled (and later, absent) husband raises questions about disability more as a social phenomenon, and not merely as a medical one.



Fig. 2 | Shamu disappears into the sunrise in *Mother India*, 00:54:39. Mehboob Productions, 2018.

Consequently, post-independence Hindi popular cinema embraced the subject of land as its central narrative trope while disseminating the idea of India as a self-sufficient independent nation. Effectively, *Mother India* became an influential cinematic venture for constructing the idea of *Indianness* based on the metaphor of land as the mother.

Director Khan was a socialist, and thereby, stood for endorsing Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's socialist ambitions in India. Behind the glamour and chutzpah of the rather melodramatic plot, *Mother India* seems to have a clear political agenda: to promote and further the cause of farming, farmers, and agriculture, in keeping with view Nehru's ideal in India's First Five-Year Plan. Jawaharlal Nehru has been criticized for his faulty implementation of socialism at many levels. When India became independent, almost one-third of the population worked in low-productivity agriculture, and hence, creating jobs was Nehru's primary agenda. He understood that the levels of literacy and education were highly

lagging behind and college graduates were unemployable due to problems in the education system, a glaring example of which could be observed in Raj Kapoor's movie *Shree 420* (1955). In *Shree 420*, the protagonist, who lived in Nehruvian times, is more than a tramp—he is a bachelor degree holder but unemployed, an issue that continues to plague India even in contemporary times. While Nehru made the proper diagnosis of the newly independent India's rising economic problem, it remained more of a rhetoric than effective implementation. Nehru intended to increase agricultural productivity and revive labour-intensive manufacturing while providing mass education. Primarily influenced by the Japanese model, India invested in textile mills and small and medium-sized factories that could absorb labour. For instance, Ludhiana has been the hub of hosiery manufacturing industry, Surat has been known for the textile craft of *zari* (thread work with silver wire or fine gold), and Coimbatore for its textiles and light engineering industry. However, instead of giving a boost to these kinds of small and medium-sized industries, Nehru pushed heavy industry and followed other leaders in global industry. As a result, neither land reforms nor agricultural extension services were initiated in the independent India for the seventeen years Nehru remained Prime Minister and unemployment persisted (Purandare 2023).

Nehru's socialist reconstruction of India owes its foundation to his contacts with the peasantry. The marginalized peasants of Oudh recounted to Nehru their economic depravity, poverty, high rents, and illegal expulsion from their land, alongside extreme oppression by the exploitative land-owning Zamindars, moneylenders, and police, amongst others. Nehru was perceptive enough to observe the impending farmer's revolution, alongside the political movement in the newly independent India. Although disparate, both seemed to converge



Fig. 3 | Nehru's imagined India in *Mother India*, 00: 01:12. Mehboob Productions, 2018.

national. Though the supposed beneficiaries of the reform were the peasants, this was not possible now due to the exploitative landlords who extracted higher rents. This remains consequential to Nehru's concept of constructing socialist India. Once he grasped the fundamental issues regarding the pauperization of the Indian peasantry, his quest for a basic socialistic remedy also began (Ganguli 1213-15).

This agrarian crisis has been fittingly portrayed in *Mother India*, which is based on rural India as a metaphor for the newly independent nation rising after the collapse of the British Empire. The movie centres on Radha, an abandoned woman from a poor rural village, trapped in the debt imposed by the predatory moneylender of the village. The movie shows how the slump in agricultural prices debilitated the entire peasantry. The opening scene of the movie, is, however, at odds with the hardship experienced by Radha, the "Mother India" of the movie. *Mother India* commences with old Radha, played by Nargis, sitting in a field—a trope which is woven throughout the film. The scene moves forward by shifting the focus of the camera to a dam being constructed and ends with a

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and reinforce each other. Especially when the Great Depression (1929-1939) descended as a disastrous blight on India's countryside, Nehru realized the ultimate remedy to curb the revolutionary potential of the agrarian discontent of the Indian peasants was the abolition of landlordism, the removal of intermediaries, and the dissolution of the feudal socio-economic structure. Due to the global crisis, there was a severe fall in agricultural prices—the backbone of the Indian economy. While the value of farm produce dropped by half, the land rent to be paid by the peasants remained unchanged. During the Great Depression, when prices decreased, the farmers tried to produce even more to pay off their debts, taxes and living expenses. However, in the early 1930s, prices dropped so low that many farmers went bankrupt and lost their farms. Thus, the feudal mode of production further denigrated the basic human dignity of millions of agrarian populations while also serving as an impediment in the primary development of the

group of villagers persuading Radha to inaugurate the newly constructed water canal. Tractors and other advanced agricultural implements are framed in the background along with a song praising "Mother India." Evidently the viewers are introduced to the protagonist Radha as "the mother of the village" (00:03:39). Khan uses the opening scene as a device in supporting and establishing Nehru's ambitions in fortifying the Indian economy, creating food security, and making India self-reliant during its early years of independence. The scene, replete with agricultural advancements, tractors, irrigation projects, and so on, that unfolds as "memorial reconstruction" (Mishra 127), is suggestive of Nehru's imagined India. The generous use of red in both the foreground (Radha's saree) and background (tractor) in the scene (Fig. 3) functions as a window to the farmer's blood that went into making India independent.

