Chapter 6  
Representation of the Hindu Iconic Widowhood: Aspects of Cinematic ImaginNation

'There has been considerable confusion and misunderstanding in regard to our film production "Mother India" and Mayo's book. Not only are the two incompatible but totally different and indeed opposite... We have intentionally called our film "Mother India", as a challenge to this book, in an attempt to evict from the minds of the people the scurrilous work that is Miss Mayo's book.' ¹

This chapter engages with the question of how Hindi cinema sought to synergize and imagine the nation, community and land in independent India as the embodiment of widowhood. This process of embodiment, I suggest was the culmination of a long historical-political process. The focus of this study is a 1957 Hindi film by Mehboob Khan named *Mother India*. The film stands out as a powerful emotional drama. On the one hand, this film marked continuity with the Indian literature, painting, theatre and cinema of the colonial period, ² on the other, *Mother India* guided the emotions of a new Indian nation after 1947.

Within a decade after India attained independence from Britain, the Indian cinema became an undisputed site where the cultural engineering of a new nation could be carried on. The four main film makers of the years between 1950 and 1960 were Bimal


² Reproductions, oleographs and calendars with representation of Mother India flooded the market from the beginning of the 20th century. It was the first Indian film to be nominated for the Oscars in 1958. Scholars have dealt with the birth of Indian cinema and its teething problems in the late colonial period. Some examples are: Prem Chowdhry, *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity*, Manchester University Press, UK, 2000. Chowdhry investigates the colonial markets' reaction against certain ideological formations and its impact on production processes as well as British policy formation as regards empire films. Also see M.Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, OUP, Delhi, 1998.

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Roy, Mehboob Khan, Guru Dutt and Satyajit Ray. They portrayed the struggle of a new nation coming of into its own. Narrativising Indian women became central with films like *Aurat* (1940); *Maa* (1952); *Mother India* (1957); *Sujata* (1959, interestingly about a Harijan girl); *Parineeta* (1953) and *Pyasa* (1957). While cinema provided an opportunity to psychologically and temporarily tide over one’s real life struggles, it simultaneously created a unique world of emotions and sensitivity where real issues, both within and outside the home, could be negotiated with. A collectively imagined nation one of the strongest emotions purveyed by Indian cinema. Kiran Chandra Bandhyopadhyay’s play ‘*Bharat Mata*’ (Mother India, 1873), represented nation as a dispossessed woman often a widow or a woman deranged by suffering. In the anthology of the patriotic songs, *Bharat Gan* (India Songs, 1879) and in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s 1882 novel *Anadamath*, a mother was rescued by her brave sons. Jawaharlal Nehru was conscious of the power of the visual to impress the ordinary people. He noted in 1930s:

> It is curious how one cannot resist the tendency to give an anthropomorphic form to a country. Such is the force of habit and early associations. India become Bharat Mata, Mother India, a beautiful lady very old but ever youthful in appearance, sad eyed and forlorn, cruelly treated by aliens and outsiders and calling upon her children to protect her. Some such picture rouses the emotions of hundreds of thousands and drives them to action and sacrifice. And yet India is in the main the peasant and the workers, not beautiful to look at, for poverty is not beautiful. Does the beautiful lady of our imagination represent the bare bodied and bent workers in the field and factories? Or the small group of those who have from ages past crushed the masses and exploited them, imposed cruel customs on them, and made of them even untouchable? We seek

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3. For Shyam Benegal, Roy’s *Do Bigha Zamin* (1955) was a watershed in the history of Indian cinema. A certain tradition of acting became less and less theatrical and had slowly acquired a ‘humane tendency’ because of the liberal background from which Bengali cinema had emerged. Shyam Benegal, ‘Bimal Roy: A Film Maker’s Perspective’, in Rinki Roy Bhattacharya (Ed), *The Man Who Spoke in Pictures: Bimal Roy*, Penguin, Delhi, 2009, pp59-66.

4. In 1955 he made a Bengali film called *Pather Panchali* and followed it up as a trilogy, where he focused on the social changes in independent Bengal.

5. The pioneer of the Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke began with the historical and religious themes in *Raja Harischandra* (1913) and *Lanka Dahan* (1917). Themes of colonial ambivalence resonate when one contrasts the cinema on life histories of Hindu saints (Sant Tukaram 1936), with cinema on encounter with Western modernity in ‘*Bilet Phirat*’ or England Returned (1921).
to recover truth by the creatures of our imagination and endeavor to escape from reality to a world of dreams."^{6}

Both Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru indirectly guided the imagination of the intellectuals in the cinema industry, which had itself been a product of the colonial times. The cinematic representation of the women in independent India needs to be understood in terms of the problematic of post colonial discourse^{7} which expresses the rationale of the contemporary groupings in a common past and dreamt the future that was nothing but a utopian one. This is where one must ask the question: do men and women share the same singular experience of the post colonial condition. The answer perhaps lies in recovering the imagery of the anti colonial ‘Mother India’ which was transformed into that of the ‘Mother India’ of a suffering/recovering nation in post colonial India. It has been argued that at the turn of the 19th century, the literary and cinematic representations were mediated by painting at the turn of the 19th century. Representation acquired novelty when painters applied new art forms to contour physicality of the Hindu women. Tapati Guha Thakurta has looked at the production of certain kind of urban high class Hindu mytho-pictures in the Calcutta art schools which passed down to the arena of popular bazaar art production, thus homogenizing what she calls the ‘mass visual culture’.^8 Some of these art studio pictures borrowed the European neo classical painting styles, for e.g. the biblical image of ‘pieta’ (Madonna and the dead Christ) provided inspiration for the figure of the grieving Savitri cradling Satyavan’s body as she pleads for his life before a huge brawny personage of Yama. Secondly, these studios had a cross regional public as three languages – Bengali, Hindi and English were used. Another artist, Raja Ravi Varma from Travancore gracefully collapsed the realistic and the mythic together to create a ‘modern’ Indian art. The last and the most crucial phase in iconography identified by Guha begins with the 20th century, when such pictorial representations of women coincided with a new powerful

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set of equations made by nationalist discourse between ‘tradition’ and ‘feminity’, between ‘nation’ and the mother goddess.

The early 20\textsuperscript{th} century fusion of European and traditional Indian forms of artistic expressions to produce patriotic iconographic representations was perhaps inspired by the Western appropriation of the classical goddess from ancient Rome and Greece. Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger have shown how in Europe of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century Germania, Britannia, Victoria and the Great Mother, Austriae were dressed in iron helmets and they visually represented the nation states whose names they bore.\textsuperscript{9}

The concept of \textit{Bharat Mata} did not emerge independent of its regional character. The undivided Bengal was painted by Abanindranath Tagore in 1905 as Goddess \textit{Banga Mata} – \textit{Mother Bengal} to symbolize the unity of the country against the partition of Bengal. Perhaps a prototype of the independent India’s \textit{Mother India}, Abanindranath put into the four hands of the deity four symbols: a sheet of cloth, a sheaf of rice, a book, and a rosary, signifying agricultural, industrial as well as religious and intellectual well being. These were some of the qualities that the \textit{bhadralok} of Bengal felt themselves to be ‘replete’ with. The goddess has appearance of a Vaishnava nun, associating the national deity with the new order of the Ramakrishna Mission, a reformatory Hindu organization founded by Swami Vivekananda. Soon the image took on the mantle of the \textit{Bharat Mata-Mother India}. The same figure now proclaimed that India was a nation in the making. The process of imaging \textit{Bharat Mata} needs to be studied as mediation, transmission and circulation of culture between the artist and the viewer or the receptor. David Freedberg\textsuperscript{10} initiated a challenge towards art history in the 1980s as it ignored the relations between images and people in history. Christopher Pinney envisages history in part determined by struggles occurring at the level of the visual.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{9} Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger, \textit{Bharat Mata: India’s Freedom Movement in Popular Art}, OUP, Delhi, 2008. Their work is considered a good example of a visual turn in modern Indian studies where patriotic art has assumed a new visibility.


As in the paintings and iconography, in the films as well she was without any male consort. The cinematic narration of 'Mother India' downplayed her sexuality by mostly absenting the husband, thus projecting on to her a widow's status similar to that of a destitute or a poor woman. The struggle of this widow has been then made central over other characters and themes. The image captures the independent India struggling to achieve economic reforms and transform feudal social relations. Correspondingly, the old widow in various Hindi films is supported by her young son or sons. This representation is a metaphor for the Young India supporting the 'old Mother India', who rendered her participation to the independence movement and then rendered her labour to bring up her sons in free India.

The 'cinematic widow' also imbibed the middle class notions of shame, honour and chastity. However, a peculiar feature inherent in this picture of the widow was the Nehruvian socialistic inspiration which propelled her to rebel against the feudal agrarian structure of the colonial past in rural India. A widow was visualized as poor, struggling and vulnerable. Her existence was a sheer test of her capability to generate economic resources for herself and the family without giving in to sexual politics of the overtly masculine world. The nation was personified as this widow who was not to be vulnerable to corruption and lure. Economic development had to accommodate a reformed notion of an all pervasive fructifying 'Mother', flexible enough to be easily moved into a spiritual domain as and when required, in the form of Kali or Durga.

The cinematic 'Mother', I suggest was not derived from the religious domain alone, she in fact belonged to an existing tangible and marginalized social category of the Hindu widow as depicted in numerous literary narratives as well as social reformist discussions and debates of the 19th and 20th century. The cinematic imagination of the 1950s was quick to adopt the popular and powerful imagery of 'Mother India' as portrayed in nationalist discourse. Cinema, history and gender negotiated respective discourses in a most complicated manner after independence. Compared to Bengal, this image evolved rather late in Hindi speaking

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12 It is perhaps not accidental that Gandhi called his journal by this name.

13 The image of the struggling peasant woman became significant in the light of rural indebtedness and poverty that India was faced with in initial years of independence.
region. It was not before the early 20th century in north India that we see the notion of Bharat Mata in print, calendar art and iconography. Within cinema the construction of 'Mother India' was much more than just a conscious effort to figuratively represent the superiority of a divine cultural force presiding over the affairs of an emergent nation. Through the tangible metaphor of 'Mother India', the family and the nation could be emotionally bonded together by a whole gamut of familial social relations. The social relations could in turn be shaped by the redefinition of the nation. The gender relations underwent a degree of social transformation because the women had been partners in the freedom struggle and in economic reforms in independent India. Any form of modernity had to incorporate and reflect on this contribution.

Interestingly, by the 1930s, India as a geographical entity also could be imagined in a new image form such as the map of India. The temple of Bharat Mata at Benaras was built in 1936 by Shivprasad Gupt, who was a nationalist and an Arya Samajist. The temple was inaugurated by Gandhi and had no image of god or goddess but only a marble carving of the map of India. The Mata here was conceptualized as a sovereign territory. The author suggests that the use of Mother India in a temple freed Hinduism of its dogmas and gave it a political rhetoric.

