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Sanctity and Scandal

The Mythologisation of Mother India

A rumour widely quoted in Bombay film circles in the 1980s was that when *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) was screened in Europe in 1958, it was beyond the comprehension of the hard-boiled, amoral Western audience. 'Why didn't the heroine simply sleep with the moneylender? Then she could have fed her family without all that suffering', a bewildered Englishman is supposed to have asked of a horrified Mehboob Khan. Whether or not the story is apocryphal, its wide currency and endurance suggest something deeper.

Mother India, in fact, has received considerable acclaim from Western audiences over the years—probably more than any other mainstream Indian film. It received an Oscar nomination in 1958, patronising but generally favourable reviews at its London release in 1961, and a flood of enthusiastic letters following its first transmission on British television in 1983. The wide circulation of the rumour almost certainly says less about actual Western audiences than about the terms of discourse of Indian cinema itself. Since it first emerged in the context of colonial India's fight for independence, Indian cinema has, for a number of reasons, been concerned with constructing a notion of Indian cultural and national identity. This has involved drawing on concepts such as 'tradition'. But a chaste and pristine India has also been constructed by opposing it to a decadent and exotic Other, the licentious and immoral 'West', with the films' villains invariably sporting a clutter of signifiers of Westernisation: whisky bottles, bikini-clad escorts or foreign limousines. In this case, however, there appears to be a telling displacement. The decadent Other is

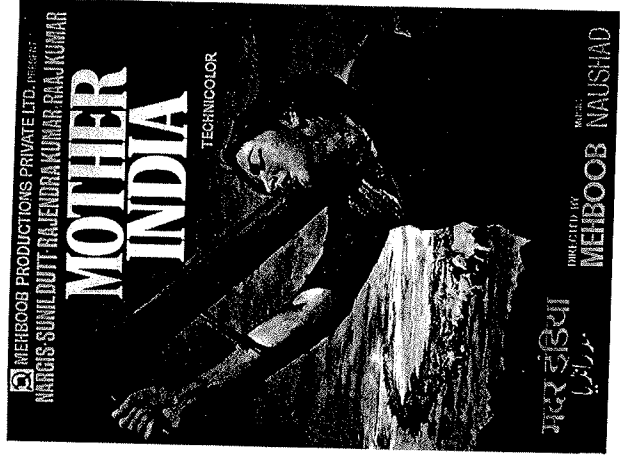


Figure 9.1 Poster for *Mother India* (1957)

Source: © Shaikat Khan. Courtesy Mehboob Productions Private Ltd, Mumbai, India.

transposed from the narrative of the film itself—where colonial rape is nevertheless an implicit subtext—to the wider narrative of the film's conditions of circulation; from an element within the narrative that must be punished by the forces of virtue to the gaze of a Western audience whose control must be wrested or arrested.

It can be no coincidence that such a story circulated around this particular film. *Mother India*'s status in Indian cinema mythology and popular consciousness is legendary: it was the all-time box-office hit and still guaranteed full houses well into the 1990s, allegedly playing in some part of India every day of every year.¹ Imbued as it was with the apparently untroubled optimism of the post-independence decade, and referred to as 'of our soil' or 'full of Indian emotions', *Mother India* is in many ways the quintessential Indian film. Clearly, the rumour articulated a not unreasonable mistrust of Western appropriation of Indian cinema: the West's desire to see and know cannot be divorced

from the ethos of colonialist adventuring, which controls its subjects both through voyeuristic fantasy and through attaining knowledge by means of which it can define and judge the rest of the world and thus consolidate its power.²

Beyond this general warning lies a disturbing specific history, for *Mother India* is also the title of a notorious book published in 1927 by Katherine Mayo, an American.³ This book purported to reveal research on the abuse suffered by Indian women at the hands of their menfolk but was an overtly sensationalised and very dubious diatribe that linked hysterical accounts of horrific sexual abuse—maimed and lacerated child brides, rampant venereal disease and grossly unsanitary childbirth—with a spurious genetic argument that India was unfit for independence. A best-seller in the West, it provoked a storm of controversy and has now come to exemplify the crudest of colonialist propaganda, particularly since recent research has revealed that rather than being a naive, misguided evangelist for women's causes, Mayo was almost certainly knowingly involved in a cynical British propaganda exercise.⁴ The film's reference to this controversy was not incidental,⁵ and the fact that both film and rumour so neatly invert the terms of the book in their construction and use of female sexuality is a feature of central significance, with wider ramifications, to which we will return.

What both the rumour concerning the film and the controversy around the book more broadly highlight are the complex issues involved in the reading of texts across cultures. Assuming that the text is not an object that contains meaning in itself, but that meanings arise in the process of reading and that texts open continuously onto other texts,⁶ I am concerned broadly with the implications—and difficulties—of this notion of intertextuality for how we talk about any individual film, particularly across cultures. At its most basic level, this chapter is an uncovering (necessarily partial) of some of the other stories and imagery that open onto, and through which a mainstream Indian audience might read, the film *Mother India*. It is not intended, of course, to fix the film—or simply to explain it to a Western film buff eager to consume such knowledge—but to illustrate the complexities involved in the processes of meaning production. On the one hand, I argue that the film offers a number of fissured, partial

and contradictory representations that address, construct and produce meaning and illusory coherence for the spectator through the process of narrative—and the resolutions narrative appears to effect. On the other hand, I show that underlying the film are a number of other discourses that range from the imagery and rhetoric of nationalism to ideas current in Indian society about female chastity, including those derived from other films and books and gossip about film stars.⁷

The central argument of this chapter is that *Mother India* is most usefully seen as an arena within which a number of discourses around female chastity, modern nationalism and, more broadly, morality intersect and feed on each other, with significant political effects. The first part of the chapter describes the film and discusses some of the play it makes with notions of femininity and tradition, ordering its material, somewhat precariously, within the narrative. The second part focuses on two written texts which bear on the film and describes how these fix and use two very different constructions of female sexuality and tradition. While some understanding of the Indian concept of *izzat/lataj* (honour or chastity)⁸ is important to making sense of the film, and knowledge of mythological and other culturally specific references further enriches it, vital and invariably undervalued is knowledge of the expectations Indian audiences have of Hindi film as a genre and the usually extensive fund of information they have about film stars. Thus, *Mother India* is known to be a remake of Mehboob Khan's earlier film *Aurat* (Woman, 1940), to work within (and against) the conventions of mainstream Indian cinema, and to be mythologised now as *the* all-time classic, its songs, imagery and dialogue firmly ensconced in the popular preconscious.

