Inventing a New Gandhi: *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* and making of a Comic Hero

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Films are social documents[1], even when the maker is unaware that they are creating one. Visuals and non-textual elements are intrinsic aspects of the human world due to their inevitable presence in everyday life.[2] Even *masala* films, made with conventional storylines, manage to captivate audiences. Think about how they are going to view the content and how they would react to the film. A changing economy, evolving family structures, and shifting socio-moral architecture determine the fate of films. Filmmakers invest energy and money in constructing an imagined audience—Janta—who will spend their hard-earned money to watch the story they create. Not only art-house or multiplex films but even mainstream commercial films aspire to be liked by the masses and accepted within the logic of storytelling-precisely in that order.[3]

One key difference between storytelling in films and in stories or novels is that films are a form of collective consumption, experienced in darkened theatres that function as captive spaces where audiences are compelled to focus, aided by bright visuals and high-decibel sound. The technology of sound and visuals separate viewers from their belongings, which is changing fast due to the all-pervasive invasion of the mobile phone, but more on that somewhere else.

Going to the theatre is both an impulsive and expensive proposition. In India, it's generally a family thing, meaning at least three to four people buying tickets translating into thousands. Add the coke and popcorn and reclining seats, and it becomes a small fortune. At the

same time, the time taken to decide on watching a film is in the realm of impulse. The booking applications have made it even swifter. No longer do you have to go to the theatre and queue up to buy the tickets. On the other hand, reading a story or a book is a very personal experience. Only one person can read it at a time; the same book may not be read or liked by others. The books take years and decades to reach the number of readers that a film can in just one show all over the screening theatres.

That's why films need to reinvent what is familiar and identifiable while being accepted by the social-moral complex of the people and the region. The concept of family, as well as ghost stories, differs across the world and even within a nation. The same applies to humor. It changes with society, taking a differing stance on it.

Basically, the films are commodities and must be seen as a "tangible product and intangible service."[4] So, the filmmakers are constantly in need of new heroes and new ways to show the visuals, and they frequently adopt old ideas and heroes, albeit dressed up, to catch the imagination of the audience.

The film *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (Carry on Munna Bhai.., Rajkumar Hirani, 2006) was a well-articulated mix of a fictional gangster and a national icon, who is called the father of the nation. The film's protagonist was Munna Bhai, a ruthless hired goonda, with a funny gang, who all did not have dangerous weapons except for a knife and occasional display of a gun. The gangster did not have a den or anti-national agenda, as in most Hindi films. He dressed like an ordinary person in Mumbai, wearing pants and a floral shirt with an occasional display of gold chain. Tall, with pronounced Mumbai accent, with an old, old-fashioned proper name like Murli Prasad Sharma, he had no me of the traits of being from UP! It may be noteworthy that the makers gave him an upper caste (Brahman), belonging in a caste consciousness

where the protagonist generally is from the upper strata of social belonging. His caste was blurred successfully by his Mumbai accent, his criminal acts, his love affair with a heroine, and above all, his imaginary interaction with Gandhi. A cinematic super-illusion was created by manufacturing super plots and super characters. The super-plot was an association of Gandhi in apparition-like appearance who was brought in as a dial-a-help-like diminutive superman helped blunt the gangster protagonist.

Gandhi is a well-known figure in India; he needs no introduction to anyone. With his iconic lathi (long walking stick), knee-length dhoti, round glass frame on eyes, and little bent gait, the imagination of the father of the nation was not only almost real but easily became the super character that helped the film and other sub-plots grow.

Though imaginary and apparition-like, the audience did not doubt the way he was shown in the film. Filmmakers used him in the way people of India remembered him, doing away with any danger of conflict with people's memories of him. The popular memory is uncharitable and does not forgive any adulteration. We create post-reality imagination and hold it sacrosanct. Any tampering is not taken lightly by people. Hence, the astute makers used the imagination of Gandhi as people would have wanted.

Like a demi- god, he could appear at will, be called by his devotees as gods who are known to have appeared to help their devotees, give some advice, and be always distant from the plots that imagine him. It is necessary to maintain his divine persona and imbue him with curative powers; otherwise, the plot would subsume him. The epic proportions of such magical characters are things that viewers accept without much ado. Films are perceived as fiction and, therefore

require larger-than-life yet believable events, characters, and subplots. The intelligent filmmaker that Hirani was, the gangsters 'Munna' and 'Circuit' were drafted in local lingo, whereas Gandhi, being a national icon, was given clear Hindi diction. The wider Hindi-speaking audience had to be kept engaged, invited to the big screen, and encouraged to immerse themselves in the film. That is done by creating round characters, epic characters, layered stories, and in India, also with songs and a love interest. Gandhi is a living-dead hero who needs no introduction. He is present in books, comics, folklore, various forms of popular culture, academia, and multiple visual media. His dress-dhoti to knee and bare torso, the lathi (long shaft) as an identifiable unique prop, his gait, and his adherence to non-violence was a great twist added to what would have been a gangster story. Gandhi adds respectability, believability, trust, and an instant connection with the audience. The pan Indian charisma of Gandhi reduced the gap between educated and illiterate masses that flocked to see a Sanjay Dutt-starrer gangster film. That was a clever subplot by the makers that became the super glue for the audience. He was not always present, nor did he display any superhuman powers. He appeared only when summoned by the gangster, visible and audible only to him, offering advice while remaining an illusion—one that the audience accepted without question.[5] Since he was portrayed as Gandhi, the masses accepted him as a believable figure. That's the big achievement of the filmmakers that they fused Gandhi in the script to be viewed by millions of people.