The women's movement also popularized the iconography of Bharat Mata. There is evidence from United Provinces that the iconography of Mother India (Bharat Mata) was popularized by both satyagrahis and the revolutionary women. The satyagrahi category under the leadership of the Nehrus and Zutshis, who promoted charkha and khadi; made salt at home and did prabhat pheris or picketing of liquor shops. While the middle class women who embraced the second category participated in various ways from assisting men procure arms (in Kanpur and Kakori case) or by directly making bombs.14 In 1920s, UP was the centre of the wide spread peasant unrest.15 It was here

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14 Suruchi Thapar Bjorkert, Women in the Indian National Movement', Sage, Delhi, 2006. She argues that by contributing to the national movement Indian women 'domesticated the public sphere' and 'politcized the domestic sphere.'

for the first time Nehru has encountered the peasantry who have surrounded him while shouting the slogan: *Bharat Mata ki Jai*. This is how Nehru explains this encounter in *Discovery of India*:

‘Sometimes as I reached a gathering, a great roar of welcome would greet me: Bharat Mata ki Jai- ‘Victory to Mother India’. I would ask them unexpectedly what they meant by that cry, who was this Bharat Mata, Mother India, whose victory they wanted? My question would amuse them and surprise them, and then not knowing exactly what to answer, they would look at each other and at me. I persisted in my questioning. At last a vigorous Jat, wedded to the soil from immemorial generations, would say that it was the dharti, the good earth of India that they meant. What earth? Their particular village patch, or all the patches in the district or province, or in the whole of India? And so question and answer went on, till they would ask me impatiently to tell them all about it. I would endeavor to do so and explain that India was all this that had thought, but it was much more. The mountains and the rivers of India, and the forests and the broad fields, which gave us food, were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me, who were, spread out all over this vast land. Bharat Mata, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people, and victory to her meant victory to these people. You are part of this Bharat Mata, I told them, you are in a manner yourselves Bharat Mata, and this idea slowly soaked in to their brains, their eyes would light up as they had made a great discovery.‘

Over time, three images of Bharat Mata were contesting with each other: one rooted in religious imagery, second linked to cow in the context of Hindu Muslim relations and the third linked to dharti or territory. It was this third image which was promoted as well invoked by Mehboob Khan’s film. The secularization of Mother India attracted intellectuals as well as the ordinary people. Thus the ideological template of the film wa
created by drawing upon the Nehruvian idea of dharti mata and combining it with the utopian image of the widow as articulated by Gandhi.

**Mother India (1957) as the ‘Widow’**

This section looks at the idea of popular culture and the ‘cinimagination’ of *Mother India* and explores the way in which she resembled the struggle of a widow. ‘*Mother India*’, a 1957 Hindi movie called is an interesting social text of the contemporary times. A striking characteristic of this movie is its syncretic significance. It was directed by Mehboob Khan, and Nargis plays Radha, the main protagonist. The director and the actor successfully weave deified image of a Hindu woman caught in the trials and tribulations of agrarian poverty in the background of a newly independent India. Mehboob Khan himself belonged to a Gujarati family with agrarian roots and had produced *Aurat* (1940) prior to ‘*Mother India*’ in which woman was the central character. The themes were inspired by Pudovkin’s socialist realist adaptation of Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* (1926).

The movie begins with an old widow Radha (Nargis) being requested by the village locals to inaugurate a new dam. Reluctantly Radha agrees to do so and while

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17 See Plate 2.


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inaugurating she reminisces her past life. The story moves back and forth in flashback. She recalls her wedding day when Shyamu (played by Rajkumar), her husband brought her into his home. The young charming Radha plays a devout wife to Shyamu as she is shown touching his feet on their first day together. In almost all the following scenes she is shown attending to the household chores - cleaning, cooking, and taking care of her three sons. She is shown working in the fields shoulder to shoulder with her husband. Incidentally, this film also effectively makes a strong visual case for the reinterpretation of the notion of women's labour both inside as well as outside the household. Radha’s family deals with the village money lender, Sukhilala (literary *a happy man* but used satirically in the film to connote the contradictory relationship between happiness and wealth), who comes to collect his share of the produce every time there is a harvest. The family pays an exorbitant interest rate on the money they had borrowed from him. However, each time Sukhilala cheats them because none from the family or the village can read the account ledgers. The consciousness of being cheated builds up in the entire family and in a bad season when there was no harvest, Sukhilala threatens them that he will confiscate all of their belongings if they do not pay back the money the family had borrowed from him. Out of pressure, Radha convinces Shyamu that they will together clear a 5 bigha (acre) land in order to pay back their dues. Unfortunately, the land turns out to be rocky and difficult to clear and while lifting one of the huge rocks, Shyamu loses both his hands. The family then slides into utter poverty. Radha does not give up and borrows money from Sukhilala who repeatedly insults the family for not having paid up his dues. Radha somehow feeds her husband (who can no longer do any work), her children and her mother in law. Sukhilala meanwhile takes away their oxen and the family is left without any resource. The family’s economic condition deteriorates and here comes one of the turning points of the film - Shyamu leaves the home out of shame that he cannot provide for his family and does not want to live on his wife’s labour. Probably he commits suicide or becomes an ascetic/beggar. Radha is left alone with her children. This point is the most crucial one because when Shyamu leaves home he wipes off Radha’s vermillion mark while she is asleep. Her being a Hindu married woman, this marks the onset of Radha’s widowhood. The rest of the film is about the transformation of a peasant woman – a
Hindu widow into *Mother India*. Through various aesthetic devices she is transformed from an individual into a metaphor for a struggling nation. In fact it is after she 'becomes' a widow that she is faced with the test of her chastity, her loyalty to her 'dead' husband against her nerve wrecking poverty. Meanwhile a huge flood destroys her remaining resources but she does not leave the village. She also pleads other people not to leave. She and her children then battle to survive. Her new born, her third child dies. Sukhilala then visits her and offers to feed her remaining two children who are starving to death, on the condition that she sleeps with him. She is faced with the acutest dilemma of her life. She initially resists, but then for her children’s sake decides to give in. But she finally decides against compromising her dignity and honour, i.e. ‘*laj,*’ for food. The director successfully captures this extremely delicate moment of ambivalence. What follows is a scene where Radha is seen talking to the image of a Hindu Goddess Luxmi. Radha blames the goddess for being unkind towards her. Interestingly, Radha does not pray for protection and mercy. She in fact equates the goddess with her own entity and addresses the goddess as if she also had a womb, children and the related matrix of emotions. Radha manages to escape from Sukhilala’s house and gets back to feeding her children. She cooks some wild muddy mushrooms for them. The rest of the film is about the travails of a lone mother bringing up her infants through physical hard labour.

Most of the scenes of the film centre around Radha tilling the land, first alone, then with sons. They were supposed to be the most touching moments for the audience. The director carefully portrays the figure of a sweating, sober, and patiently suffering Radha in the fields. Radha’s pain and suffering becomes an allegory for the new born nation after the trauma of the partition. The movie underlines the two most crucial phases of an Indian woman had - one as a wife; the other as a mother. She is initially a consort, a companion and a partner to her peasant husband. During this period she remains docile and more or less an appendage to her husband. Later on, once she is rendered widow, under the pressure of circumstances she transforms into a form of an independent

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19 Goddess of Wealth and prosperity.

20 In a song in the movie *Mother India*, Radha urges those villagers who are leaving the village after the devastating flood, not to leave.
powerful entity waging a determined struggle against all odds only after she becomes a widow, a traditional Hindu woman's strength that has been given a completely new interpretation. She is no longer an 'abala' but a 'sabala' as personified through Radha's character. The strength displayed here violates the traditional gender code. This can be seen as a positive turn towards embracing the masculine role. The notion of mother's nurturing function here is made to coexist with her taking upon a man's role. In the next stage of her role as a mature mother of adult sons, she reintroduces herself to the spectator as a new Hindu widow displaying a strong virtuous character. One of her two sons, named Birju, grows up to be a rebel, who internalized the injustice done to his family by Sukhilala. He was convinced that only a violent method will serve the cause of justice. The other son was aware that Sukhilala had wealth that also made him powerful in many other ways. Although injustice had been done, it could not be settled through violent means. He was also optimistic like his mother and believed in better times ahead. In a way, the Indian National movement was a contest between the two approaches – one violent revolt to solve the zamindari problem and the other peaceful mobilization to solve rural India's problems of poverty and exploitation. Here the director conflates the historical process with the individual role in order to give his characters a larger than life role. The text of history and the text in the film merge with each other.

Moreover, it is rather striking that Radha does not protest against Sukhilala in the film again. She extends her notion of self respect and dignity (that characterized her as a wife in the first half of the film) to that of the village 'community'. This particular community is partly an 'imagined' one, because it extends beyond the caste and class of oneself. Through the idiom of community the director was addressing the problems of the newly emerging nation, nation that was being addressed by Radha. The non-violent Radha was perhaps a Gandhian construct. A complete new Mother, suffering and sacrificing, evolves in Radha when her aggressive son, Birju kills Sukhilala and kidnaps his daughter on the day of her marriage. His motive of doing so is to get back her mother's bangles from him which she had had to mortgage with Suhki. On this question

21 Literally meaning 'without power' and 'with power' or 'empowered' respectively. Abala continues to be used to this day as a synonym for a 'woman'.
of violating dignity of a woman, Radha almost detaches her ‘motherhood’ from Birju and breaks the sentimental umbilical cord with him. She threatens him and tells him to set the girl free because Sukhilala’s daughter’s laj was the entire village’s laj. She would not let Birju play with it. But Birju does not listen to Radha; she shoots him. The community’s honour is upheld even at the cost of a great sacrifice. This scene of son’s killing forms the highest point of tension in the film.

It is noticeable that the film is about a widow’s struggle but it goes beyond dealing with ‘widowhood’ alone. Her struggles were also a response to a cauldron of economic pressures of a feudal- rural- peasant society where colonial ‘modernity’ was not a feasible alternative or option. The expressions of this unique protest had to be derived from a metamorphosis of traditional-mythical symbolism and the Gandhian Hindu middle class version of resistance and respectability. Radha has not been portrayed as pitiful and helpless individual as was done in the cinema of the 1970s and 80s, where the ‘masculine’ Amitabh Bachhan often played protective son to a suffering widowed Hindu mother.

Apart from being an exploited peasant woman, Radha was also the young sexually vulnerable widow. The image of this victim widow has been a popular subject for novels and short stories in India (details have been discussed in the chapter on literature in this thesis). In the Hindi cinema, certain movies have stood above the others in addressing the question of the young widow. The next section discusses Prem Rog (literally ‘Love disease’), a 1982 mainstream Hindi movie remembered most for its powerful reformist subtext. The other Hindi movie under discussion in this chapter ‘Water,’22 is more contemporary and reviews inner world of widow homes in north India.23 Various movies (Hindi as well as regional) have been made on the theme of widowhood since independence and widows are visible in certain roles in films. I chose to integrate only these three movies mentioned above into my narrative on

22 Dubbed and subtitled in English.

23 The detailed stories of both these films is contained in Annexure 6(i).
representations. The reason behind selecting the above three films was they are all Hindi mainstream cinema and were watched by a large number of audiences. Secondly, these films were not based on novels or stories by writers of the day. They were professionally written for cinematic audience. *Mother India* was written by Wajahat Mirza and S.Ali Raza, who had also written *Aurat* in 1940. *Prem Rog* was written by Kamna Chandra, who again did not belong to the literary field. *Water* was written by Deepa Mehta, who was the director and producer herself. I have build my arguments on the assumption that it was basically *'Mother India'* which moved the Indian people to the core and provided templates for how gender relations ought to be represented in the context of an emerging nation.