However, Nargis, who plays the heroine, was equally a legend in the 1980s, particularly since her tragic early death in 1981, and her star persona provided a further, crucial inflection to the film. The third part of this chapter focuses on the gossip stories through which Nargis's star persona was constructed and argues that these also constitute a discourse on chastity, nationalism and morality. While their comparatively open-ended form constrains this material in a manner different from film narrative, these stories work in crucial counterpoint to the film. Thus, for example, as the top star of her era, Nargis was popularly seen not only as glamorous and enviable

but also as scandalously sullied because of a very open romance she enjoyed over a number of years with her married co-star, Raj Kapoor. It may not be altogether frivolous to suggest that the most significant differences between the European and Indian audience's understanding of *Mother India* may have had less to do with the Europeans' ignorance of Indian ideas about female chastity (as the 1958 rumour implied) than with their ignorance of India's prurient interest in the star's purported lack of chastity.

THE FILM

Mother India is the story of a poor peasant woman, Radha, who, left alone with her children, defends her self-respect and an ideal of virtuous womanhood against tremendous odds: famine, flood, and a corrupt and lecherous moneylender, Sukhlal. Although his attempts to seduce her fail, he does keep her *kangan* (wedding bangles) in pawn and pauperises the family by extracting usurious interest on a small loan for over twenty years. Her son, Ramu, grows up to be gentle, obedient and supportive, but her favourite, Birjoo, turns outlaw in a single-handed fight against Sukhlal and the oppression he represents. Having failed to persuade the conservative, law-abiding villagers to join him, Birjoo then antagonises them further by joking with, and disrespectfully touching, the young unmarried women of the village. His excesses are seen as a threat to the community's izzat, and the angry villagers start a fire in which both Birjoo and his mother nearly die. When Birjoo finally unequivocally oversteps the bounds of community morality by kidnapping Sukhlal's daughter on her wedding day, Radha takes the decision to kill her own son.

The film is, of course, constructed within the formal conventions of Hindi cinema: the narrative is not tightly linear but builds in more or less circular fashion through a number of climaxes that are counterposed with scenes of humour, spectacle or pure emotional import, notably, a series of visually powerful and musically splendid songs.⁹ The film as a whole falls under the rubric of melodrama. A number of irresolvable, primarily in the arena of kinship and sexuality, are set in motion, resolutions are proposed which are only tenuously satisfactory and the excess (the emotional overspill); that

which cannot be convincingly resolved) is siphoned off in music and spectacle.

The undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated within the action, subordinated as it is to the demands of family/lineage/inheritance, is traditionally expressed in the music and ... in certain elements of the mise-en-scene. That is to say, music and mise-en-scene do not just heighten the emotionality of an element in the action, to some extent they substitute for it.¹⁰

Nowell-Smith's description of Hollywood melodrama is highly relevant, for Indian mainstream cinema as a genre tends to address and move its spectator through a film importantly by way of affect, although this is structured and contained by deeply rooted and familiar narrative. The emphasis is on *how* things will happen, not *what* happens next; on a moral disordering to be (temporarily) resolved rather than an enigma to be solved, as stated earlier. This positioning depends for its full effect on certain kinds of cultural competence, most notably, a knowledge of the parameters of the ideal moral universe of the Hindi film—that is, the paradigms of 'good' and 'bad' (or expected and unacceptable) behaviours through play with, or defiance of, which the film derives its dramatic tensions and within which the ensuing crises must be safely resolved.

The most common play of Indian cinema is to throw the domain of kinship morality into crisis. In this, *Mother India* is exemplary. Drama is wrought, firstly, by exposing contradictory injunctions within the domain itself and, secondly, by opposing ties of kinship to the demands of the law and religious and moral duty to the community. The crises are dramatised through a series of dilemmas that face the heroine. Radha's first apparent choice is between being an ideal wife (honouring her *suhrag*¹¹ and refusing Sukhlal's advances) and being an ideal mother (feeding her starving children). Later, she must choose between being an ideal mother (unconditionally loving and protecting her son) and being an ideal woman of the village community (protecting its izzat, which has been tainted by Birjoo's abduction of one of its daughters), itself considered a kinship group. While the narrative momentum, and identifications offered, must

position most spectators adequately to make sense of these dilemmas, they gain in power with cultural knowledge of the conventions of Hindi cinema's ideal moral universe, which lays particular stress on both the sanctity of the blood relationship—above all, the mother-son bond—and the sanctity of marriage (and *suhaag*), together with the controlled sexuality of wife and mother figures. Careful negotiation of values accruing to each character is crucial to the working of the film, so that, for example, much is made of the ambiguity of Birjoo's villainy. Although he endangers the village girls' *izzat*, he is also a passionately devoted and, in many ways, exemplary son whose breaking of the law is fired primarily by a desire to avenge the affronts to his mother's chastity: he dies pulling from his chest the blood-soaked *kangan* he has recovered for her—a restitution of her symbolically violated honour.

Although the spectator appears to be positioned primarily through the figure of Radha, this identification is, of course, partial and fragmented, and one is simultaneously offered the infinitely more dangerous position of Birjoo. From here, a familiar underlying structure, the Oedipal drama, unfolds: the son's fantasy of displacing the father and taking his place with the mother is a violation of the law against incest and must be punished by castration or death. This is not overt, of course, but its resonances underlie the poignancy and emotional power of, for example, Birjoo's offerings of the blood-soaked bangles. While the film can be seen to play out, on one level, this most recurrent preoccupation of human mythology—the conflict, from a male perspective, between desire and the law—around this it also weaves other material which is more specific to Indian culture and film conventions.

All such ordering works to give apparent mastery of (and to cover over) ambivalence and contradiction, none more fraught than in the construction of woman.¹² In *Mother India* we, in fact, find Radha constructed through a number of partial and, at times, conflicting representations that refer to a spectrum of archetypes of ideal femininity in Indian culture, and the figure appears to operate as a terrain on which a notion of the ideal Indian woman is negotiated.