In the movie, while Radha's family is trapped into destitution owing to the debt and its increasing interests, the situation

worsens after Shamu meets with an accident while working on the barren land and loses both his arms. Shamu later abandons his family and disappears due to the everyday humiliation he faces because of his disability. What follows thereafter are the trials and tribulations of a single mother who continues to be tormented by repeated misfortunes until she emerges heroic at the end. However, what remains overlooked in this heroic narrative of suffering and survival is that the physically disabled Shamu has barely been given any role by the filmmaker in his depiction of this newly independent socialist India. In fact, what remains largely unaddressed is how Radha's quest for self-sufficiency is placed against the unfortunate departure of the disabled husband, where even the village money lender tries to take advantage of Radha's situation by offering her food and money in exchange for sexual favors.

It remains largely overlooked how society transmutes the disabled husband into a mere footstool in the process of putting Radha on a pedestal. The movie bears no history of Radha's past and makes no mention of her maiden home or previous life before her matrimonial alliance with Shamu, and her identity is etched out only in relation to her husband Shamu. In her first meeting with her husband Shamu, the newly married Radha—bedecked with jewels, red clothes, and most significantly, red *bindi*, a symbol of lifelong commitment and well-being of the husband—is shown throwing herself at the feet of her husband. This act symbolizes the adulation and respect married women are supposed to have for their husbands—a visual cue to how husbands are considered *pati-parmeshwar*, literally translating as husband-God to be worshipped and revered, a theory propagated by ancient Hindu mythologies and epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The wife, happy at the feet of the husband, content to eat the left-over morsel of food, becomes a recurring scene both before and after misfortune befalls Shamu. Thus, while Radha's portrayal is that of an archetypal mother, her altruistic behaviour and selfless nature are of the utmost significance in the creation of this self-sufficient socialist India. Her magnanimous role could further be contrasted with her disabled husband who is now unable to economically sustain his family anymore. Although Shamu's condition evokes compassion in the viewers, there is a simultaneous sense of pity prompted as well. The scene where the moneylender Sukhilala (Kanhaiya Lal) makes fun of Shamu's disability results in his climactic abandonment of the society, away from any kind of social and familial bonding. Thus, it could be observed how *Mother India* continues to be a representative of the era of the 1950s land reforms, playing an instrumental role in understanding the way Hindi films have addressed the subject of land post-independence.

MOTHER INDIA AND PERCEPTION OF DISABILITY IN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY AND IN SOCIAL HISTORY

In tracing the Hindu doctrine, Disability Studies expert G. N. Karna observes how disability is often considered as the result of *karma phala* or the retribution for the sins committed in the past. He further states, in a developing country such as

India, where the majority population is illiterate, and superstitions are a significant part of the social cultural milieu, even disease is considered to have been associated with disobedience surrounding the principles of nature and religion (23-24). According to the Hindu philosophy which believes in reincarnation of souls, it is often believed that disability occurs when one leads a sinful life, because of which he/she is subjected to the wrath and vengeance of gods or goddesses based on the deeds and activities performed in one's life. The *Charaka Samhita* (the ancient treatise on Ayurveda) considers any kind of physical deformity as a result of misdeeds or action done in a previous life or *karma phala* (literally translating *karma* as work and *phala* as a result), and this continues to be believed in Indian society (Mukherji and Waheli 25). In this context, the disabled person is, thereby, looked upon as convicted of some wrongdoings or as going through a penalty for mischief.

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Disability expert Usha Bhatt notes how in primitive societies, the tribes would often abandon their physically disabled children, and the tribal chief would support the killings of these unfortunate children. However, it may be worthwhile to mention that the concept of "disability" or handicap was different from what is often perceived today. Mere illness or any deviation from the expected normal behaviour of an individual was assumed to be disability (85). Conversely, it remains a matter of grave concern to see how such discrimination continued to persist in the twentieth century when such intolerances are justified on the grounds of religious and social bases. This is possibly where the character of the disabled Shamu from *Mother India* can be located. His growing conscience about his disabled body, which seemed more like a societal malady than a medical fatality, accentuated his inability to meet the requirements of his family or contribute to the developing *Bharat* (India).