The title *'Mother India'* also has a genealogy of its own. It was originally a title of a book that an American lady, Katherine Mayo wrote in 1927. The book created a widespread controversy amongst the nationalist circles which included both men and women.²⁴

**Notions of Honour and Social Protest**

The cinema in twentieth century colonial India began as an audio-visual corollary to the 19th century painting and literature. It incorporated certain new technical forms from the West. Historically, the Indian cinema had audiences from different social classes in colonial India but it was not before the 1940s and 50s that notions of the 'popular' were produced. Ravi S. Vasudevan has suggested that though art cinema produced a 'social difference', simultaneous dissolution of identities also happened when cinema created a popular culture.²⁵ The cinematic journey of the widow (portrayed as a young or an old) has also been a cultural encounter of the audiences with the discourse of honour. For the old widow the honour is kept in tact within the family as long as she was able to

²⁴ The book and the responses to it have been discussed below under the theme 'Family, Nation and Politics of Renunciation.'

inculcate a sense of morality in her son. For him, her life must become a message. To do so, she had to first show her knowledge of socio-moral religious texts and their relationship with daily life. She would have to lead a life of devotion to these texts. The younger widow within the family must undergo symbolic de-sexualisation by wearing only a white sari/cloth, removing her vermillion and/or by shaving her head she must be seen as living the life of a genuine widow evoking pity and sympathy.

Thus the discourse of a woman’s ‘honour’ got spontaneously introduced in the Hindi cinema. In Mother India, Radha who is a peasant woman has a strong urge to ‘protect’ and ‘reclaim’ her honour (laj). The cultural idiom of laj works as an idiom to guide a Hindu woman in general, as the idiom also had the capacity to cut across classes and homogenize the Hindu feminine virtue.

In Prem Rog, safeguarding the young widow was tantamount to guarding her sexuality and became a question of honour for her upper caste and wealthy Thakur family. Here the women of the household share responsibility with their male counterparts in monitoring her social activities and guarding her social space. The widow refuses to shave her head and this causes a furor within the male elders of the family who act as interpreters of moral codes within the extended Hindu family and the immediate community in the neighbourhood.

Within the widow home (vidhwa ashram) in Water, the director introduced complexity into the very ideal of honour. While all other widows in the Home were tonsured, one of the youngest and the prettiest of them all, a young widow was spared. This young widow was sent out by the head of the ashram to perform sexual favour to one of the richest zamindars of the city of Benaras. However, when this girl falls in love with a young man and they decide to get married, the head of the ashram tells her that she has gone mad and widows do not remarry. Her marriage would bring nothing but shame to the ashram.

Historically, the upper caste idea of honour itself was double edged. Reformists argued for widow remarriage primarily because the idea of honour was at constant risk, while some castes feared losing honour if they remarried their widows. The reformation of widows was therefore possible within certain cultural limitations. The Hindi cinema borrowed this complexity from the socio-reformist activism of the 19th century. The
cinema audience which came largely from the middle class in independent India inherited the cultural nuances of this dichotomy. The perception that younger widows were more prone to forming illegitimate relations convinced the Hindus across all castes that her sexuality must be relocated within the institution of marriage. In case of the elder widows, ashrams and modern old age homes could relocate them. The state also introduced certain reforms by passing the 1955-56 Hindu Marriage and Property Acts. This was presumably done to address the question of economic vulnerability of the Hindu women in general and was result of a long drawn battles waged by the Indian women’s groups since the 1930s and 40s. In independent India, the Nehruvian socialism uniquely combined with Gandhian moral reformism sought to furnish a renewed moral code. In the context of nation in the making, both Ernest Gellner26 and E.J.Hobsbawm27 have laid emphasis on the element of artifact, invention and social engineering. Nations may not just bring together people to be citizens of a post revolutionary state, such as the French state. Nations bring citizens together in the context of a particular stage of technological and economic development also. Nation making was a phenomenon in which citizens’ ‘view from below’ was also important. It was equally important to know whether a particular discourse was being accepted or not. In this sense, Nehru had realized the strength, emotional intensity and appropriateness of the Gandhian approach and had woven it with his policies during his prime ministerial days.

That is why in the widow’s cinematic representation this is notion of honour complements and articulates the idea of social protest. This peculiar ideological amalgam opened up the options for social change through a regulated mode of social protest and simultaneously narrowed the options for a social rebellion. Nehru in one of his interviews to R.K.Karanjia observed:

‘Class struggle is always there. One cannot deny or put it aside. But the solution need no longer be one of violence or struggle or hatred: and that’s where Gandhiji’s peaceful approach, friendly and constructive approach comes in....Marx was conditioned by his times where there


was no democracy or franchise, no working class movement and well, simply no means of resolving inequalities and equalizing society other than struggle. Now while the nuclear energy holds out tremendous hope for human advancement, the atom bomb threatens to blow up civilization with one or two or three bangs—thus the emergence of such a destructive weapon makes conflict or war, be it in form of class struggle or capitalist—socialist conflict, simply so disastrous that it is impossible to think of solutions in terms of violence at all. 28

Gandhian discourse on the possibility of creating a strong moral and ideal Indian had a tremendous impact upon the cinematic imagi-Nation. Gandhi introduced multidimensionality into the meaning of honour during the freedom movement.

How can a woman save her honour? According to Gandhi, either she herself could save it or her male relatives could protect her. To women he advised that:

"When there is a non-violent atmosphere, where there is the constant teaching of ahimsa, woman will not regard herself as dependent, weak or helpless. She is not really helpless when she is really pure. Her purity makes her conscious of her strength. I have always held that it is physically impossible to violate a woman against her will. The outrage takes place only when she gives way to fear or does not realize her moral strength. If she cannot meet the assailant's physical might, her purity will give her the strength to die before he succeeds to violate her. Take the case of Sita. Physically she was a weakling before Ravana, but her purity was more than a match even for his giant might. He tried to win her with all kinds of allurements but could not carnally touch her without her consent. On the other hand, if a woman depends on her own physical strength or upon a weapon she possesses, she is sure to be discomfited whenever her strength is exhausted." 29

As regards how male relatives were to protect a woman, he suggested that the brother or father or friend could stand between his protégé and her assailant. He will either dissuade the assailant from his wicked purpose or allow himself to be killed by him in protecting her. In laying down his life he will not only have done his duty, but given a new accession of strength to his protégé who will then know how to protect her honour. 30


30 Ibid.
The idea of honour coexisted with social protest in the Gandhian programme. Gandhi often compared the widow with the 'untouchable' in the Hindu society.

'The untouchable is not the only portion of suppressed humanity. The young widow in Hindu society is no less so.'

An anti widow remarriage correspondent from Bengal expressed his anxiety about the fact if widow remarriage is made common among the Hindus, will not young widows induce young men to marry them and make it difficult, rather impossible, to find out bridegrooms for unmarried girls? Will not unmarried girls then commit all sins which are committed or which are presumed to be committed by widows, if there be no provision to keep more than one wife by a Hindu? What would then happen to love (prem), the saintly grihastha life, and the pativrata Dharma. The correspondent further compared the moral status of Hindus with the Muslims. He cited the example of the Muslims where there was no restriction on widow remarriage yet there was provision for a man to marry up to four wives. Like wise, should the Hindus also start practicing polygamy?

Gandhi remarkably defended the Muslim morality by replying that though polygamy was permitted amongst Muslims, they generally had one wife. Hindus in the 'highest circles' had been known to marry more than one wife. The prohibition of widow remarriage was limited to higher classes and no untoward consequence had taken place in the lower castes which remarry their widows. Gandhi found the suggestion that young widows would take up all young men and leave none for unmarried girls, to be most absurd of all, as it betrayed a woeful want of sense of proportion. He wrote:

'The excessive anxiety for the chastity of young girls betrays an unhealthy mind. The limited number of widows remarrying can never leave a large number of girls unmarried. And in any event, if ever such a problem arose, it would be found to be due to the early marriages that take place today. The remedy in anticipation is to prevent

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32 Ibid, p110.
child marriages... Of the love, the sanctity of grihastha life, etc, where there is a widow of tender age, the less said the better.'

Nehru's biographer Frank Moraes, in a laudatory tone, writes that Nehru was less doctrinaire than Gandhi whose ideas supposed to have shaped Nehru's beliefs. Nehru would bend his ideas but not do away with them. Within their flexible framework Nehru accommodated and reconciled Gandhi's non-violence, his love for the 'small man and acceptance of the small machine,' his simple democracy where the gulf between the rich and the poor would not be marked, his gospel of the charhka and village India. Nehru had a rational scientific outlook; eagerness for technological and industrial advancement on the modern lines and dreamt of a world where the peasant, the technician, the worker, the industrialist, the scholar, scientist and intellectual would share the fruits of their toil and thought. Nehru envisaged for India a type of economic life distinctive in itself, conditioned to its own ways of living, and identified neither with the laissez faire economics of the nineteenth century nor the totalitarianism of Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany.

Theorists of cinema have sought to scrutinize the nature of relationship between cinema and society as it is embedded in cinematic representations. Madhava Prasad has argued that the Hindi cinema as an institution is part of the continuing struggles within India over the form of the state. Scholars have also debated the role of religion and class in the making of popular Indian cinema. Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel claim that the norm of the film immediately after the independence had been urban, upper caste north Indian Hindu. Characters from non-Hindu religion and regions have been shown as the 'other'. The screen presence of Hindu widowhood was a part of a broad project led by the Indian film makers through which gender relations were transmitted to a growing

33 Ibid, p111.
34 Frank Moraes, Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1956, p438.
middle class audience. There is a swelling body of scholarship which has addressed questions of film makers’ and audiences’ social identity.37

Ironically in case of ‘Mother India’, the film maker, lead actress, writer, and music director were all Muslim. Vijay Mishra views this attempt by Mehboob as a ‘secular ethos’ of combining nation and sectarianism. He adds that in Mother India there is excessive insistence upon dharma, the law of culture, and an excessive valorization of genealogy so that Sita may be granted a central position in Indian consciousness. Mishra’s argument simplifies the study of phenomenon of representation itself. Mother India represents a monumental problem of motherness, Sita-ness, and Otherness in Indian culture.38 Mishra, however, overlooks the multidimensionality of this ‘Sita-ness’. The idea of ‘purity’ of a woman as a virtue has evolved in different historical times and spaces.39 Valmiki’s notion of ‘Sita-ness’ was different from the Gandhian notion of ‘Sita-ness’. Gandhi wrote in a particular letter (found in a fragmented state):

‘In no country are widows insulted as much as they are in our county. But I place widows in the category of spiritual rishis’.40

He felt no hesitation in advising the women of his ashram to organize themselves and see that widows are allowed to be present on auspicious occasions, or if restrictions are imposed on their diet or dress, the same rules apply to widowers. If a wife voluntary makes a sacrifice on the death of her husband, the rigidity of such a social custom had to be broken.

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37 Anirudh Deshpande, Class, Power and Consciousness in Indian Cinema and Television, Primus Books, Delhi, 2009; Manju Jain(ed), Narratives of Indian Cinema, Primus Books, Delhi, 2009. These authors represent cinema a site where identities are played out and negotiated such as one’s religion, caste and class.


39 Renuka Singh, Womb of Mind: A Sociological Exploration of the Status Experience of Women in Delhi, Vikas Publishing, Delhi, 1990, p125. Singh, a sociologist observes that Sita consciousness operates in the lives of women even today. Her study is about the depths of women’s relationships with men and the rediscovery of the meaning of the image of Sita, which has somehow survived despite the ‘accumulated dross of centuries’.

Although Gandhi clarified that he was not upholding the idea of becoming a sati as the highest point of acquiring honour, he held firmly that it was any day more possible for women than men to lay down their life for honour because women were ‘capable of throwing away their lives for a much lesser purpose’. He cited example of a young girl of twenty who burnt herself to death as she felt she was being persecuted for refusing to go in for ordinary studies. She perished with such cool courage and determination. She ignited her sari with an ordinary oil light and did not so much as raise a cry, so that the people in the neighbouring room were unaware of the happening until all was over.\(^{42}\)

Gandhi’s articulation of the inner feminine strength of a widow to preserve her honour had a precedent in Hindu widow’s own perception of her honour. In 1919, a widow wrote a letter to Stri Darpan\(^{43}\) protesting against the reformist zeal to remarry them. She highlighted the married woman’s enslaved state and, how in certain ways, she was also like a widow.