The types of images that erupt in the course of the film vary from shots of Radha heroically enjoining the villagers not to desert their

motherland to images of her being trampled underfoot by them; from being carried out of a blazing haystack in her son's arms to stuffing *chapatis* (flatbreads) into her sons' mouths as they pull a plough through their fields; from shots that look down on her blushing coyly behind a wedding veil or as *sindoor* (vermillion) is placed in her hair to shots that look up at her proudly striding forward harnessed to her plough; from shots of her crying on her son's shoulder and pleading with him as a lover might to the images of her wielding a heavy stick, axe and, finally, gun. The most powerfully horrifying image is of Radha's levelling a shotgun at her son. But, in fact, all the central male figures are destroyed or implicitly castrated by association with her: she kills her favourite son; her husband loses both arms (and implicitly his manliness) following her insistence that they plough some barren land; the villainous Sukhlal ends up covered in cotton fluff, covering like a naughty infant as she beats him with a big stick, and pleading abjectly with her to save his daughter's *izzat*; and her elder son Ramu becomes ineffectual in her shadow. Thus, she is both venerator of men and venerated by them as *devi* (goddess) and *maa*



Figure 9.2 Mother India (Nargis) and her two sons. Still from *Mother India*.

Source: © Shaikat Khan. Courtesy Mehboob Productions Private Ltd, Mumbai, India.

(mother), and she is, in turn, in need of men's protection and also a protector and destroyer of men.

The cultural competence of most Indian audiences means they would, on some level, recognise within this Radha allusions to a variety of figures of Hindu mythology: Sita (archetypal dutiful, loyal wife and embodiment of purity, whose trial by fire and abandonment with two young sons are implicitly invoked);¹³ Savitri (exemplarily devoted wife); Radha herself (the cowherd who was Krishna's lover); Lakshmi (goddess of wealth and good fortune, to whom brides are customarily likened and to whom Sukhial explicitly, and somewhat ironically, given the context of his attempted seduction, likens Radha); and the more fearsome mother goddesses, Durga and Kali, powerful symbols of female sacred authority and embodiments of Shakti (female power), who punish and destroy if they are displeased. There are also more covert references, for example, to Surabhi, the holy cow, and to Mother Earth, the fertility principle.

This diversity of allusions and a degree of incoherence are undoubtedly crucial to the experience and dramatic power of the film. But while the Oedipal subtext may operate as one form of ordering of this diversity, it is elaborated within another important, and more culturally specific, patterning. As Wadley has pointed out, in the Hindu tradition not only does femaleness embody a fundamental duality—woman as bestower and as destroyer—but female sexual energy is always potentially dangerous, but can become beneficent (to men) if controlled through marriage or otherwise subjugated to male authority.¹⁴ Thus, the goddesses who have no regular consort (primarily those known as mother goddesses) are considered the most aggressive and fiery—often demanding blood sacrifice—due to the 'fierce power of chastity',¹⁵ a power that accumulates through sexual abstinence but, if carefully handled, can also be tapped to male advantage.

In fact, the film relates each manifestation of Radha's apparently threatening power or strength to her exemplary chastity, and this then serves (male) traditional values and the izzat of the community. Radha's defiant refusal of Sukhial's advances is thus constructed less as a stand against male sexual oppression of women than as evidence of faith in Lakshmi and as a refusal to dishonour her husband and hence

her suhaag. It is by virtue of this noble chastity and faith that Radha derives strength to uphold the morale of the village and save it from a string of natural disasters. Similarly, her subsequent killing of her son is less a display of solidarity with the women of the village than a defence of the community's izzat (ensuring the chastity of young women given to other villages in marriage). The pattern has overtones of a blood sacrifice, Radha's own 'fierce power of chastity' being tested and consolidated before the act, first by the fire ordeal and then by a purification in water (as she and Birjoo swim to escape). The film's resolution produces Radha—and her upholding of female chastity—as the saviour of the village and implicit cause of its prosperity and liberation from oppression: it is *her* hands, still bloody from the sacrifice of her son years before, that are respectfully entreated to inaugurate the village dam, signifier of technological plenitude.

In describing the film as a play of tensions between a number of apparent irreconcilables—primarily within the domain of kinship morality and notions of femininity—and the (tenuous) mastery and coherence the narrative seems to offer, it is important to remember that these irreconcilables draw on, and slip between, a number of discourses. Mulvey has described melodrama's fundamental appeal and power as lying in 'the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of overdetermined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes.'¹⁶ *Mother India's* central celebration of a notion of female chastity does, in fact, work some particularly complex elisions and denials, most notably through its slippage between discourses of sexual and national identity.

For any Indian audience, the title *Mother India* immediately situates the film within the discourse of the freedom movement, and the film is seen to be as much about nationhood as womanhood. Although the British are not overtly represented, there are a number of oblique but highly charged allusions, notably, the metaphor of colonial rape that underlies the whole film: the predatory oppressor appropriates a defenceless woman's wedding bangles through force backed by a corrupt law. However, the villainous Sukhial is simultaneously the tyrannical feudal lord, and the film can be read as a description of the triumphant emergence of a new India from both feudal and colonial oppression. The long introductory credit sequence together with the

film's final moments—between which the body of the film unfolds as flashback—is most revealing. Following a long montage of dams, pylons, power stations, cranes, bulldozers and bridges, Radha, who appears as a venerated but dumb and mud-stained old woman, is asked to inaugurate and bless an irrigation project by the men of the village who, as paragons of patriotic deference, signified by the white cotton *kurta* (shirt) and Gandhi-*topi*,¹⁷ humbly address this champion of female chastity as *maa*. It is a vision of a new utopia that integrates features of both alternative deposed societies. The traditional society, it is implied, was fundamentally morally sound, its evils concentrated in a villain who could be vanquished. Here Sukhilal evokes the mythological villain, Raavana, the rapacious king of Lanka who abducted Sita. However, this society was vulnerable to the vagaries of nature. Western society, the locus of male violence and notoriously uncontrolled female sexuality, is fundamentally morally unsound, but it does have technological mastery. Thus, controlled female sexuality and uncontrolled nature are opposed to controlled nature and uncontrolled female sexuality. Power in the new society is generated by control of both: oppression is ousted and the hazards of nature overcome with modern technology, but the purity of traditional values—symbolised by female chastity—must still bless, and ultimately legitimise, technological advance. Mother India must open the dam.

