

THE «OTHER» INDIA IN LITERATURE AND FILM MOHAN DĀS IN UDAY PRAKAŚ'S STORY AND IN MAZHAR KAMRAN'S FILM

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Mohandas is a 2009 Hindi drama film directed by Mazhar Kamran, based on the story *Mohan Dās* by noted Hindi writer Uday Prakaś, who also wrote screenplay and dialogue for the film. Mazhar Kamran is at his debut film as director. The film stars Sonali Kulkarni, Nakul Vaid, Sushant Singh, Uttam Halder, Sarbani Mukherjee, and Aditya Srivastava, and is produced by Abha Sonakia. The story is hard-hitting, and it has a willingness to engage; the film dares to raise uncomfortable questions that feel-good Bollywood generally prefers to ignore, and can be enjoyable for people who appreciate the parallel cinema of the 1980s. In this paper I introduce *Mohan Dās/Mohandas* as a counter-narrative on Dalitism, a multi-layered story of resistance and a critique of representational democracy. It is a story of marginality, featuring a young Dalit resisting against the oppression of the hegemonic society. Dalit oppression has been going on for ages but Mohan Dās's story is the product of a distinct modernity (or post-modernity?). I also draw a comparison between the literary and the cinematic version of the story and try to highlight the specificity of the movie, also in the context of recent Hindi cinematic production.

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¹ A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the II Biennial Conference of the Asociación Española de Estudios Interdisciplinarios sobre India: "Otras" Indias: La riqueza de la multiplicidad india, November 23-26, 2011, Universidad de La Laguna, Tenerife, Canarias, España. I use diacritical marks only in words referred to the short story, leaving the names belonging to the film as they commonly appear in film literature, and other names in their common form.

1. Mohan Dās, the story: a counter-narrative of Dalitism²

The long short story, or short novel, *Mohan Dās* was published in *Hams* in the Premchand anniversary issue, August 2005. It is a narrative of marginality, featuring a young Dalit resisting against the oppression of the hegemonic society, based on a real life story—that of Shobhalal of Gunwari in Madhya Pradesh.³ Mohan Dās, a Dalit young man, is a topper in studies and is overjoyed when he is selected for a job in Oriental Coal Mines. But he is kept waiting and waiting to actually get the job. Long afterwards, when he has given up and somehow reconciled to it, he learns that someone else has assumed his name and has already taken his job. When he rushes to protest, he is beaten up and thrown out. The protagonist's identity, in fact, is stolen by an unscrupulous Brahmin character through a deep-rooted conspiracy involving the whole community, and this launches a heroic struggle for resistance.

Uday Prakaś constructs a sort of postcolonial version of Gandhi, as the Dalit hero shows a clear resemblance with the Mahatma. This is a choice going against the prevalent discourse in Dalit policy, based on Ambedkar and his emancipating Dalit iconography, especially if we consider the notorious contraposition between Gandhi and Ambedkar. In such a counter-narrative the meta-discourse of the Dalit unity is challenged by the insurrection of little selves. This “*dalit avatār*” of Gandhi finds himself again and again in a helpless condition, but not even a single Gandhian activist or organisation is made available in the story to help him. Even while expressing a deep sympathy for Gandhian thought, this makes no allowance for any sympathetic argument about whatever is left of the Gandhian project in the contemporary world.

The text resists also the mainstream Dalit discourse.⁴ In the prevalent overwhelming presence of the national memory of Ambedkar, Uday Prakaś chooses not to introduce him as Mohan Dās's co-fighter and/or helper, thus refusing to adhere to the discourse of the politicised Dalit masses. Yet, the very presence of a protagonist who is an educated Dalit fighting for his reserved seat in government jobs⁵ and at the same time belonging to a little community of untouchables and professing a *kabīrpanthī* existence reminds the reader of Ambedkar. Thus, Ambedkar's invisibility is a key feature in order to understand the text. Mohan Dās's story does not limit itself to having the reader to face the devastated existence of a Dalit, but it is set against an extremely gloomy scenario, representing the collapse of institutional egalitarianism and the resultant failure of the whole civilisation. More concretely, it offers a general critique of representational democracy, exposing the limits of Ambedkar's modernising project.