‘Do they think that the only way to reform a widow’s life is by remarrying her; by getting rid of her? Is it the only way they can do think of doing well to a widow? Perhaps she will then not go hungry. It is in fact not true if you look at the condition of the hundreds and thousands of married women today. They experience nothing more than four boundaries of their home. For years together, they perhaps never get to see their husband before mid night and that also when all lamps have been put off. There is no apparent difference between a married woman who is living like a widow and the real widow who is living like a widow. ‘I am aware that compared to married women, widows are tortured more because in presence of the husband the world fears touching you. But in remarriage there is a risk of finding a husband who tortures you and your condition may become worse than in widowhood. Do not misunderstand me...I am not saying that widows should not remarry. I only mean to draw attention of the reformers to the fact that they should not resort to only remarriage and come up with meaningful reforms so that widows are spared of the torture they go through.’\(^{44}\)

\(^{41}\) Here used in the sense of widow immolation after husband’s death. Gandhi used the term sati in different ways.


\(^{44}\) Ibid, pp182-3.
Gandhi also had a position against widows’ remarriage, somewhat similar to this particular widow. He was of opinion that remarriage cannot be recommended for all widows. The poor and wretched child widows knew nothing of *pativrata dharma* as they were strangers to love. They were never married at all. If marriage is, as it ought to be, a sacrament, an entrance into a new life, the girls to be married had to be ‘fully developed, should have had some hand in the choice of companion for life, and should know the consequences of their acts.’ He held that it was a crime against God and man to call the union of the children a married state and then to decree widowhood for a girl whose so called husband is dead. He believed that a real Hindu widow was a treasure. She was one of the gifts of Hinduism to humanity. For him Ramabai Ranade was such a gift but the existence of girl widows was a blot upon Hinduism. Gandhi was well aware that the widows were excluded from the social space during auspicious occasions. Widows’ inclusion became urgent if they were to be idealized. They had to be made visible to inspire other women so that they did not fear widowhood.

The extension of this sort of social protest is visible in Hindi cinema as well. There are numerous examples of the cinematic struggle with the idea of how a male partner could be chosen by an adult widow. The white sari clad widows in the Hindi cinema have been central to several scenes of colorful festival of *Holi. Sholay*, the block buster of the late 1970s had a young widow, who was mostly depicted as sad but in control of herself. The *Holi* scenes were necessary because it was against the background of Holi, a colorful festival that her sadness and misery could be best contrasted. Traditionally Hindu widows did not participate in this festival as it connotations of sexual playfulness in however milder ways it is depicted. The act of putting colour on her, signified negation of her widowhood and acceptance of her worldly existence. The visual rupture of the notion of ‘honour’ takes place when the male hero colours the widow. It is the best form of manifesting a cultural discontinuity because it is acceptable to the audiences.

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45 Ibid.
In Water, all the widows celebrate Holi within the ashram premises, no one goes out. Presumption was that making the celebration visible would invite dishonour and would create unnecessary suspicion. But the widows also need to celebrate it. Moreover, one of the oldest inmates of the Ashram, who often reminisces the days when she got married and craves for sweetmeats, cannot ask anyone for it or buy it herself. Doing so would break her social code of self abnegation. Nevertheless, just before she dies, the youngest widow, Chuhiya, steals a piece of sweetmeat and feeds her.

In Prem Rog, Manorama and Deodhar ride together on a bicycle in various romantic scenes. In fact the promotion poster of the film showed this white sari clad widow and her lover together on the bicycle. In another scene, the Manorama has been shown as resentful and violently protesting when the family barber comes to tonsure her as part of the widowhood ritual. More than any other aspect of deprivation of a widow’s life, it was this de-sexualisation that she feared the most.

What strings together these three films is the fact that in all of them the widow is represented as an extremely powerful character that can overcome suffering and misery or can suffer to preserve family and community honour. At the same time, she could also stage a personal/social protest against her victimhood. The oscillations within these themes of representation could well be partly understood in terms of socio political setting of the contemporary times- such as the Nehruvian era of the 1950s, the Congress era of the 1980s and the years in power of Bhartiya Janata Party between 1999-2004. It was primarily the 19th century reformism, the Gandhian paradigm of honour, and Nehruvian socialism underlying equality of sexes that got translated into complex forms of cinematic representations in independent India. Nevertheless, it is necessary to be aware of the danger in attributing cinematic imagination entirely to the ideological political struggle of the times. In the context of the film ‘Mother India’, Gayatri Chatterjee has pointed out that the hammer and sickle insignia of the Mehboob Production Company intimated the socialist leanings of the director. Turkey had in fact banned Mother India as a communist film.46

46 Gayatri Chatterjee, Mother India, Palgrave, (first published 2002 by British Film Institute) London, 2008. Nevertheless she argues that ‘Mother India’ was cultural construct more than a political one. About five years after India's independence the nationalist slogan that allegorised the nation as the
Cinema in most parts of the world has been fascinated by motherhood and widowhood. Interestingly, the image of a suffering mother has not been popular in the Western world in political or the popular perception. In Germany for example, in the 1990s, the new feminist theory advocated that historians must not search for the ‘pure type’ in the cinematic representation of women of the Third Reich. A film about a sacrificing and a suffering widowed mother of four children in a 1939 film called *Mutterliebe* (A Mother’s Love, produced by Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda), was not received well by the German public. Melancholy images could not acquire popularity during the war time. Much of the popular cinema represented women as national heroines or as lovers with high drama.

**Family, Nation and the Politics of Renunciation**

Another important strand of the debate looks at the role of cinema in the making of national identity. Sumita Chakravarty suggests that Indian cinema was built on the mother/goddess was still a living memory. The film works on these two levels, that is as both an individual drama and an epic struggle that has a nationalist mythico/historical resonance.


49 Ibid, p148. Another, rather anthropological cultural explanation of how cinematic representation could syncretise the victim widow with the rebel widow, perhaps lies in the exposition of the archetypal – psychical world of the feminine. Erich Neumann has suggested that opposition and coexistence of the two fundamental characters as well as their shifts in dominance can be demonstrated at every stage in the development of the Archetypal Feminine. Eric Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, (translated from the German by Ralph Manheim), Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, London, 1955, p38. The woman is a ‘vessel’ or the carrier of the seed of the man in which she carries him as well. There is an inward growth in this feminine character. She becomes a mysterious creative character when she brings forth the male in herself. A goddess could be a ‘Good’ Mother in whom the elementary character was predominant or she might reveal traits of the ‘Terrible’ Mother with a predominance of the transformative character. The phases in the development of consciousness appear as the embryonic containment in the mother, as childlike dependence on the mother, as the relation of the beloved son to the Great Mother, and finally as the heroic struggle of the male hero against the ‘Great’ Mother. Since the liberation of the male consciousness from the feminine maternal unconscious is a hard and painful struggle for all mankind, Neumann argued that the negative elementary character of the Feminine does not emerge from an anxiety complex of the ‘men’, but expresses an archetypal of the whole species, male and female alike.
strategy of 'masquerade' and 'impersonation' to consolidate a national identity. The characters impersonate real men and women and the film viewing experience impersonates dreams. The enduring popularity of Mother India was shaped by the Indian experience of suffering and belief in mythical and the heroic. It allowed the audience to 'renew their most cherished cultural assumptions.' The film projected a gender equation where a man's anxiety was satisfied about how well a wife and a devoted mother could guard values of the family and community. The question remains as to how consciously does cinema appropriate nationhood and reenergize it.

Jyotika Virdi adds a significant insight and points out to the over simplification of what Chakravarty has argued. The cinematic narrative of nation always gets configured along terrains of gender, sexuality, family and community. She takes a longer historical view of post independence Hindi cinema which also became a site of sexual politics. Hindi cinema, she argues uses a specific construction of traditional Indian womanhood to connote a unified nation and 'mastery over women plays a central role in such a signifying practice. Post partition tensions around Hindu Muslim integration center around each community's right to retain control over 'their' women.' The debates over the uniform civil code, Shah Bano case, and Roop Kanwar case, expanded the magnitude of identification with a particular community, rather than with the nation. It is in the context of these local - national anxieties that the visual representation of gender needs to be looked at. Most of the post independence cinematic ventures therefore aimed at evolving a homogenized cultural space. The gender orientation in Indian cinema can also be understood in terms of response to complex gender debates initiated during the colonial period itself. This section engages with the sexual politics of the cinematic representation of widowhood and reads the representation as a vital cultural extension of the nation making process.


52 Ibid, p72.
Since the 19th century, the missionaries\textsuperscript{53} were leading the discourse that critiqued the Indian way of life - socially and culturally. Apart from the male missionary accounts which sharpened from 17th century onwards, the presence of the women missionaries from late 19th century provided a different understanding of the Hindu domesticity. The advent of the American and Canadian Presbyterian women missionaries is crucial, if we read them as predecessors of Mayo.

Both Indian men and women were leading the social reform movements since the 1880s. In various women’s autobiographies and writings from all over India, particularly Maharashtra and Bengal, the slogan that ‘personal is political’\textsuperscript{54} was being raised. The Gandhian movement for freedom in the 1920s incorporated women in large numbers. Gandhi had skillfully managed to evolve his discourse on the position of women both within and outside the domain of home. The freedom movement had taken off well by the late 1920 and issues such as child marriage and widow remarriage were also being addressed by Gandhi and local reformers. It was as if the ‘modern Janus’\textsuperscript{55} of the ‘would be’ Indian nation had already germinated in the nationalist imagination. Recent scholarship has contended the formulation that nationalist movement ‘resolved’ the women’s question\textsuperscript{56}. But the question needs to be asked for whom? Nevertheless, it was in this politically volatile ambience of 1920s, a book called ‘Mother India’ was published by Katherine Mayo, an American lady who had visited India for two years.\textsuperscript{57}


\textsuperscript{54} From Maharashtra and Pune, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, Ramabai Ranade, Anandibai Karve, Tarabai Shinde, from Bengal Haimavati Sen and Nishtarini Debi- are some leading examples of women who wrote not only about social issues and reform but also about their personal lives.

\textsuperscript{55} Tom Nairn, \textit{The Modern Janus: Nationalism in the Modern World}, Hutchinson, London, 1990. Janus was a the Roman god who stood at the gates of people’s homes with one head turned forward and another turned backward, symbolizing concern for guarding the nation as well as reforming the nation. In case of India, it would imply carrying on national movement and the internal reformation simultaneously.