In celebrating Radha's power and her defence of chastity in this way, the film implicitly, but crucially, denies the essential role played by Birjoo's act of violence in killing Sukhilal and the conscious sacrifice Birjoo made of his own life. As Birjoo explained: 'Ma, our troubles will never end as long as Sukhilala lives.... My death will assure ... the farmers will have grain in their homes and fuel to burn.... The fate of the village will change forever.'¹⁸ To which Radha, who was throughout a conservative force remonstrating with him against the use of excessively radical or violent action, replied: 'No, Birjoo. You won't change anything with a gun.... Don't lose heart, my son.... We'll work hard, we'll toil. God will change our lives and He will change the fate of the village.'

Within the framework of the Oedipal subtext, the denial of the desire and subsequent violence of the son and its displacement

onto woman are not so mysterious. But this denial can also be related to the context of early post-independence India and the wide currency of Gandhi's ideas, which drew on notions of bhakti (redemption through selfless devotion) and a concept of potent, active femininity to oppose two models of (male) behaviour. The Gandhian ideal used a non-violent, 'feminine' and supremely potent force; the other, the violence, machismo and uncontrolled aggression seen to mark Western as well as various Indian warrior traditions.¹⁹ The film appears to echo this by denying and destroying Birjoo's potency, while celebrating and saving Radha and the gentler son, Ramu.²⁰

One of the most traumatic aspects of independence was, of course, the amount of violence that was involved and that erupted so horrifically during Partition. The film's seeming denial of the effectiveness of revolutionary violence is rather more fraught than at first appears. Throughout the film one finds examples of highly charged imagery and covert reiteration of the denial: for example, one central and powerfully emotional song begins with images of streams of refugees leaving their homeland (which could not but evoke Partition, particularly in 1957 India) but ends with them returned to peace and prosperity, dancing by sheaves of wheat on a map of *pre-Partition* India. Although a coherent explanation of the song is feasible, for an Indian audience much of the power of such sequences undoubtedly lies in the emotional impact of this dream-logic reworking and censoring of Indian history.

The slippages effected by the notion of female chastity itself permit the most complex disavowal, however, for within India, the notion conflates a number of not wholly compatible ideas and discourses. First, female chastity represents female sexual energy not dissipated by sexual activity and, as such, it is a potent force in nature that can either be tapped to male advantage or become positively dangerous to men. Second, it implies a passive sexuality, woman constrained as a pawn of male power networks and locus of displaced male anxieties. Third, it is used as a metaphor for purity and, hence, for the 'purity' of traditional values, for an ideal society uncontaminated by colonial oppressors, and for India itself. This slippage between woman and nation means, for example, that the film can construct woman as an

ultimate authority and power, disavow this by relegating woman to metaphor for India or ideal morality, and simultaneously preserve a construction of woman as pawn of male desire.

BACKGROUND READING

The rumour that *Mother India* puzzled Western audiences because they could not understand the Indian stress on female chastity is not, in fact, so misconceived. Although female chastity is familiar in the West as a symbol of purity, this draws primarily on a Christian equation of sexuality with sin, an association scarcely present in the Indian formulation. The range of ideas the concept encompasses in a Hindu or Muslim context would certainly be lost on most Westerners. It was ostensibly to contextualise *Mother India* for international audiences that the film-makers produced a special brochure.²¹ This was a twenty-two-page, full-colour booklet containing reproductions of oil paintings illustrating both themes and scenes from the film together with a number of short essays (in English) purporting to explain Indian traditional beliefs about womanhood, nature and destiny and to give a flavour of peasant life in village India. The whole is resonant of a sentimental, and somewhat hysterically moralistic, Victorian religious picture book, each image capped with an overblown title and a florid prose description.

The booklet begins and ends with the assertion that the film is about Indian women's chastity and its sanctity. It refers to:

this epic drama of an Indian mother, the nucleus around which revolves the tradition and culture of ages in this ancient land ... [where] ... chastity, the sacred heirloom of an ancient race, demands the supreme sacrifice, even of her children, from the mother.²²

It brazenly asserts that woman exists only in terms of man.

In India, woman is part of man ... her single prayer is to die in the presence of her husband.... To this eternal Indian woman, the home is her temple, her husband her god, the children his blessings and the land her great mother.²³

This is finally neutralised in a historical perspective.

The woman is an altar in India. She is loved and respected, worshipped and protected.... Indians measure the virtue of their race by the chastity of their women. To them a woman's person is sacred, her chastity a virtue to be nursed and her character a prize to be envied.... Indian women have thrown themselves into the sacrificial fire to escape even the defiling shadow of a foreign invader.... This India of the olden days still lives in the 700,000 villages of India.²⁴

Throughout the booklet, Radha/Mother India is described as ideally pure and an exemplary mother and wife and repeatedly compared to the goddesses Sita and Savitri. However, in stressing analogies with these paragons of purity and selfless devotion to husbands and sons, there is a significant omission: the booklet ignores all reference to the more powerful and terrifying facets of ideal Indian femininity, as embodied in the punitive and destructive mother goddesses such as Kali and Durga, although these are in fact implicit in the film. The effect of this construction of a comparatively uncontradictory model of femininity is to close off whole areas of themes and tensions apparent in the film, presenting instead an ideal moral universe free from disorder or ambiguity, with woman safely controlled and idealised.

A similar disavowal operates in the booklet's description of traditional India, which is shown as an unequivocal utopia where 'an ancient peace-loving people ... lead a harmonious community life', with colourful festivals and mothers telling 'stories of virtue and valour' from mythology to build the character of their sons. The theme of rural oppression and Sukhial's corruption is scarcely mentioned: hardships are ascribed to the 'inscrutable smiles and frowns of nature', designed by God and destiny to make 'heroes out of men and mothers out of women'. Furthermore, 'the Indian farmer likes his sweat to mix with the perspiration of his bullock', so that even those who know of tractors often prefer not to use them. In this context, Birjoo becomes a virtual villain for having 'hated in his heart' and for losing faith in divine justice. Again, this shift of emphasis closes off much of the narrative play of the film: if traditional society is a

utopia, questions about the ethics of revolutionary violence become less compelling; if Birjoo is a villain, Radha's dilemma is less acute; if peasants prefer bullocks to tractors, Western technology need not be incorporated.