Dalit oppression has been going on for ages, but Mohan Dās's story is the product of a distinct modernity (or post-modernity?). In fact, the story portrays also a political and social change affecting contemporary Hindu society. In a rural and semi-urban setting a Brahmin usurps a constitutionally mediated scheduled caste identity, reserved for ex-untouchables, and while doing so neither he nor his all family show any hesitation for fear of ritualistic pollution. How can such a change take place in the middle of the Hindutva discourse?⁶ A possible response is that the secular-bureaucratic structure of this constitutional identity is probably sufficient to guarantee them safety. The relation between this

² This section is an abridged version of the paper “Resistance in today's Hindi world: Mohan Dās by Uday Prakāś”, presented at the 21st European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, 26-29.07.2010, Bonn. A longer version is “Resistance in the postcolonial Hindi literary field: Mohan Dās by Uday Prakāś” in *Orientalia Suecana* LX (2011): 9-19.

³ <http://greenchannel.blogspot.com/search?q=soni>

⁴ For some bibliographical references about this topic, see: Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste*, India Permanent Black, New Delhi 2005; *idem*, *India's silent revolution: the rise of the lower castes in North India*, ed. by C. Hurst, London 2003; Badri Narayan, *Women heroes and Dalit assertion in north India: culture, identity and politics*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, Calif. 2006; Ramnarayan S. Rawat, “Making Claims for Power: A New Agenda in Dalit Politics of Uttar Pradesh, 1946-48,” in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (September 2003); Ramnarayan S. Rawat, “Partition Politics and Achhut Identity: A Study of Scheduled Castes Federation and Dalit politics in U.P. 1946-1948,” in *The Partitions of Memory*, ed. by Suvir Kaul, Permanent Black, Delhi 2001. An interesting Dalit publishing house is Navayana, see: <http://navayana.org>. About anticaste social vision see: Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura. The Social Vision Of Anticaste Intellectuals*, Navayana Publishing, New Delhi 2008.

⁵ On reservation policies in India see: Aimee China and Nishith Prakash, “The redistributive effects of political reservation for minorities: Evidence from India” in *Journal of Development Economics*, Volume 96, Issue 2, November 2011, pp. 265–277.

⁶ On the ambiguous relation between Hindutva and Dalits see: Badri Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation*, Sage, Delhi 2009; Dr. Anand Teltumbde, ed., *Hindutva and Dalits: Perspectives for Understanding Communal Praxis*, Samya, Kolkata 2005.

character and other upper caste characters is grounded on a shared middle class identity, giving the fake Mohan Dās, who in any case is not outcasted and maintains his *jāti/birādari* links, a sort of “neo-Brahmin” status. Significantly, this is not perceived as dangerous by the upper caste characters.

Mohan Dās is denied justice and he complains about that. But, at least in the literary version, his lament stresses the fact that his constitutional identity has been stolen only because his *birādari* is not represented in key positions of power: nobody of his community has yet obtained any government or political high position. This literary representation of Ambedkar, therefore, represents the tragic story of a small community excluded from its rightful place in the ranks of the emerging Dalit political community because it is too weak in the number game of politics. This is not a disadvantage inflicted upon Dalits by tradition: it is the result of the violence of a hierarchical modernity. It represents a larger problem of modernity (or post-modernity?) and it poses the problem of a post-Ambedkar rethinking of the Dalit issue, launching an incisive critique of the variants of new and old Indian modernities, distrusting them, and opening a ground for new explorations. Mohan Dās is totally ignored from the political community, and his experience is so confusing and disabling that the emancipating Dalit iconography doesn't work any longer. The political rise of the Dalits in North India, in fact, has coincided with the strengthening of caste and identity politics. The formation of Dalit political communities with their own power structure is a major contribution of Ambedkar's discourse, having a radical effect on the process of social development and on liberal democratic values. The literary representation of this process raises some basic questions about the principle of equality, the future of this new community identity, and the necessity to re-evaluate the results of Ambedkar's emancipating discourse.