\textsuperscript{57} Katherine Mayo was born at Ridgeway, Pennsylvania. After her education at private schools in Boston and Cambridge, she turned to historical research as a hobby. As early as 1896, in New York Evening Post, appeared her articles on colonial and revolutionary topics. Her early books included \textit{Justice to All}
The book was set to become what Mrinalini Sinha has termed as a future ‘global public event’. What was most crucial about these events was that since the 19th century the space of the ‘Hindu family’ had been opened up for public scrutiny. Gandhi had to sanitize this space for a committed non-violent freedom struggle. His strategy was not only to simply designate an ancient glory to the unit of ‘family’ but also to acknowledge an individual’s protest against his/her own family. Units of biologically related individuals with strong attachment to family could not possibly devote themselves seriously to a ‘national’ struggle. For this Gandhi had to reappropriate various spheres of activity – both traditional and modern where kinship sentimentality could be inducted into a new political sphere. Sujata Patel has suggested that Gandhi did not break and dismiss the assumptions of ‘separate spheres’, a notion which originated with the 19th century reformists who were middle class men and women. When women joined the national movement the spheres came to overlap. She claims that Gandhi constructed a new model of woman extracted from the image of a Hindu widow between the years 1932-48, as a renouncer who could dedicate to the service of the nation, outside the domains of both family and political activism. While Gandhi did uphold both motherhood and widowhood (she was not viewed as a simple renouncer) all through his writings, but widowhood was certainly a more complex issue.

a) **Mother India as a Text**

Katherine Mayo’s book invited primarily a negative response from the Indian public, which included leaders of the freedom struggle. The book also invited a Western response, both in opposition and support. Rather than dying out the curiosity about the

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book only got multiplied. In fact, it became global in nature. In the year 1955, almost 3,95,678 copies of *Mother India* were sold all over the world.\(^{60}\)

Mayo launched a multi layered critique on the Indian ways of living and its people addressed. She addressed India as the *sad old Mother India* \(^{61}\); she claimed that Indians in general have *a slave mentality*.\(^{62}\) For Mayo, *Mother India* was a weak victimized woman who had accepted slave like life. Indian men too were slave like. She spoke about sexual excesses of Indian men; their *early sexual exhaustion*.\(^{63}\) She also generalized that if a woman failed to reproduce through the weak husband, she was sent to the temple priest for consummation.

In 1928, prominent nationalist leader, Lala Lajpat Rai, in his book, *Unhappy India*, concluded that Mayo was a propagandist for those British officials who had vested interests. He raised questions about how Miss Mayo could accompany a District Commissioner on his tours of chequered city or how she sat in the village councils of peasants, or at a Municipal Board meeting.\(^{64}\) The Tory paper, London *Times* refused to give publicity to an important letter of protest signed by almost all influential Indians, officials and non-officials, then present in London. They wrote that Mayo ‘depicts the entire nation of 320 million people as physical degenerates, moral perverts and unabashed liars’.\(^{65}\)

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\(^{61}\) Katherine Mayo, *Mother India*, New York, 1927, p20

\(^{62}\) Ibid, p21.

\(^{63}\) Ibid, p27.


\(^{65}\) Members who signed the letter included Sir A.C.Chatterjee, High Commissioner for India; Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, ex-member of the Executive Council; Sir Chimanlal Setalvad, ex-member of the Executive Council of the Governor of Bombay; and Mr Sachchidananda Sinha, ex member of the Executive Council of the Governor of Bihar and Orissa. It also included all the Indian members of the
The anger was over a comment in ‘Mother India’ where Mayo described that the Hindu woman who in her child birth was ‘ceremoniously considered unclean’.

Mayo attacked the unhygienic practices of child birth:

‘Therefore, in total you have the half blind, the aged, the crippled, the palsied and the diseased, drawn from the dirtiest poor, as sole ministrants to the women of India in the most delicate, the most dangerous and the most important hour of their existence.’  

‘As a result, first, of their feeble and diseased ancestry; second, of their poor diet; and third, of their own infant marriage and premature sexual use and infection, a heavy percentage women of India are either too small boned or too internally misshapen and diseased to give normal birth to a child, but require surgical aid. It may safely be said that all these cases die by slow torture, unless they receive the care of a British or American woman doctor, or of an Indian woman, British trained.’  

Gandhi compared the book to a drain inspector’s report:

‘If Miss Mayo had confessed that she had gone to India to merely to open out and examine the drains of India, there would perhaps be little to complain about her compilation.... I feel that no one who has any knowledge of India can possibly accept her terrible accusations against the thought and the life of the people of this unhappy country. The book is without doubt untruthful, be the facts ever so truthful.’

In 1931, at a meeting of Women’s Indian Council organized by Agatha Harrison at Morley College, Gandhi declared that he had read the book (Mother India) cover to cover and that it was ‘99 percent untrue’. He claimed that the Indian women activists were superior to their British counterpart because there were no hindrances placed in the way of Indian women in entering public life. The British women had to go through untold suffering to win their suffrage.

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Secretary of State for India, Sir Mahomed Rafique, Mr R.N.Mullick and Dr. Paranjpaye. (In Lala Lajpat Rai, Unhappy India, 1928, pxxvi.)

66 Katherine Mayo, Mother India, 1927, p92.

67 Ibid, p98.


69 Speech at Meeting of Women’s Indian Council at London, 18th November 1931, Young India, 3-12-1931, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XLVIII, pp311-12.
Mayo acknowledged that reformists like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar headed legislative reform for the widow’s remarriage. Gandhi, she noted, had critiqued enforcement of widowhood upon girls as a brutal crime for which Hindus were dearly paying.\(^{70}\)

In her chapter on widowhood entitled ‘Wages of Sin’, she wrote about the plight of the Hindu widow:

> ‘From the moment of her husband’s decease till the last hour of her own life, she(widow) must expiate those sins in shame and suffering and self immolation, chained in every thought to the service of his soul. Be she a child of three, who knows nothing of her marriage that bound her, or be she a wife in fact, having lived with her husband, her case is the same.’\(^{71}\)

In her support, Mayo cited Cornelia Sorabji, her contemporary and the first Indian woman lawyer. Cornelia had commented that ‘the orthodox Hindu widow suffers her lot with the fierce enjoyment of martyrdom.’\(^{72}\)

Interestingly, Mayo linked up the ‘menial’ status of widows within the Hindu households to the female wards in many prisons in India where the women were under sentence for the murder of their husbands. And she adds that, ‘these are perhaps rare mentalities, perhaps hysteria cases’.\(^{73}\)

Remarriage, she mentioned in orthodox Hinduism was impossible and the limited remarriage campaign by Hindu caste/reformist groups mostly focused on child/virgin widows.

Lala Lajpat Rai in his reply to Mayo, refutes her argument that Hindu widow’s remarriage was impossible. He says that prohibition of remarriage was limited to the higher castes; where as the lower castes mostly did not practice any prohibition. The higher castes constituted not more than thirty percent of the total Hindu population.

Rai argued back that:

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\(^{70}\) Katherine Mayo, *Mother India*, 1927, p88.

\(^{71}\) Ibid, p81.

\(^{72}\) Cornelia Sorabji, *Between the Twilights*, pp144-6, quoted in Katherine Mayo, *Mother India*, 1927, p81.

\(^{73}\) Katherine Mayo, *Mother India*, 1927, p83.
'the widow's life is not so hard as has been made out by Miss Mayo and the Hindu widow, if she is a mother, is simply worshipped. 

I have never seen a Hindu widow's head shaved anywhere in the North Western Frontier Provinces, or the Punjab, or the United Provinces or Rajputana. 

He quoted from a book by an American sympathizer of India, who was of opinion that: 

'On the whole, the Indian home is a very narrow and limited place, but it may be a very sweet and holy place as well; it has produced a type of woman who knows how to love and how to suffer and be faithful and lose herself in those she loves.' 

It was not only the Indian male nationalists who reacted very sharply to Mayo's Mother India. Those Indian women who were aware of the contents of the book, openly expressed their suspicion and disregard for it. In this sense, Mayo was positioned very differently from some other prominent Western female activists, concerned with the Indian social condition. Ramusack has looked at the activism of five Western women-Mary Carpenter, Annette Akroyd Beveridge, Margaret Noble, Margaret Cousins and Eleanor Rathbone. She argues that while all five were supporters of self government for the Indians, they believed that colonial government had brought positive reforms for women. They have been called 'maternal' imperialist by Ramusack. Rathbone read Mother India in 1927 and was determined to check the accuracy of Mayo's data. To discuss the issues described in Mother India, Rathbone organized a conference in London and initiated a survey of Indian women. Most Indian women and their organizations were not enthusiastic and Rathbone did not have any associates in India.

The All India Women's Conference refused to cooperate saying that:

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74 Lala Lajpat Rai, Unhappy India, 1928, p195.
75 ibid, p193-194.
'such a survey cannot adequately and surely be made by women who do not know India by long residence and by sympathetic co-operation in life of its women'.

Another Indian lady, wife of Indian official stationed in London, Dhanwanthi Rama Rau attended this conference organized by Rathbone at Caxton Hall on 29th October 1929. She was disappointed and in her memoir questioned the right of the British women to arrange a conference on Indian social evils in London, where all speakers were British and many had never even visited India.

Mrinalini Sinha has suggested that the controversy about the book was symptomatic of the public crisis in the hitherto dominant understanding of the relationship between the political and the social spheres in colonial India. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, an outcome of this crisis, was seen as a victory for the Indians against Mayo. The controversy over the book can be seen as 'a moment of ideological discontinuity' when for a short period the Indian women emerged as a collective public. It is indeed interesting to note that although Mayo's 'Mother India' documented the sick and the deprived Hindu woman and mocked at the Hindu male category. The book was critiqued across wide Indian circles. The circulation of the title 'Mother India' caught the Indian imagination for the times to come. 'Mother India' became a site for cultural contestation and competing images of India's womanhood abroad.

78 Rameshwari Nerhru to Rathbone, AIWC Papers, Bombay Report, 1930, p32.


80 Mrinalini Sinha, Spectres of Mother India, 2006, p7.

81 ibid. Also see, Ramachandra Guha, India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy, Picador, India, 2007/8, p156. Ramachandra Guha has pointed out in the context of the 1940s that there were two images of India that predominated American view of India. In postwar America, Indians were imagined as either benighted Indians, who worshipped animals and many headed gods; or as pathetic Indians, plagued by poverty and crippled by disease. Guha says that 'it was no accident that the book on subcontinent best known in America was Katherine Mayo's Mother India.

82 The debate settled down by the early 1930s as more and more women joined the Gandhian struggle.
The image of India created by the book *Mother India* had continued to persist in American imagination. Since the 1930s Indians with nationalist inclination have always sought to convince the Western world that what was required was nothing less than re-imagination of India.\(^{83}\)

The image of India that *Mother India* had projected abroad had deeply disturbed the nationalist minded Indians. This is because they had an exactly opposite image of India in their imagination.\(^{84}\)

The other development in imaging *Mother India* was her affiliation with the Indian revolutionaries.\(^{85}\) Gandhi could envision the amorphous nature of *Mother India* and he drew further upon this cultural capital. Gandhi evolved his unique manner of appropriating her. He did not venerate any particular form of *Mother India*, he in fact strove to create female participants who resembled her. The female participants for a non-violent struggle could not be drawn from the domestic domain alone. The domestic domain, particularly the Hindu one, involved near 'enslavement' of a women and men to their household concerns. Married women in general were not free to commit to a cause external to her family. The mainstream political sphere had some western educated Indian women who were active but were limited in their numbers. A section of these women were simultaneously focusing on movement for suffrage. They were seen as being 'detracted' them from the mainstream freedom struggle. The Gandhian movement was based on non-violence. This could be led by those who practiced self retrain and patience. Both men and women who joined the movement were to be committed to the movement and were to be free of anxieties. This involved sacrifice, even of the family. Going to jail required husband and wife, sisters and brothers,

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\(^{83}\) Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, Basil Blackwell, London, 1990. He studies the effects of Indological historiography on the practice of the social sciences, especially with how that historiography has introduced into the discourse of the West certain key concepts with which India has been inextricably identified--concepts such as caste, monism, divine kingship, sectarianism, etc.

\(^{84}\) The image for this seems to have been borrowed from Orientalists of the 19th century as discussed in Chapter two.