It would be easy to dismiss this as simply a sexist and reactionary rant. However, as with the film (whose complex workings and contradictions particularly defy simplistic categorisation), such blanket dismissal is dangerously reductionist. As an aside we might note that, intriguingly, Mehboob Khan himself was not coy about contradiction: his studio emblem blithely combined a hammer and sickle with an Urdu couplet meaning 'Man proposes, God disposes'.²⁵ While the use of the figure of woman to signify a vestibule of traditional purity and power undoubtedly works to oppress women on many levels, in the context of the nationalist struggle it can be simultaneously a tool to counter imperialist oppression. We cannot ignore a history in which an American book, brazenly appropriating the nationalist catch-phrase 'Mother India' to its own title, had sensationalised a picture of degradation purporting to be of Indian womanhood and had claimed not only that 'Indian women of child-bearing age cannot safely venture, without special protection, within reach of Indian men',²⁶ but even that 'a very small percentage of Indian women seem ... well and strong.... This state I believe to be accounted for by a morbid and unawakened mentality, by venereal infection, and by sexual exhaustion. They commonly experience marital use two and three times a day.'²⁷

While an Indian rumour constructs a West so licentious and amoral that it cannot remotely comprehend Mother India's bid for chastity and must have the concept spelled out in a proselytising picture pamphlet, a Western book—far more sinisterly—constructs and projects onto India a sexuality so depraved that chastity is inconceivable, where women are routinely abused to the point that Indian genetic stock is depleted and Indians' 'hands are too weak, too fluttering, to seize or hold onto the reins of government'.²⁸ In this context, the insistences of the film booklet, the rumour and the film itself seem less excessive, for they are implicitly involved in reclaiming Mother India for India, in exorcising the defamations and pollution of

the term by Mayo—and, similarly, that of India by the West and of Indian women by colonialist men.²⁹

THE STAR

These are not the only discourses within which the film is read. Other texts at play within the broader arena of *Mother India* already undermine too seamless a construction of an ideal India. Although Bombay film-makers assert that certain transgressions of an ideal morality are impossible in Hindi films because the Indian audience is conservative and easily shocked, this same audience appears very eager to be shocked in certain contexts, if one is to believe the evidence of the network of gossip that surrounds the scandals in the lives and loves of film stars in India. These stories are consumed almost as avidly as the films themselves and, over the years, many publications have been regularly produced devoted exclusively to such narratives, which become tacitly—and at times, even quite overtly—interwoven in the Indian audience's readings of the films. Compared to the films, the form of the gossip narrative is somewhat open-ended and most usefully likened to soap opera. There is a long-standing core of central characters, whose careers and romances have been the focus of obsessive public scrutiny over the years and are standard cultural knowledge throughout the Hindi film-going centres of India. There are a number of ongoing and intertwined storylines, within which short, self-contained dramas are played out. Crises erupt and are temporarily resolved but, as in soap opera, the elements of the drama remain to be re-used, re-explained and resolved again in a new drama, thus allowing a continual reworking of the obsessions of the discourse, which turn primarily around sexuality and kinship but also deal with modern Indian identity.

Nargis became a star in the late 1940s and, although she retired from films in 1957, she remained very much in the public eye until her death. She is undoubtedly a central legendary figure of Indian cinema, and most Indian audiences were, until recent years, familiar with—and still discussed—the details of her story. It is not possible to reconstruct precisely how the stories would have been inflected in

1957, as film publications then were more discreet and much was told by word of mouth as rumour. What was available in the 1980s were primarily modern retellings of her story: rumours circulating among the general public, stories told by people who claimed to have known or have met her, features in gossip magazines of those years, some archival features, and a small number of published interviews.³⁰ The questions and issues that structure the legend have been inevitably and importantly reworked over the years, according to the preoccupations of each generation, and it is crucial to stress that my concern here is with the persona of Nargis as publicly constructed rumour, not with an accurate biography.³¹

The story of Nargis is that of an unfortunate girl, born in 1929 to a famous Muslim courtesan-singer and a young Hindu doctor later ostracised from his 'respectable' family for this association. The story goes that even as a child, Nargis had dreamed of redeeming herself by becoming a doctor. Her mother had sent her to a good Bombay school and disciplined her strictly, largely keeping her away from the film industry throughout her childhood. Once she reached adolescence, however, Nargis's mother not only tricked her into (most unwillingly) starring in a film for her friend Mehboob Khan but also allegedly put her daughter's *nath* (virginity) on the market and allowed a wealthy Muslim prince to pay handsomely for her. (This episode is sometimes denied, or recounted as her first affair. Its purpose seems to be to construct her as already tarnished before meeting Raj Kapoor.)

By the late 1940s, Nargis had become a top star, but it was her professional and personal partnership with Kapoor, handsome young star, producer and director, that brought superstardom and notoriety. The couple's bold and very open love affair captured the prurient imagination of the nation. On the one hand, it was enviously celebrated: they were young, glamorous, beautiful, rich, and said to be passionately in love. They epitomised a modern freedom and lack of inhibition. They flew around the world, were seen photographed with Truman at the White House in 1952, were popular as pin-ups in bazaars throughout the Arab world, and were household names in Russia following the unprecedented success there of *Awaara* (The Vagabond, Raj Kapoor, 1951).³² Many versions of the gossip justify the affair not only because of their (anomalous) status as film stars, but also

because their love is said to have been pure, blind, an all-consuming passion, and even divine. Moreover, Nargis is applauded for having had the courage to live her life openly and show total devotion to 'her' man, for example, wearing only white saris in deference to his whims, slaving with exemplary dedication at his studios for minimal pay, and even wearing sindoor in her hair despite the fact that he continually refused to marry her. On the other hand, the affair was a source of voyeuristic titillation and completely scandalous. As Kapoor was a married man with children, Nargis was denounced as a whore and a home-breaker, and the affair as squalid. It is also stressed that Kapoor exploited her, although it is simultaneously suggested that, of course, as a good Hindu, he could not have left his arranged marriage to marry a tarnished woman. After seven years, Nargis eventually 'saw the light' and, 'heartbroken', left him. She scrupulously kept a vow to avoid his presence for more than twenty years.

The next episode is recounted particularly often and with overt fascination. Some time after the breakup, Nargis was shooting the fire scene for *Mother India* in Mehboob Studios when the blaze got out of hand, and she was trapped behind a wall of burning haystacks. In a dramatic gesture, Sunil Dutt, the young and comparatively unknown actor who played her son, Birjoo, dived heroically into the flames and carried her to safety in his arms. After he saved her life, they fell in love and later married quietly. When news of the marriage broke, there was a sensation, fuelled by a distinct frisson of scandal that a younger man (and screen son of *Mother India*) was marrying the notorious First Lady of the Indian screen.