2. Mohandas, the movie

Mohandas. A Man Lost In His Own Nation is a 2009 Hindi drama film that was released on 4 September 2009. It is directed by Mazhar Kamran, being his first feature film as director even if he is an experienced cinematographer, whose fame is connected to Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya*. The script is based on Uday Prakaś's story and also screenplay and dialogue are by Uday Prakaś. Mazhar Kamran selected an ensemble cast of actors chosen mostly from television: the film stars Sonali Kulkarni, Nakul Vaid, Sushant Singh, Uttam Halder, Sarbani Mukherjee and Aditya Srivastava and is produced by Abha Sonakia.

Mohandas raises uncomfortable questions that feel-good Bollywood generally prefers to ignore. It is not a film to be watched by people who are for entertainment only, but it can be thoroughly enjoyed by those who liked the great parallel cinema of the 1980s, like *Damul* (1985, directed by Prakaś Jha) or *Mirch Masala* (1985, directed by Ketan Mehta). It's not an angry or cogent visual document like Govind Nihalani's *Ardh Satya* (1983) or *Aakrosh* (1984), but Mazhar Khan's film is meaningful and shows a willingness to engage. The story is beautifully weaved, so that the audience get deeply engrossed in the film, and one really wants to find out whether the protagonist gets justice in what is supposed to be free and democratic India. As I said, the movie is based on a short story by Uday Prakaś and in fact it is a powerful heart rending story with twists and turns that leave one praying for a happy ending. But this isn't the sort of movie that soothes, and as we discover the 'other' India an extremely gloomy scenario opens.

The film script differs from the short story as it gives emphasis to an element that was totally absent in the literary version. In both narratives Mohan Dās, a man floundering in a hellish limbo, is in fact supported by a lawyer, Harshavardhan, who is willing to work for free in order to restore justice. In the literary version the story is told by an anonymous narrator, an acquaintance of Mohan Dās, who gets to know it from Mohan Dās himself, and it is the lawyer who informs the local media. Even national channels as NDTV and *Aaj tak* do send reporters, but the news never get to national level, as no important national politicians are involved. On the contrary, in the cinematic version the whole story is told through the media. The other main character in the movie, in fact, becomes the reporter Meghna, played by Sonali Kulkarni, a correspondent working at a news channel in New Delhi. She receives a videotape by a young journalist from a remote place in Madhya Pradesh, who happened to witness a disturbing event and videotaped it. On the tape, a battered young man claims to be the real Mohan Dās and alleges that someone else has stolen his identity: someone else is living as 'Mohan Dās'. Intrigued by what looks like an unusual small-town scam, and against her editor's will, Meghna sets forth to that place.

There, she unearths the true story and places it in the media. The narrative strategy is to present the whole story in the form of an interview of the protagonists or as their narrations to the media people.

Media are not portrayed as perfect. On the contrary, Meghna is in a class by herself: most of her colleagues are only in for the glam, and TV channels have a schedule where 20% is entertainment, 15% sports, the rest politics and crime. When she tries to convince her boss to let her pursue the story of a man in Anuppur, Madhya Pradesh, who has “lost” his name, and subsequently, his identity, he is dismissive of her socialist zeal: “*Yah muṃṣī Premchand kā zamānā nahīm hai* (This is not the era of Munshi Premchand),” he shrugs. But Meghna is naively sure that justice can be restored through an inquiry and a public knowledge of the case. Also Anil, the young local journalist, is very proud of media people, who don't just sit in an office and do paper work as lawyers do, but denounce the case and help restoring the truth. On the contrary, Harshvardhan, a lawyer from the district, knows that an inquiry within the corporation will only cover up the story, as all the power positions are held by Brahmans. He is also skeptical of media people coming from the centre: they just want the news, but don't follow up and go back to their golden world forgetting about the grim reality of the margins. When this all happens, in fact, he takes this case of stolen identity to court with the intention of hauling up the usurper. Unfortunately, in the real world the judicial machinery is not run by true facts, but by what can be proved by papers, and, as the honest judge in the movie laments, goondas and mobsters have penetrated all democratic institutions in the country, making a mockery of India's democracy. In a corrupted system documents can be forged, witnesses can be bought, and honest judges can be relocated where they become less annoying. As for troublesome lawyers, they may just happen to be one of the many road casualties that every year are recorded in India. The fake Mohan Dās is thus released, and the real Mohan Dās loses his identity for good. The film ends with Meghna going back to Anuppur in order to find Mohan Dās. He has moved to a hill far from the village, lives in dire poverty, and when she knocks at the door calling for Mohan Dās he replies: “You are probably in the wrong place, there is no Mohan Dās here!”.