\(^{85}\) It was in the literary field that the association between the revolutionaries and the Goddess was first developed. I have looked at the literary imagination in another chapter of this thesis.
mothers and sons, fathers and daughters to be away from each other. It involved break up of the family structure. To overcome anxiety, celibacy was a must. It was comparatively easier to train women to follow these norms.

However, one category of women who did not require any training, were the Hindu widows. Widow represented the ideal freedom fighter for Gandhi. She was the most suitable participant. A widow’s personal renunciation could be transformed into a political ideology. Although Gandhi could not turn substantial widows into participants, he upheld the idea of widowhood. It is this politicized and idealized Hindu widowhood which was used by Gandhi to motivate public consciousness towards a pacific but consistent struggle. It was therefore inevitable that post colonial cinema should imagine a struggling widowed mother as an embodiment of its anti-colonial past and prosperous future nation. I propose that Gandhi’s renunciatory political ideology created a third sphere of activism; specifically for widows who belonged to neither the domestic nor the political domain, particularly those in the widow homes or ashrams. In this sphere, widows contested as well as cooperated with the nationalist politics.

b) The Third Sphere

In the history of most nations, women have become central to the discourse on nation and nationalism. It seems that in his representation of the character mother as a ‘living sati’ of the twentieth century, the director was very much influenced by Gandhi’s ideas on widowhood. Gandhi’s views on sacrifice, sati and renunciation need some exposition to understand the ways the director has constructed the ‘historical tale’ of the mother in the context of a peasant economy.

86 Gandhi was against child widowhood. The widows who had not consummated or lived a life with husband were not really widows for him.

87 Sudhir Kar proposes that certain forms of the maternal-feminine may be more central in Indian myths and psyche than in the Western one. He identifies a ‘hegemonic narrative’ of the Hindu culture which is neither that of Freud’s Oedipus nor that of Christianity’s Adam; it is in fact the narrative of the Devi. Sudhir Kakar, ‘Gandhi and Women’, The Essential Writings of Sudhir Kakar (with an introduction by T.G. Vaidyanathan), OUP, Delhi, 2001, pp221-261. A.D Smith has pointed out to the preexisting cultural traditions as the basis of imagination of the community. A.D.Smith, The Ethnic Origins of Nationalism, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986.
Gandhi defined renunciation as follows:

‘God created nothing finer than the Hindu widow. Whenever I hear men recounting their misfortunes, the picture of the widow comes vividly before my eyes and I laugh at the man who bewails his fortunes. Self control has been carried by Hinduism to the greatest height and, in a widow’s life, it reaches perfection. Man can find a remedy for his misfortunes, which are usually the consequence of his own folly. Much of his misery is in no way responsible for her misfortune. Nor is the remedy for it open to her, for custom has barred that door. A great many widows do not even look on their suffering as suffering. Renunciation has become second nature to them, and to renounce it would be painful to them. They find happiness in their self-denial. This is not an undesirable state. On the contrary, it is good. It is Hinduism at its best. I regard the widow’s life as an ornament to Hinduism. When I see a widow, I instinctively bow my head in reverence. I never regard the sight of widow as an ill omen. I feel blessed if I see the face of one in the morning. A widow’s blessing is to me a gift which I prize. Seeing her, I forget all my sorrows. Man is but a clod before her. A widow’s patient suffering is impossible to rival. If this holy life lived by widows becomes a thing of the past, if this living image of service is destroyed through ignorance or pride, incalculable harm will be done to Hinduism.’

It is noteworthy that Gandhi celebrated the renunciatory spirit of these widows much after he had to transform his own sexuality to salvation and sexual potency to spiritual power in the years following his vow to celibacy in 1906. Gandhi’s personal struggle with sexuality and own practice of celibacy defined this third sphere of the widows differently. Theorists of nationalism have often pointed out to the sexual differences generated by the discourse on nation. It has been formulated in the context of 18th century Europe where the bourgeois values of respectability were shaping men and women’s sexuality differently.

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89 The guilt of the moment while he was having sex with his wife and his sick father passed away in the next room, never left him. Sudhir Kakar, ‘Gandhi and Women’, The Essential Writings of Sudhir Kakar (with an introduction by T.G.Vaidyanathan), OUP, Delhi, 2001, pp221-261.

90 George L. Mosse, Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1985.
Secondly, the ashrams or widow homes made the widows highly vulnerable refuge and invited social exclusion and disrespect. Both these spheres—home and the ashram—perpetuated victimhood of the widow. It is at this juncture that we come to the third sphere of comparative respectability.91

Gandhi’s idea of remarriage for a widow however remained flexible. He advised both men and women not to marry again after the death of the partner because the basis of Hinduism was self discipline and self control.92 He added that although self control was enjoined in every religion, Hinduism attached to it especial importance. In such a religion, remarriage can only be an exception. He discouraged remarriage but also laid down that as long as the practice of child marriage continues and as long as men are free to remarry as often as they choose, we should not stop a girl, who has become a widow while yet a child, from remarrying if she so desires, but respect her wishes. 93 He would not, if she did marry again, regard her action as sinful.

Gandhi and Nehru, both, though in differing degrees, represented the idea of renunciation, the symbol of men who had spurned wealth which attracts but does not

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91 In the film Water, the child widow Chuhiya innocently asks the local priest, ‘where is the male widow’s home?’ The priest remains quiet but his facial expression is that of helplessness. In the end, the middle aged widow, Shakuntala, after listening to a speech by Gandhi, hands over Chuhiya to his follower. Chuhiya had been exploited sexually by the local zamindar, as did many other young widows. Shakuntala trusted that the ideas of celibacy, purity and non-violence were weapons against the lustful upper caste male. Gandhians embodied these virtues and could also be trusted. The film sends a straight message that under the pretext of upholding the culture and religious texts, the widows were thrown away from home to the ashrams.

92 ‘The Widow’s Wail’, Young India, 4th February, 1926, quoted in M.K.Gandhi, Women and Social Injustice, Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1942, pp106-7. Regards remarriage of widow Gandhi suggested: ‘There are so many educated youths amongst us. How few of them have thought of the Jot of the widows in their own homes! How few have resisted the temptation of lucre! How few regard them as their own sisters and mothers and protect their honour! How few have had the courage of their convictions! And defied their castes to do their worst! Whom is the poor widow to approach? What comfort can I bring her? How few of them are readers of Navjivan! How few even of those who read it can act up to their convictions!...I would appeal to everyone who has a child widow under his care to consider it his duty to marry her.’

bind. In the minds of peasantry *tyag* and *tapasya*94 stirred the immemorial respect of the ordinary Indian for those who renounce the world’s attractions in order to benefit their fellow men.95

Another mode of renunciation was that Gandhi held possession of property as undesirable. When asked about his opinion on the opponents of laws relating to the right of a married woman to own property on the ground that economic independence of woman would lead to the spread of immorality among women and disruption of domestic life. He answered it by saying that ‘Has not independence of man and his holding property led to the spread of immorality among men? If you answer ‘yes’ then let it be so also with women.’96

Within the third sphere Gandhi specified a certain way of life for those widows who were grieved so much that they volunteered to perform *sati*. He advised them on how to be a living *sati* rather than a dead *sati*. He experimented with this very potent cultural theme of Sati.

‘Don’t I appreciate at least her courage to die? – I may perhaps be asked. My reply is ‘no’ in all conscience... Satihood is the acme of purity. This purity cannot be attained or realized by dying. It can be attained only through constant striving, constant immolation of the spirit from day to day.’97 ‘She would prove her satihood not by mounting the funeral pyre at her husband’s death but she would prove it with every breath that she breathes from the moment that she plighted her troth to him at the saptapadi ceremony, by her renunciation, sacrifice, self-abnegation and dedication to the service of her husband, his family and the country. She would shun creature comforts and delights of the senses.’98

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94 A tough trial.

95 Frank Moraes, Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1956, p70.


98 Ibid. The widow who had children could add knowledge of rearing and bringing up children so that they might live to be true servants of their country.
The idea of a living sati was a unique ‘positive’ cultural construction over the ‘negative’ collective shared meaning of a dying Sati. In doing so Gandhi seemed to have dissolved the ‘durability of culture’ and sought to ‘invent’ a new tradition. 99

By bringing the widows in to the national movement Gandhi was drawing upon a cultural reservoir to deepen the feeling of nationalism and simultaneously mapping the vision for the widows to draw upon a cultural reservoir to deepen the feeling of a meaningful and purposeful life. 100

In 1919, a widow in a letter to Stri Darpan, the contents of which echo the Gandhian voice to an extent. Not only that the idea of what work women can do in terms of nation building is also clearly articulated:

‘At present there are millions of widows in our country whose lives are being wasted. They are not respected in their homes. They do not go out to socialize; they have nothing to be happy about; and have nothing to do with reading and writing. What can they do? When they hear that a group of reformists is bent upon getting them remarried, they agree to it, even if later they have to regret. If they get the opportunity to serve the nation in some way, they will never agree to remarriage. One can talk of reform of the widow only when she will be able to serve the nation; will be able to earn her bread herself and will be able to keep her dignity intact. There is a lot of talk about women’s education; schools have opened up in large numbers and there are no teachers. Among million widows won’t there be at least 500 or 1000 widows who can be trained within a few days of hard work? I have drawn special attention of the reformers to this measure because after this very few widows will be ready to remarry. Women are also required in hospitals. It is not a bad job either. During the recent war, women from wealthy families came forth and nursed the wounded soldiers. Rather than shutting oneself inside home and weeping day and night, it is a good option. Women can also do another work. If widows can be taught how to weave cloth, at least we can prevent money from going into foreign hands. She

99 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge University Press, UK, 1992. This work explores examples of this process of invention - the creation of Welsh and Scottish ‘national culture’; the elaboration of British royal rituals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the origins of imperial rituals in British India and Africa; and the attempts by radical movements to develop counter-traditions of their own.

This widow’s own language resembles the one that of Gandhi and Nehru. What is significant is that expressions such as ‘to serve the nation’ and ‘to keep ones dignity intact’, seem to have been appropriated by the director of mother India to create a counter hegemonic image to Mayo’s image of Indian woman. It is this vision which constitutes the spirit of the film and the struggles of the central character, Radha. The inauguration of the dam at the beginning of the film is a clear reference to Nehruvian developmental programmes for rural India. But one question still remains to be asked: Why did the director had to render a happily married woman into a widow by removing her husband from the scene? Perhaps the answer to this question is that only a widow could be shown as the true creator of her destiny. Only a woman without her husband’s help could be portrayed into a heroic mould. A married woman is always dependent on her husband for taking decisions in daily life and acting upon them. Moreover only a widow could be shown as sexually vulnerable woman.

Gandhi frequently exchanged notes with widows from all over India and answered their queries. On her report of the Vanita Ashram, a particular widow, Sulochanabehn was praised for bringing lustre back into the widow’s life. He was of the opinion that ‘there is beauty in widowhood, if only we can see it’. He held that if in the measure one has strength and nobility of soul, one can promote one’s own and others’ good. ‘Every widow owes it as an especial duty to dedicate her strength and her soul to the motherland.....in her (Sulochanabehn’s) widowhood, she has taken the motherland to husband.’

Gandhi recognised that there were two different spheres, where they had different roles, yet he wanted to make both men and women aware that they are not unequal. This language of equality was missing in the visions of earlier reformists. Gandhi wrote:

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101 Ek Vídhwás ‘Vídhwá kí dásá’, Stree Darpan, July-Dec 1919, p182.
The duty of a woman is to look after what in English is called the hearth and home. Man has never performed this task. He has been content to build forts and ramparts for protection. Will he come forward to protect the home?... Hence it is my confirmed opinion that women should get a distinct kind of education. The two have separate spheres of activity and their training, therefore, should also be different. This does not imply that the work of the one is inferior while that of the other is superior; the spheres of the two are complementary.¹⁰⁴ In the film, the director has shown that no sharp division of roles exist for a hard working rural woman.