Riding high on the phenomenal success of *Mother India*—and national and international accolades for her performance—Nargis retired from the dirty world of the film industry and gave birth to a son, Sanjay. Gossip invariably stresses how crucial leaving films was in saving her reputation. For the next twenty years, she continued to devote her energies to caring for her husband and three children, for whom she was said to be a 'tower of strength'. Much is made of her performance as an ideal wife and mother, keeping traditional Hindu fasts for her husband's well-being—Sunil's prospering career was taken as evidence of her devotion—and idolising her son. As Sanjay grew up, the gossip press made much of this exemplary mother-son

relationship: 'for a minute we looked in admiration at this wonderful, dignified, first lady of the Indian screen. I turned to Sanjay. His eyes held sheer idolatry and respect as he gazed fondly at his mother.'³³ She also gave dedicated service to community charities, especially those relating to cerebral palsy. The family suffered various hardships. At one point, Sunil's films began to fail, he had indiscreet affairs with other actresses (although Nargis remained the long-suffering, faithful wife), and they were constantly harassed by a public loath to forget the colourful Kapoor affair. Sanjay was taunted by schoolmates, and, most bizarrely, when Kapoor in 1970 chose a young unknown beauty, Dimple, to co-star in his son's debut film, a decidedly far-fetched rumour gained ground that Dimple was Raj and Nargis's secret illegitimate daughter who had been farmed out to a local businessman for adoption. Moreover, Sanjay was clearly developing into something of a rebel: while Nargis wanted him to be a doctor, he wanted to become a film star. Before long, stories started to circulate of his teenage romance with a top starlet—of whom Nargis was said to disapprove.

In accordance with a pattern that has been remarked on in the construction of other stars,³⁴ stories about Nargis construct her as both ordinary and extraordinary, as a housewife with her share of mundane domestic joys and trials and simultaneously as both an extraordinarily talented actress and a bold rebel who had uninhibitedly followed through a grand and divine passion and who continued to live among the rich and powerful. She began to be referred to respectfully and affectionately as *bhabhiji* (lit., elder brother's wife) by the film industry, becoming their public spokesperson and president of the IMPPA. More significantly, she is said to have built up a close friendship with Indira Gandhi over the years and in 1980 was rewarded with a seat in the Rajya Sabha (House of Lords).³⁵ She was by then a national symbol of dignified glamour and respectability, the other first lady of India—Indira Gandhi's glamorous alter ego. Nargis's first parliamentary intervention was stoutly patriotic and wildly controversial: she denounced Satyajit Ray's films for showing India's poverty to the West, rather than 'Modern India ... [for example], dams', and a national debate ensued.³⁶

Later that year, aged 51, Nargis was discovered to have cancer and, when Indian doctors gave up hope, she was rushed to New York's foremost cancer specialist. For weeks on end her distraught husband kept constant vigil at her bedside and his prayers and superhuman endurance appeared to have been rewarded when the specialists declared a 'miracle'. Nargis was triumphantly brought home and fondly anticipated her newfound dream of seeing her beloved son make his public debut as a film star. Weeks later she suffered a relapse, and just three days before Sanjay's film premiere, she died. The nation mourned, and the family was devastated.

Stories continued to circulate about Sanjay.³⁷ After his mother's death, he became a self-destructive rebel, allegedly ruining his health and film career with drugs, wild nights and alcoholic binges. In Nargis's daughters' rare appearances in gossip, they were invariably constructed as 'good', and, with a touch of fortuitous symmetry, the eldest married the son of Rajendra Kumar, who had played Mother India's good son, Ramu. Sunil, Nargis's husband, became a pillar of the community. In 1985, pledging his support for the bereaved son of Nargis's friend, Indira, he was elected a member of Rajiv Gandhi's new government.

The parallels between the film and star texts are, of course, remarkable: both are preoccupied with the control of female sexuality and patterned around sacrifice and the burgeoning of female power and authority. Both involve mothers' relationships with rebellious sons and both work towards a definition of a modern Indianness, with dams recurring, somewhat bizarrely, as key signifiers in each. Direct crossovers occur, with Nargis's star persona increasingly integrated with Mother India in later years; but there are also some crucial inversions. To the extent that the star persona is always implicit in the Indian audience's reading of a film, these inversions provide a counterpoint and tensions that can, at times, explosively exacerbate the apparent coherence of the film.

Just as the film had played with a diversity of representations of 'woman', so the star persona of Nargis ties a number of facets of modern Indian womanhood loosely together: the Muslim courtesan, the Westernised free lover, the passionate Radha, the

devoted Hindu wife, the adoring mother, the powerful politician, and so forth. While some coherence is provided through the overriding linear narrative (sexuality placed under social control leads to redemption and power), the facets still to some extent coexist in the gossip, which orders this material primarily through spinning stories around the questions that such conflicts throw up: Can a daring, uninhibited seductress be a dutiful wife and mother? Can the daughter of a courtesan be a respected symbol of national propriety? While the film more or less contained such irreconcilables through the process of classic narrative, and the booklet's didacticism closed off even more, the star persona exists primarily in the telling and retelling—with varying emphases, moralistic commentaries and speculations—of a heterogeneous collection of anecdotes over many years (which the present account has necessarily had to linearise, standardise and condense), and resolutions are always temporary. It can thus accommodate more internal incoherence and more overt transgressions of ideal morality. If the star persona is a discourse on how to live modern Indianness and the crises of conflicting moralities this entails, stars become more fascinating the greater the contradictions they embody and the greater their transgressions.

Similar themes structure both texts, however, and the most obvious inversion—that the persona of Nargis at the time she played Radha was very far from a paragon of maternal chastity—masks a deeper structural similarity. In the film, Radha's chastity was tested when kinship duty and economic necessity (feeding her children) crossed wider social morality (preserving *izzat*) and, in fact, the film ultimately allows her both. In the gossip, Nargis must choose between kinship duty (obeying her mother) and economic necessity on the one hand, and wider social morality (preserving her *izzat* and becoming a doctor) on the other hand. But here the former constrains her and she loses her chastity with dire social consequences.³⁸ Thus, underlying and interwoven in the film's blanket celebration of ideal chastity is a text that opens up a number of questions sealed over by the film: *which* women must be chaste? What is the place of India's various erotic traditions—from goddesses such as Radha to the Muslim courtesan? How is modern Indian woman's sexuality negotiated?