The need of Gandhi in the film needs to be discussed. He transcends generations, he is well known, at least the younger generations see him comically, often people are heard saying, I am not Gandhi, if you slap me I will slap you back! Gandhi died in 1948 but lives in popular memory as a living saint who chased the British

imperialists and got us freedom.[6] He is there in film Songs and public mediums. It is also said that this film trivialises Gandhi's history as farce[7], but bringing Gandhi back as a chimera in this film was a clever plot. A revolution in screenwriting. One needed a lot of restraint in writing his role in the film as he was the father of the nation, and no liberty could have been taken with him. Makers were successful in using him selectively as a chimera and not making him come as an avatar. That was a clever move to avoid protest and conflict with the established memory of the image of Gandhi. The success of a script is using a historical character that is aspirational and has a long association with the collective imagery of the people at large. Then, it becomes easy to establish a cultural connection with a character or a bunch of characters that add plots and twists to the story.

Gandhi in *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* is a chimera; it's a phone-a-friend kind of saint who is on call, a roving moral advisor to a notorious gangster. Though he advises him on love and such issues, interestingly, he never asked him to leave the world of crime. He gives as much advice as sought but does not proffer unsolicited advice. That saves the real Gandhi from being judged by the audience and critics for maligning Gandhi, who is regarded as the father of the nation. Gandhi has a certain fixed visual image in the country, and that has been kept intact in the film, and no film can mock him. Strangely, the filmmaker used his appearance for a gangster film, and people loved it. It was a great cinematic risk that Raju Hirani took in otherwise so culturally sensitive a country.

It's important to state here that Gandhi is remembered and seen as a non-violent, anti-British crusader known for his half-naked dressing, that unmistakable lathi (shaft), and balding head. But no film except his biographies showed him walking and appearing at the call of

a gangster. Now, that was a big gamble, mixing a national hero with a modern-day *tapori* (street) gangster.[8]

The fact that Gandhi does not appear on his own in the film, but is always requisitioned by the goon- protagonist empower the script, gives it a new meaning. From being a mortal, he is imbued with immortal powers that allow him to appear to his ardent followers. He was not visible or audible to others but was fully accessible to the protagonist. This created a superhuman persona who could appear at will to solve petty issues of people. His Exorcist-like appearance in the film to cure ills and solve petty matters of the people was crafted to suggest that he was not only the hapless and dated person but rather well equipped to deal with modern times. This new Gandh was useful for the new generation.

This filmy Gandhi understood love, accepted the modern and tech-savvy world, did not moralise on crime, adopted Munna Bhai as his disciple, and towards the end even agreed to appear to the crooked property dealer played by Boman Irani. This Gandhi is a mysterious mix of original self, adapted to the new situation, giving advice that is pragmatic and new age-compatible. Hence, the protagonist coins a new catchy phrase, *Gandhigiri*, which amounts to the practice of Gandhian values but with a contemporary twist to make it easier for the masses to consume.[9] Popular culture often invents phrases and applications of social values that are taken from the traditional values to be adapted and adopted by contemporary societies. In the book E.J. Hobswam and Terence Ranger eds., Invention of Tradition[10], this matter was taken up in detail. It was suggested that Invented traditions are cultural practices that are presented or perceived as traditional, arising from people starting in the distant past, but which are relatively recent and often consciously invented by historical actors. A ritual, folklore, or event

from the past can be lifted to apply in the contemporary times to make collective use of it.

The films in India are the major and perhaps only mass culture. In a country with low income and lower literacy rates, films have come to be the only means of collective and shared entertainment and out-of-home activity. With rising working couples and smaller nuclear families, movie-going is a considered decision not only for entertainment but for the intellectual consumption of assumed narratives. Films today are big-budget corporate enterprises often hemmed in by corporate executives who look at the films from various emotional draws and commercial acceptances. Hence, films today are more of a financial investment than they were earlier.

A film like *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* is thus a constructed emotional narrative to appeal to a cross-section of Indian audiences that holds affinity with Gandhi. made in this corporate environment becomes a consumer product, which needs to be decoded through a complex process talk shows, smartly inserted reviews and kind of mobilisation hardly seen till the decades after 2000. With clever marketing—such as inserting emotional clips on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram—even a film without a star cast can become a hit. From Dev Anand to Rajesh Khanna, Amitabh Bachchan, and later Shahrukh Khan, films were made around stars, and audiences watched them primarily for these actors. However, films like *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* and 12th Fail became major hits primarily because of their strong storytelling. In *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*, none of the actors single-handedly carried the film; the story was the true star, and the director's name played a key role in drawing audiences to the theatres. That's the reality of filmmaking today. While stars still help sell films, success increasingly depends on the story rather than celebrity appeal.

However, the final verdict remains to be seen.

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