This third sphere of activism had a more psychological significance than directly a political one. The psychological transformation of individuals was central to the Gandhian strategy of non-violent resistance.¹⁰⁵ The nineteenth century reformism had produced mostly elitist women thinkers and reformers. The male reformers who were Western educated could formulate only a limited agenda for women. Indian women in general and Hindu widows in particular had been marginalized in the reformist discourse. Most widow homes of the 19th century organized boarding caste wise. Tremendous scholarship exists on the critique of the 19th century reformist action, especially regarding the Age of Consent Act of 1891 and widow remarriage campaigns and Act of 1856. Regarding the 19th century reformists, Tanika Sarkar argues that liberal middle class politics was neither hegemonic nor triumphant in colonial India.¹⁰⁶ Charles Heimsath has argued that a new stage of intellectual development came into prominent focus as the reconstruction of Indian nationalism assumed a different form.

¹⁰⁴ Answers to questions asked by members of Jyoti Sangh, an institution for women’s welfare, 31st May 1935, Gujarati, 16-6-1935, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. LXI, pp123-25. Gandhi upheld Gokhale’s example as a widower: ‘He (Gokhale) lost his wife while he was yet in the bloom of youth. He could have married again, but he did not. He served his family in many ways; ordinarily everyone does so. One may, however, serve one’s family either out of self interest or to advance the interests of the nation. Gokhale had renounced all considerations of self interest. He did his duty by the family, and then the town and then the country, as occasion demanded with an undaunted spirit.’ Speech at opening of Gokhale Library, Umreth, 12th November 1917, Dharmatma Gokhale, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol.XIV,pp81-83.

¹⁰⁵ For an elaborate discussion on Gandhian strategy see Shashi Joshi and Bhagwan Josh, Struggle for Hegemony Vol I,II and III, Sage, Delhi,1994.

under the leadership of ‘Hindu revivalists’. Apart from the weak 19th century reforms, a variety of nationalism emerged by the early decades of the 20th century that had crucial implications for the debate on widowhood. The Aryas, the Sanatanists, the revolutionaries, the Gandhians and later the communists – all but forward their views regarding women and nation in the emergent public sphere. They can be better understood if they are seen as different constellations of ideas on tradition and modernity.

Feminists have been arguing that in the discourse of nation making it is the women who perpetually emerge as bearers of collective honour. Men and women are taught to answer their call for service to nation differently, thereby creating a gender difference.

In the film Mother India, Radha embodies just the kind of wife that Gandhi had imagined for the 20th century, a co-sharer with him of equal rights and duties. There are no scenes where Radha’s husband Shyamu works alone in the fields. Radha is always there and performs the same kind of physical labour. The poster of the film where Radha is drenched in mud

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108 Some 19th century style of reforms which continue well up to this day in the form of caste associations. These mostly concern match making for marriage within the caste members.


110 For girls the motto was ‘be faithful; be pure; be German.’ For boys it was ‘Live faithfully; fight bravely; die laughing’ Claudia Koontz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics*, Cape, London, 1986. It has also been proposed that women tend to be identified with nature while men were identified with culture. The women in such a case emerged as pre-social and primarily occupied with child birth. Sherry Ortner, ‘Is Female to male as nature is to culture?’ in M.Rosaldo and L.Lamphere (eds), *Women, Culture and Society*, Stanford University Press, 1974.

111 He added regarding the twentieth century sati, ‘All that I have said about the wife applies equally to the husband. If the wife has to prove her loyalty and undivided devotion to her husband so has the husband to prove his allegiance and devotion to his wife. You cannot have one set of weights and measures for the one and a different one for the other. Yet we have never heard of a husband mounting the funeral pyre of his deceased wife. The wife is not a slave of the husband but his comrade, otherwise known as his better half, his colleague and friend. She is a co-sharer with him of equal rights and of equal duties.’ A Twentieth Century Sati’, *Young India*, 21-5-1931, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XLVI, pp73-75.
and holds a sickle became very popular. In the history of Indian cinema, no other film had such a powerful female centric character. What is also noteworthy is that her husband is shown being demoralized and retreating when they have to struggle with utter poverty. Shyamu's shows cowardice when he goes away from home, leaving Radha alone with three children and his mother who is also a widow. Infact, the film is a story of struggle by two different widows of two different generations. This has been done to contrast Radha's moral and spiritual strength with her husband’s lack of it. In the overall schema of Mother India, men figure as weaker than women. Radha could not have been imagined by Mehboob Khan if a Gandhian paradigm was not available in public culture disseminated during the preceding years of the freedom movement.

To sum up, the representation of widowhood in Indian cinema, as has been shown above, was a coming together of several historical processes. As far as gender relations are concerned the permeation of this picture in popular culture is exemplary.

This chapter has tried to underline some fragments of the politico-cultural imagination which formed the subtext of the national movement - from its infancy to post colonial and to present day. The debate on Katherine Mayo’s Mother India in the 1930s had left behind certain sedimented memories and Mother India, the film, where a new powerful woman was recreated in cultural imagination worked on those memories, albeit, in an entirely different way. This cultural imagination was nurtured and transformed by invoking the Gandhian views on widowhood.

112 Gandhi had portrayed the image of Sita as an ideal for Indian womanhood. Sudhir Kakar describes in detail how the Sita myth influences the crystallization of a Hindu woman’s identity and character and the role it plays in helping to ward off feeling of guilt and anxiety. The Hindu community has tried to mould the character and personality of its women according to the ideal symbolized by Sita, which incorporates chastity, purity and singular faithfulness. For discussion of Sita, see Renuka Singh, Womb of Mind: A Sociological Exploration of the Status Experience of Women in Delhi, Vikas Publishing, Delhi, 1990.

113 The other two films discussed above – Prem Rog and Water, are not about formulating widows as icons or mothers, but as subjects of reforms, rather as subjects of failed reforms. What is remarkable is that while these two films project failure of 19th century reformism; association of widows with the Gandhian styled freedom movement is never shown as problematic. In Water, which has been made by Deepa Mehta, (who has experimented with feminist themes in Fire and Earth), the child widow is handed over to a Gandhian who appears to be most trustworthy to Shakuntala. She does not even think once about handing Chuhia over to the priest towards whom she is respectful and who feels sympathetic towards all the widows. The triumph of Gandhian memory over cinematic imagination is clear.
This in turn generated a new energy and enthusiasm desirous of developmental aspirations.

What connects his earlier film Aurat (1940) and Mother India (1957)? Mehboob Khan commented that the two stories as visualized by him were:

'centred around the fact that the true Indian woman enters her husband’s home when she marries and leaves it only when she dies, that she will never sell her chastity for any price on earth... The Indian woman is the one with the land she works on'. \(^{114}\)

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Annexure 6(i)

Prem Rog (1982)

In this film, a young widow (Manorama played by Padmini Kolhapuri) was represented as a subject of reform, whose remarriage was essential in order to bring happiness back into her life. Revisiting this 19th century reformist theme became popular with this Raj Kapoor film. It narrativised how the upper caste in North India victimized their widows within the household. The horror of stripping the widow of the symbols of her married status is elaborately described. She is spared of the ritual of tonsure when her mother intervenes. The only other sympathizer she has is her childhood friend Devdhar (played by Rishi Kapoor), who secretly loves her. He cannot dare to ask for her hand because she is a high caste woman. After being widowed Manorama gets invited to spend some time at her elder sister’s house. There she escapes a rape attempt by her brother in law. She understands very clearly how vulnerable she is. At this point Devdhar rekindles his friendship with her which finally translates into innocent love. However, Manorama’s father does not approve of this relation as remarriage was against the honour of the family. He threatens Devdhar, who gets beaten up several times in the film. Though in the end the marriage of the two finds acceptance, within family and within the village, the methodology employed by Devdhar to justify Manorama’s remarriage reflects the discourse of the 19th century social reformers.

Water (2005)

This is one of the most controversial movies of the new millennium. Nominated for Oscars, this film brought back widows to a collective consciousness of Indian public in the contemporary times. The film is a story of a particular widow home, ashram, set in the 1920 Varanasi. A child widow, Chuhiya (played by Sarala Kariyawasam), perhaps seven or eight years of age, is brought to this ashram by her parents. Against her wishes they leave her there and tell her that ‘now this is your home’. The ashram has about fifteen other widows, one of whom is a middle aged Shakuntala (played by Seema Biswas) and another is a young attractive widow, Kalyani (played by Lisa Ray). Shakuntala is the most graceful and integrated widow of all. Kalyani is sent out for prostitution by the head of the ashram (herself an old widow), to the local zamindar. Kalyani unknowingly falls in love with this zamindar’s son Narayan (played by John Abraham), who is a Gandhian. The ashram head tells her that widows do not remarry. Kalyani also finds out that her lover is the son of the same zamindar she was often sent to. Both shame and social code compel her to commit suicide. After she dies, it is now Chuhiya who is sent to the same
zamindar. When Shakuntala finds out about this, she feels shocked and makes up her mind to free Chuhiya from the ashram. But she is faced with the dilemma: where will Chuhiya escape to? At this critical moment she happens to listen to Gandhi, when he stops over at Benaras station. The movie ends with Shakuntala handing over Chuhiya to Narayan. Symbolically Chuhiya reaches the safe hands of a Gandhian.
Plate 2 The transformation of a peasant woman into 'Mother India' through iconic representation of Widowhood.....

Mother India as a labouring Wife
Mother India as a Widow
Mother India as a suffering/sacrificing yet strong woman; protects honour of self, family and village.
Chapter 7
Conclusion

In the specific context of the United Provinces four dominant and recurring processes weave through this thesis:

1) The dying sati: Discourse regarding the control over the Hindu widow’s sexuality recurs in different forms in various caste and class groups and this discourse was endorsed, and fostered by the colonial government thereby seeking to legitimize it in the public sphere.

2) The remarried widow: The other picture that recurs is that of the process of re-domestication and re-subordination of the widow in the household and of how she is reconfigured in the family space. The urge to resituate the widow within the family space i.e. widow remarriage was sought to be relocated in the context of production and reproduction.

3) The Living Sati: The third process is the conceptualization of the image of a self abnegating, sacrificing, chaste widow, and above all the labouring/peasant widow patiently enduring all the sufferings involved. This was a uniquely imagined widow which could be merged with the project of nation making and could personify centrality of land to this project. Her imagined renunciatory powers indicated her self discipline and perfect control over her sexual desires and impulse. Besides nation making, the patriarchal perceptions of this ‘self controlled’ body of a Hindu widow also helped in mutating modernity with chastity. It is her chastity, hard work on her family’s plot of land and bringing up new family in the process that underpins the idea of peasantry as a newly emerging nation. The chapter on ‘Mother India’ is an attempt to represent this aspect of peasant life of a Hindu widow.

4) The rebellious widow: It has also been demonstrated in the thesis how the literate and the writer widow of the early 20th century perceived the patriarchal sexual oppression of widowhood and developed a language of literary protest quite early in the Hindi region. But this kind of personal protest in this region remained a marginal voice as it could not establish a dialogical relationship with wider social reformist currents. The reason being that such reform orient movements, such as Arya Samaj and cultural awakening led by Ishwar Chandra
Vidyasagar and Rammohun Roy, did not filter down to this region to considerably influence the intelligentsia.