Probably the most dramatic subversion of the film's denials lies in the moment at which the two texts literally overlap: Birjoo/Sunil Dutt rescues Radha/Nargis from a wall of blazing haystacks. It is in fact a turning point in both texts. Within the film, it is the point at which Radha's devotion to her son is most acutely tested and recognition of the need to sacrifice him begins; within the gossip, the purging of the 'unchaste' woman is the point from which Nargis can achieve redemption and power by self-sacrificing devotion to husband, son and community. The film booklet adds its own significant inflection to this moment with a painting of a modestly draped woman lost in swirling (womb-like) blood-red and orange flames. The caption reads:

Fire, the crucible of virtue.... Like Sita, the fabled goddess of purity, she stepped into the ordeal of fire only to come out into the dawn of a new life. Those who sacrifice never die. They only inherit a greater existence.³⁹

Somewhat strangely, this description fits the gossip story better than the overt sense of the film scene, which not only makes no explicit reference to Sita but is more obviously about testing Radha's devotion to, and unflinching protection of, her son—and his devotion and protectiveness towards her. The fact that the film's testing of the mother's devotion and son's power is played out in an idiom that echoes Rama's testing of the chastity of his wife, Sita, leads to an interesting elision: Birjoo the son plays out the role of Rama the husband, the fantasy of the son displacing the husband/father. These are, in fact, peculiarly intense scenes: around these moments, Radha and Birjoo appear most like lovers, the *mise-en-scène* becomes revealingly extravagant and patently excessive. The sequence culminates in a crescendo of orchestral strings and a wild camera pan through trees, before dropping down into a lilting, lyrical song: 'O Mere Laal Aa Jao' (My Beloved Son, Come Back), soothingly reinstating the 'proper' mother-son relationship. That the gossip stories represent the fire scene as the precise moment at which the stars fall in love is thus a dizzy exacerbatation of an already dangerous Oedipal subtext, for it provides the 'knowledge' / fantasy that the scene was really played out. Sunil married Nargis. The son 'got' the mother.

It is, of course, primarily through controlled sexuality and motherhood—rather than chastity per se—that Nargis is seen to have consolidated her power and authority. Moreover, the obsessional interest of the gossip in Nargis's very ideal relationship with her son suggests that her power, and the completeness of her redemption, must be continually asserted and tested. Radha, the doting mother whose rebel son has to be killed when she can no longer control him, becomes Nargis, whose beloved rebel son becomes wild and self-destructive when she dies and can no longer control him. The film's significant denial of the effectivity of revolutionary violence is echoed, although more tamely, in the gossip. Where Radha's struggles had been against the villain Sukhial, Nargis struggled first against her semi-villainous mother and then against the film industry—a veritable Sukhial with its black money, extortionate interest rates, rapacious exploitation of young women, and sex and violence in its films. Like Radha, Nargis's fight against social injustice was gentle and non-violent, eventually moving into voluntary social work and institutionalised politics. She was known for opposing both radical politics (supporting Mrs Gandhi throughout) and even radical film-making (decrying Satyajit Ray's 'Westernised' films, Mrinal Sen's Marxist films, Mani Kaul's 'avant-garde' practice), and her centrality as an icon of respected Indian female power was crucially bound to this conservatism. Mother India had blessed the new India by opening a dam at the request of devout male villagers. In her final months, Nargis sanctioned a similar vision of modern India by insisting to an assembly of male politicians that Indian filmmakers should show not poverty to the West but dams. We thus find the model of controlled female sexuality invoking the image of controlled water to generate power for a new India—while still fighting the shadow of the controlling gaze of an ever-critical West: 'When I go abroad, foreigners ask me embarrassing questions ... like "Do you have cars in India?" I feel so ashamed my eyes are lowered before them.'⁴⁰

To the end, the gossip stories attempted to negotiate a harmonious marriage of Western technology and Indian traditional values. As Nargis lay in a prestigious American hospital, paying huge fees to take advantage of the latest medical technology, she and Sumil were,

according to the gossip press, displaying to the admiring Western world the sublime devotion of the traditional Indian married couple and the power of Hindu faith and prayer. After seeing this, I think I will convert to Hinduism', one American specialist allegedly announced.

Between a curious Western gaze denied any comprehension of Indian chastity and one that must be solicited with vistas of an India by which it might be benignly awed lies a history of difficult shifts and uneasy negotiations around the construction of a modern India within a postcolonial world. *Mother India* must be regarded as a broad terrain of multilayered, interrelating and conflicting texts that not only have historical and economic dimensions but also crucial political ramifications.⁴¹ Although the complexities of shifting and alternative readings and positionings must render blanket categorisations such as 'radical' or 'reactionary' inadequate (and suggest that texts are worked with rather than simply consumed), the confluences and



Figure 9.3 Poster on Bombay streets in 1985

Source: © Behroze Gandhi. Courtesy Behroze Gandhi.

slippages that this wider text negotiates have produced *Mother India* as a site of extraordinary emotional potency and clear political effectivity—whether in the arena of gender relations or the narrower forum of national politics. The figure of controlled female sexuality continued to be tapped to generate power for husbands and sons—in the national interest. In 1980, Indira Gandhi's election campaign had used the image of a raised hand with the caption, 'The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world'. In Rajiv Gandhi's 1985 election campaign following his mother's assassination, Sunil Dutt, Nargis's 'saviour' and devoted husband, stood as parliamentary candidate for Bombay. His poster showed a map of India within which stood the figure of Indira Gandhi, sheathed in a decorous sari. Beneath this was the raised hand, to one side Sunil's photograph and, above it all, the caption 'Mother India needs you' (Figure 9.3). He was returned with an overwhelming majority.