The protagonist's name intrigued many critics, especially in the West, and the “idea of Gandhi” is superimposed on the story, but it is not brought further. The literary version presents a more articulated, and –if possible– even gloomier conclusion. Mohan Dās's last image is the one of a scared, livid, prematurely aged man who keeps on claiming: “I am not Mohan Dās”. Though he is in his 30s, he looks like an 80 year old man, bending on a stick. He wears a loincloth and the dark circles under his eyes look like round glasses branded on his face: a veritable image of Gandhi's. The usurper, after collecting an enormous amount of money, has entered politics and, supported by his caste group, commits any kind of violence and crime, being incriminated as Mohan Dās. The police, though, persecutes the real Mohan Dās, and in this Kafkaesque situation he is being constantly put to prison and tortured. Therefore he is now ready to give up his identity, just in order to save his life. The plight of those who remain at the fringe of development and power cannot see much change on a positive side. There is absolutely no possibility of a redeeming future, as even the next generation is doomed: the conclusion states that Mohan Dās's 12 years old son recently eloped and some say he's gone to Mumbai, others that he has joined the Naxalite groups in the forest.

3. Media hype and “new” India

The film *Mohandas*, based on the Hindi story *Mohan Dās* by Uday Prakaś, interprets the original story focusing on a classic motif in Indian cinema — a common person pitted against an unjust system — in the context of today's India, where cities are undergoing concrete makeovers, urbanization is changing small towns, and the aspirations of rural and mofussil India are evolving rapidly. It captures the details of the mining town with care, creating a universe teeming with petty bureaucrats, political goons and the silent common man, and cloaked by white dust and concrete. Characters are developed well, and are not stereotypes. There is no sign of what Anustup Basu calls the “geo-televisual aesthetic”,⁷ a spectacular style inspired by liberalizing trends and the inauguration of a planetary media ecology.

Until the 1990s, Hindi cinema thrived on catharsis-inducing revenge of the underdog. If not revenge, poetic justice was always accorded to the hero. Many films by Bimal Roy, Raj Kapoor, Chetan Anand, Manmohan Desai, and later, parallel cinema directors such as Shyam Benegal and Govind Nihalani, had messages that reflected the dominant socialist ethos of the times: the motif, therefore, tended to be

⁷ Anustup Basu, *Bollywood in the Age of New Media: The Geo-Televisual Aesthetic*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2010.

turned into a morality tale with song and dance or else into a dark film about the oppressed poor. Here the conclusion is tragic, but the film is construed so that the story moves fairly fast and suspense is maintained throughout, so that the end comes as a shocker.

The focus on Indian media and their relevance in contemporary India has recently been an important trend in Hindi films. In 2010 *Peepli (live)*, directed by Anusha Rizvi and Mahmood Farooqui shows a perspective of so-called rural development, commenting on lop sided policies and approaching the issue of media management in the developmental perspective. Also Ram Gopal Varma's *Rann* focuses on Indian media, unraveling the business of TRP that has become the mainstay of TV programming, and commenting upon the changes that have been brought to the business of filmmaking after adoption of television style of editing in the world of Hindi cinema. This is an issue that deserves more research.

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