Hindu mythology is replete with characters with disability like the blinded king Dhritarashtra, the deformed-hip Shakuni, and the hunched-back Manthara portraying them in an extremely negative light, which could also be seen in the discriminatory attitude against Shamu the amputee. The Indian classical epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* quite overtly maltreat people with disabilities by usually considering them in a negative light with mala fide intentions. The condition of King Dhritarashtra from *Mahabharata*, who was born blind, seems relevant when compared to Shamu. While Dhritarashtra's physical disability is not associated with evil spirits unlike Shakuni and Manthara, it was a common belief that he was solely responsible for the Kurukshetra War. His physical blindness has been considered as an indication of his

moral blindness, for he could not perform his duties as a just king. Similarly, Shamu's agonizing experience as a disabled adult led to his symbolic diminution and social exclusion, and hence is unproductive for his family or for the nation. Shamu, thereby, decides to shun society before society can humiliate

from her first entry into the movie until its climactic end. In this vein, the absent husband becomes the semantic field of *Mother India*, which then indicates the marginal status of the disabled body manifested through Shamu's symbolic diminution and social exclusion. It is noteworthy that Shamu is

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him further, while exiting from the movie. While Gandhari, Dhritrashtra's queen, blind-folded her eyes as a mark of sacrifice for her impaired husband and decided not to see the world again, Radha continued wearing the red *bindi*—the mark of a married woman, visibly noticeable on her forehead until the end of the movie, even after Shamu's disappearance. While this could be read as a high ideal in women to be revered, reflecting Radha's pure love for her husband, paradoxically, it could also be perceived as Radha's protest at Shamu's merciless abandonment of her during times of adversity. Disability is here not merely associated the individual, but rather with every member of the family.

Shamu's act of removing Radha's red *bindi* from her forehead before disappearing from her life attains a symbolic status of breakage of patriarchal bondage, considering she has been wearing one (as per Hindu religious customs) ever since her marriage to Shamu. The pivotal moment is when Radha realizes Shamu's disappearance has been reflected for the spectators through the visual medium of the mirror. Radha rushes to the mirror in the morning after she wakes up to realize Shamu is not around anymore. While Radha's gaze at the mirror covers its entire frame, her *bindi* and *sindoor* have been effaced. This reflection signifies a crucial turning point in her life, indicating the end of her marriage and the loss of a male authority figure. The film begins with the use of red hues: the *sindoor* (vermilion mark) along the parting line of Radha's hair, the *bindi* on her forehead and the bridal *chunari* (scarf) draped around her shoulder and head. Gradually, we see how the perspective moves from the newly wed Radha to the red of the earth, and quite immediately, to the bronze tone of the landscape. Meanwhile, once the canal is opened, the water that flows red, a metaphor for the bloody legacy of Indian independence. Thus, the scene involving Shamu wiping off Radha's *bindi* could also be interpreted as India's dismal failure in improving the life of its citizens, and more specifically, its subaltern disabled population.

Radha's anguished motherhood in the movie is strengthened not merely by her daunting courage but rather by the rage of a disabled husband's abandoned wife, who did not deter from her survival goals. The absent presence of this disabled husband could be located in the latter half of *Mother India*, symbolically portrayed through the red *bindi* that Radha continues to wear

portrayed through a number of conflicting representations: a caring husband, a supplicating patriarch, and an abusive wife-beater during moments of crisis. This foils Radha's portrayal as an archetypal female figure, whose abilities seem to be further strengthened in the light of her husband's disabilities.

Disability continues to be seen as an act of fate dictated by myths and misconceptions surrounding the idea of disability, causing the disabled to be marginalized, ostracized, and isolated from society, rather than treating it as a lasting medical condition. Situating *Mother India* within this socio-cultural background, it could be suggested that the movie, and in fact, the character Mother India or Radha, projects a complex blend of historical and mythological aspects or symbols of a culture enmeshed in Nehru's moderate socialist economic reform.

SOCIALIST REALISM AND MOTHER INDIA AS A TEXT EXCLUDING THE DISABLED BODY

While *Mother India* is considered crucial for its cinematic representation of socialist realism in India, it also serves as a case study of metonymical exclusion of the disabled from the process of nation building. In the first half of the movie, one could notice "Maa" or Mother is established as a significant trope by referring to Radha as "mother of the entire village" in the opening scene. The film poster portrays the iconic scene of the movie where Radha ploughs a field, simultaneously representing Mother India and Mother Earth (Fig. 4).