NOTES

1. Whilst the film is still iconic, by the mid-1990s, with the advent of cable television and a new 'Bollywood' generation, it no longer had such a guaranteed box-office draw. See discussion in Gayatri Chatterjee, *Mother India*, London: British Film Institute, 2008 [2002], p. 19, also pp. 76–7.
2. This should, of course, be read as a serious—and ever relevant—warning for European and American publications devoted to the examination of Indian cinema. See, for example, Robert Cruz, 'Black Cinemas, Film Theory and Dependent Knowledge', *Screen*, vol. 26, nos 3–4, 1985, pp. 152–6. However, in the context of a multicultural Western society, institutionalised disdain for, and ignorance and marginalisation of, mainstream Indian cinema seems equally dangerous, as this is not only a symptom of, but also feeds directly into, racism.
3. Katherine Mayo, *Mother India*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1927.
4. See Manoranjan Jha, *Katherine Mayo and India*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1971. Jha's book renders naïve Mary Daly's uncritical praise of Mayo's 'exceptional' understanding in *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, p. 119.
5. Although I was unaware of this when I wrote the original essay on which this chapter is based, Gayatri Chatterjee's research in the Mehboob Studio archives has now shown that, in fact, the allusion was a knowing one (Chatterjee, *Mother India*, p. 20.)
6. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977, pp. 147–8.
7. While the former broadly describes the spectator in process, a subject positioned by the film (and offers a way out of the impasse of a relativism whose

ultimate logic must be to posit as many—equally valid—readings as readers), the latter indicates the kinds of cultural competence that the intended audience might be expected to bring to the film. The distinction is, of course, primarily conceptual and, as the chapter makes clear, the two are less easily separable in practice. See Charlotte Brunson, 'Crossroads: Notes on Soap Opera', *Screen*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1981, pp. 32–7; and Kuhn, 'Women's Genres', for discussion of these issues in relation to so-called women's genres.

8. Izzat and laaj can both refer to controlled female sexuality. The connotations of Izzat are broader, conveying a general sense of prestige, honour, respect, while laaj refers more specifically to female chastity/virginity. Both embody the idea that female 'honour' reflects on the honour of the whole kin/affine network.
9. For further discussion of these conventions, see chapter eight.
10. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Minnelli and Melodrama', *Screen*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1977, p. 117.
11. Suhaag: the auspicious state of being blessed with a living husband. The concept has wide currency and is symbolised by the woman placing sindoor (vermillion) in her parting and wearing kangan (bangles). Widows may no longer do these things and become, themselves, inauspicious.
12. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories, Mulvey and others have suggested that, in cinema, the denial of male anxiety around the figure of woman (due to the threat of castration that she represents) takes the fetishistic form of disavowal through idealising woman. See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.
13. In the *Ramayana*, when Sita was rescued from the clutches of the monstrous Raavana, the wicked king of Lanka who had abducted (but not 'touched') her, her husband Rama would not be convinced of her 'purity'—and consequent worthiness to remain queen of the land—until she had undergone an ordeal by fire. Although her survival 'proved' her innocence, as the people of his kingdom remained sceptical, Rama banished her for many years, until their two sons were grown.
14. Susan S. Wadley 'Women and the Hindu Tradition', in *Women in India: Two Perspectives*, eds D. Jacobson and S. Wadley, New Delhi: Manohar, 1977, pp. 118–19.
15. Chris Fuller, 'The Divine Couple in South India', *History of Religions*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1980, p. 327.
16. Mulvey, 'Douglas Sirk and Melodrama'.
17. Gandhi-topi: white oblong cap popularised by Gandhi and adopted by many politicians since as a symbol of earnest, sober respectability. By the 1980s it already had an additional popular connotation of hypocrisy.
18. Dialogue translations by Nasreen Mummy Kabir, *The Dialogue of Mother India*, New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2010, p. 236.
19. See Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.
20. Genre also operates here: for years the standard hero of Hindi cinema was a passive melancholic who accepted his fate with resignation as his duty or else destroyed himself. *Mother India* marked an early breakthrough in negotiating a model

of masculinity that used violence but was not wholly villainous, and Birjoo could, therefore, be only marginally heroic.

21. The booklet, entitled *Mother India*, was apparently co-written with Baburao Pate, the feisty editor of the trade journal *Film India* (subsequently renamed *Mother India*). It was published in Bombay around the time of the film's release.

22. Anonymous (studio publicity booklet), *Mother India*, p. 1.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

25. 'Muddai laakh bura chhahe toh kya hota hai

Vahi hota hai jo manzoor-e-khuda hota hai'

(It matters little if the plaintiff wishes you countless ills

What comes to pass is only what is acceptable to God)

(Trans. Nasreen Mummy Kabir in *The Dialogue of Mother India*, 2010, p. 2.)

26. Mayo, *Mother India*, p. 186.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 60–1.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

29. See, for example, Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and Their Critics, 1793–1905*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980. The potential effectiveness of this kind of reversal of colonial discourse is, however, always constrained by other power relations already in the field. For the West to see itself as marginalised within Indian representations may be salutary, but it is a different experience from India seeing itself continually so positioned within colonialist (and neocolonialist) discourse. See Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur', p. 128.

30. A star persona is also built up around the accumulation of meanings from previous film roles. For reasons of space, I have not dealt with this here, although, interestingly, one finds distinct echoes of the gossip persona in these: Nargis frequently played Raj Kapoor's lover, a Westernised sophisticate, and even a coquette but always ultimately a 'good' woman who suffered for her lover.

31. This point needs stressing: over the years, this has been one of the most regularly misunderstood aspects of this essay. A number of excellent biographies of Nargis and the Dutts have been published since 1989, to which readers are referred for factual details. These include Kishwar Desai, *Darlingji: The True Love Story of Nargis and Sunil Dutt*, London: Harper Collins, 2007; Namrata and Priya Dutt, *Mr and Mrs Dutt: Memories of Our Parents*, New Delhi: Lustre Press, Roli Books, 2007; T.J.S. George, *The Life and Times of Nargis*, New Delhi: Indus, 1994; Reuben, *Mehboob, India's De Mille*.

32. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, p. 160.

33. *Film World* (Bombay), August 1980.

34. See Andrew Britton, *Katharine Hepburn: The Thirties and After*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Tyneside Cinema, 1984; Richard Dyer, *Stars*, London: British Film Institute, 1979; John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

35. The two women were also connected by older family connections: Nargis's mother, Jaddanbai, is believed to have known the Nehru family in Allahabad in the

early 1900s. See Desai, *Darlingji*, p. 17. See also George, *Life and Times*, p. 24, who claims that Jaddanbai made a *rakhi* brother of Jawaharlal Nehru in her youth.

36. *Probe India*, October 1980, p. 14.

37. See chapter ten.

38. 'As long as I was in school my friends were all with me.... But [after acting in Mehboob's *Taqdeer* in 1943, aged fourteen] ... going to picnics or calling me to birthday parties was stopped. And that hurt a lot.... I was completely shattered.' Interview with Nargis in Vasudev and Lenglet, *Indian Superhazaar*, p. 252.

39. Anonymous (studio publicity booklet), *Mother India*.

40. *Probe India*, October 1980, p. 14.

41. More precise articulation of these is, of course, important, although outside the scope of the present chapter.