These visuals reinforce the epic proportions of the film's scope, foregrounding the ideological impetus of the filmmaker in a discrete manner, emphasizing his socialist alignment with the ideals of Nehruvian socialism. The fact that this movie was endorsed by Nehru reflected the ten-year progress India had made ever since its independence in 1947.

While *Mother India* portrays the cultural expressions of the Indian society of the time, it also reflects on those dialectical processes in the deep structure which holds Indian society together—which is, of course, at one level, is the conflict between living in the world or *pravitti* and renunciation or *nivitti*, and the other, is the ambiguity regarding whether *nivitti* is a choice or is forced upon by the society. This is, however, later mirrored by Shamu's own son Birju, who renounces the world and then becomes a bandit, and thereby, stands outside the control of the village social order just like his father,



Fig. 4 | Hand painted poster of the *Mother India*. *Mother India*, Mehboob Productions, 2018.

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and later kills the moneylender Sukhilala, who once tried to disrobe his mother of her *dharma*. This development seems to be carefully plotted by the filmmaker to end the vicious cycle of exploitation of the Zamindari system which started with Shamu's dismal condition and ended with Shukhilala's assassination by Birju (Sunil Dutt). To destroy a feudal system, a person first must renounce its structure from within. Since Shamu could not possibly do that out of choice, he had to leave the cinematic frame after his arms were amputated. "Onslaught," as Vijay Mishra duly notes, "is possible only by someone who has no real 'familial' constraints" (133). While disabled Shamu leaves his wife, Birju leaves his mother—the former due to his physical inability, and the latter so that he is free from any kind of affectionate bonds—and these departures were crucial for the revolution to take place. While in the beginning of the film, Shamu seems to be the protagonist, we see how the onus of the revolutionary zeal lies with Birju, a duty which Shamu was unable to fulfill owing to his disability. It is in this definitive conjunction between the absent father, the mutinous son, and the heroic mother that the socio-political context of the movie can be located. *Mother India* does not include the real history of India or the details of the struggle against an outmoded system of feudalism, or how the Indian peasant could have triumphed over that kind of economic exploitation, or how to fit the disabled body in the socialist dreams of that time. On the contrary, it depicts an imaginary India with all its hopes and aspirations. Although these issues are tantalizingly present in the movie and they surface over and over again, Khan does not attempt at resolving them. Instead, he projects an illusory and utopian India as a model of national development with its agrarian and land reforms, abolition of the Zamindari system, establishment of feudal landownership, and self-sufficient villages.

CONCLUSION

India in the 1950s was an era of optimism, as embodied by Prime Minister Nehru, and it saw a revitalization of cinema as well. Manifesting the spirit of the newly independent India, Indian cinema was yearning to shed the old time and enter the epoch of growth and development while balancing entertainment with education and social commentary. The paper has attempted to understand the position of the disabled in this newly independent country, pregnant with hopes and aspirations of socialist economic reform, while taking *Mother India* as a primary cinematic text in examining rural India's attempt at carving a new identity for itself and simultaneously discarding its colonial past. However, what remains invincible is its partial and marginal representation of the disabled husband, whose absence influences the cinematic text—an agonizing reminder of the marginal existence of the disabled who had no or little participation in the nation-building process. Although *Mother India* tried to capture the spirit of the age while trying to portray the imagined India liberated from the clutches of the exploitative Zamindari system, the period seemed to mar the condition of the disabled people, and they seemed to have a very negligible role to play in this new social awakening of India.

It could be observed how *Mother India* is couched in a contradictory scenario: while the movie is defiantly subversive in terms of its representation of women in rural India as heroic, *Mother India* is outrageously conforming when it comes to the representation of the disabled. On one hand, the movie celebrated an imagined India, capturing the spirit of the age and revolutionary fervor. On the other hand, the concept of disability has been presented in the movie in a stereotypically conventional light as dependents and vulnerable characters—capturing society's outlook towards them and, at the same time, shaping the attitudes and perceptions of the disabled. The paper, in this vein, has attempted to examine the reductionist portrayal of disability as either being overwhelmingly negative or having traits that are other worldly – images that many Bollywood movies seem to be inspired from, and in turn, depicting the experiences of the disabled, depriving them of fundamental human traits. While Mehboob Khan has attempted to place his movies in the tensions arising from the nationalist movement of the 1930s and 1940s, with *Mother India* circulating as both a critical discourse of the socialist Indian and as an emerging popular culture, it remains awfully detached from a just representation of the disabled. ■

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