The first chapter on Sati has revisited the Hindu widow in the context of reform by colonial state as well as by the 19th century Indian intellectuals or ‘modernizers’. I do not look at the Hindu widow as a mere beneficiary of the 19th century renaissance. The dominant colonial view that a Hindu widow was ideally a voluntary widow was inducted into the suttee debate from its very inception in the official circles. The colonial legislators presumed that a legal suttee was somehow better than an illegal suttee. Whether the widow wished to ascend the pyre of her husband or lead a chaste/austere life was presumed to be voluntary on her part. The legislative and judicial debates and reports show that there was an all pervasive colonial consciousness about the fact that constituting criminality of the act of suttee would also mean denying the ‘privilege’ to the widow to perform her religious obligation to prove her complete devotion to her deceased husband. Therefore a challenge to her voluntary widowhood, in terms of opposition to her becoming a suttee or leading a chaste widowhood had to be avoided. The question that had to be addressed was whether all forms and conditions under which the suttee was performed were approved by the Hindu scriptures or not. This resulted in colonial engagement with several Hindu shastric arrangements or vyavasthas relating to the practice. In doing so, a certain notion of what constituted a ‘legal’ suttee was created.

The chapter has shown how the discourse of reform, besides being male centric also shows the tacit connivance of two patriarchies – Hindu and colonial. The very creation of an idea of a ‘voluntary’ sati, a ‘willful’ suicidal widow, by the colonial state shows their willingness to believe in the notion that a Hindu widow’s body belonged to none other than her husband. The body of the widow as such was an embodiment of her husband’s dead body. The colonial state shared the fear of the Hindu widow’s body with their male subject. The sensational stories of widow’s illicit lovers or of her heroic jump into the husband’s pyre formed a very strong image of Indies, as strange others in the European minds. It took the British thirty years to pass the law making sati an illegal practice (voluntary or forced). The pressure to pass the Act had been created at home in England. Unless several cases of child widow burning became highly visible and non ignorable, the colonial state continued to bask
in the belief that widow immolation was a voluntary act. Even after the sati was banned the colonial administration continued to be at ease with the Hindu idea of a ‘living sati’. The opposition that faced the Hindu widow’s remarriage Act of 1856 once, again, showed the strength of this region’s Hindu intelligentsia’s belief in the suppression of the widow’s sexuality. Both the higher and lower castes recognised and managed of widow’s sexuality in their own specific ways.

The self immolating widow conveyed a sense of how spiritually rich the traditional Hindu woman had been. The cases from United Provinces (in early 1800 as part of the Bengal Presidency) bring forth the evidence that sati was performed not only among the high castes; the lower caste widows were also numerous and in certain districts they outnumbered the high caste widows as is obvious from statistics given in Chapter 2. Despite vigorous scholarly engagement by the historians, the question of caste stratification of sati remains unanswered. Social, economic and psychological aspects of sati have also explored but caste has not been problematised. From this point of view, the evidence of low caste widows from the United Provinces helps me see connections with the larger hypothesis on low caste widow, labour and the land (in the second chapter). As has been shown in this thesis— the twin ideas of fear of widow’s sexuality and the perceived strength of her self abnegating character seem to persist in is what connects the colonial and post colonial India. The cases of the child widows in the North Western Provinces put a question mark on the colonial presumption that the category of the voluntary widow was dominant and this evidence created ripples in the administrative circles and in House of Commons.

The other related notion that the widow ought to be relocated within domesticity was also borne out of the fear of her uncontrolled sexuality. There are scholarly claims that the widow remarriage campaigns amongst the reformist groups of Hindus in the Hindi region specifically were driven by the impulse that concerned community identity. Chapter 3 of this thesis has looked at this very idea of Hindu widow remarriage from the ethnographical and regional dimension. Some of the caste groups made it customary for their widows to remarry. The fact that for some lower castes where addition and subtraction to the family labour mattered, widows were useful assets in themselves. For example, amongst a low caste hill tribe the Dhangars, by remarriage a widow lost all right to the property of her first husband.
There is a dire necessity to identify the sources from which the Hindu widow’s economic vulnerability and resourcelessness emanated. In the United Provinces, both remarriage and the prohibition of the remarriage of Hindu widows existed amongst the various caste groups. In case of Bengal it was the upwardly mobile bhadralok or the service gentry which put a ban on widow remarriage. The chapter three provides evidence to an important claim that in the United Provinces prohibition on widow remarriage did not symbolize upward mobility as in the case of Bengal. It rather symbolized transformation within the land holding structure, and in turn, can be related to transformation in the demand for women’s labour. The Chamars are the best example of this transformation. Towards eastern UP where they had acquired a degree of prosperity (as result of the Tenancy Acts of 1901 and 1921) they began prohibiting their widows from remarrying. The reason for retaining the widow could have also emerged from demand for women’s labour within the household rather than in the field. Towards western UP the Chamars had moved as labour in the emergent small scale industries. They were away from the hold of the caste panchayat, and shared a comparatively egalitarian relationship with their wives and widows who also laboured with them. As has been seen in case of Maharashtra as well, the demand for women’s labour within the household accelerated the prohibition of remarriage of the widow within the household. More so in the agrarian economy even the upper caste households would have not wanted to part with additional labour within the household. Theoretically, notions of caste honour were based on widow’s chastity and related shastric codes. But as we have seen - the cultural codes were shaped and reshaped by the context of land and labour. The study of women’s labour within the household is lacking, even though much attention has been paid to women working in the factories or plantations.

Jats widely practiced widow remarriage (however restricted in the form of levirate) and were not held in low esteem by other upper castes. In fact towards the western UP where they dominated, they acquired socio-political status by combining pastoralism with agrarian skills and later through induction into the British Indian army. In UP, the theory that ban on widow remarriage was the strongest factor in climbing up the social ladder, stands questioned. The ban has to be understood in terms of redistribution of gender labour within the peasant household. My aim is not to deny the prevalence of ‘Brahmanical’ social codes for widows
across various castes in UP, I would rather like to draw attention to material setting in which
different castes set codes for their widows. The other varieties of patriarchies have not
received scholarly attention because patriarchy has been seen as a simple process of
‘trickling down from above’.

Scholarly interest in scrutiny of widow remarriage as an institution is not new. The work
of Prem Chowdhry on colonial Haryana has introduced us to some of the complexities of
widow remarriage. In my study of UP, the Bhangis and Musahars had widows who remarried
either by levirate (marriage with the younger brother of the deceased husband) or with
permission of the tribal council. The widow usually lost all claim to the property of the late
husband and in certain cases also her children on remarriage. It may be presumed that the
property involved was not a large amount since the women in the lowest castes were least
dependent on men for survival. Yet, amongst the Bhangis particularly, even though wives
and the widows were mobile, there were ways in which the caste council sometimes publicly
punished ‘infidelity’ by striping women naked. There were also women who were
excommunicated. The permission for remarriage was also required to be sought from the
deceased husband’s kins, who could also sell her or remarry her to a candidate willing to pay
a high bride price. Even by the late 1950s, the scheduled castes themselves had their own sub
castes which had mutually exclusive and the restrictions about marriage and dining between
these sub castes are almost as rigid as those amongst the higher castes. This was particularly
so in the villages and to a lesser extent in the city.

The location of a widow within her caste, class and regional location determined the issue
of her remarriage. This is precisely how I have tried to introduce the ethno-regional
dimension to gender relations in the United Provinces. I do not intend to negate the claim by
earlier scholarship on community identity which places the remarriage of the Hindu widow
in the discourses of the reformists, conservatives or nationalists. I have made an effort to
broaden the scope within which the Hindu widow’s remarriage needs to be contextualized
within the agrarian economy. I look at micro histories of the communities through their
relationship with land and geography.

For studying widow remarriage, the United Provinces presents a very complex caste and
land structure, which was unlike Haryana, where ‘peasant culture’ of the Jats dominated the
country side. UP had both poor and rich peasants; landless labour and landed gentry. In this
context gender relations were placed in a multi dimensional prism of castes and classes. Scholarship narrating the history of Hindu widow remarriage in terms of clash of communities and reformist discourses (or rather a lack of one), is incomplete and narrow. Moreover, widow’s own voice has not been accounted for. I have tried to fill in that lacuna by quoting widows/women’s perspectives from Hindi journals. The chapter on the 1931 autobiographical novel of the writer widow Priyamvada is testimony to the fact that widows had their own perspectives on the use of their body both within and outside marriage and remarriage. The chapter on Hindu widow’s rights opens up for scrutiny the legal space available to the widow. As many cases show clearly - the Court lacked a uniform perspective on cases which involved remarried widow’s inheritance and property.

The representation of widowhood in Indian cinema was a culmination of several historical processes. This chapter has tried to underline some fragments of the cultural imagination which formed the subtext of the national movement - from its infancy to post colonial to present day. For the gender relations, it enabled a unique psychological transformation, whereby a marginalized widow could be brought into public discourse. The debate on Katherine Mayo’s Mother India on the other hand left behind certain sedimented memories and Mother India, the film, worked upon these memories; by invoking them; by reinventing them; by transforming them into a new energy desirous of developmental aspirations.

Another popular image of widow in the United Provinces was that of a chaste widow who personified a living sati. Hindu woman steeped in spirituality was, as stated earlier, a joint construct of the Hindu and the colonial patriarchal imaginations. Central to this spirituality were ideas of celibacy and chastity as a supreme virtue. This has continued to dominate the collective imagination of the nation and state builders in the post 1947 period. In the chapter on cinematic imagination (on ‘Mother India’), I have offered the explanation as to why celibate, chaste widow became an ideal freedom fighter for Gandhi. He was perhaps the only thinker who recognized this cultural capital of the Hindu society. Even though he ardently supported widow remarriage he considered a sati like living as an ideal. He retained his reformist position on liberating the widows from their miseries. Gandhi carefully combined the two powerful cultural ideas embodying the Hindu widow – that of chastity and the other of individual strength of perseverance in times of poverty and political
turmoil. Gandhi's skill lies in making a sense of widowhood which was genderless. These notions of the ideal widow were personified in 'bharat mata' or Mother India with nation's engagement with anti colonial struggle. Nehru translated this very emotional energy of Mother India ideology into a project of nation building. These virtues of a sacrificing widow with sons and land found a powerful cinematic expression in late 1950 in the film 'Mother India'. The chapter on cinematic imagination raises a serious question: how should we understand the actions of a peasant woman, i.e. a Hindu peasant widow killing her own son? In the context of peasant consciousness, many scholars have developed the idea of 'moral economy of the peasant'. But I strongly suggest that this notion needs to be gendered by expanding the concept of moral economy in the context of rural women Perhaps this would include a deep seated commitment on their part to the idea that every village woman's honour and modesty is also the honour and modesty. Dishonouring a daughter of the village was a serious crime, which could not go unpunished. It is this powerful impulse to punish which motivates the protagonist mother to shoot her own son.

In the chapter on Priyamvada's autobiographical novel, the Gandhian discourse on purposefulness and participation of the widows in the anti colonial struggle and nation building formed the most appealing idea for the solitary widow. Priyamvada and many other women writers of the time did not consider remarriage as the ultimate survival option for the widow. They believed in putting their minds and body to use for nation building especially for education and health. At least from the evidence contained in this thesis from United Provinces there emerges a kind of consensus among widows with Gandhian programme was the most suitable programme for their meaningful activities. This participatory politics of the widows must have transformed the meaning of widowhood for them. So far little scholarship is available on this transformative impact. My thesis has shown that even when widows were not part an active part of the anti colonial programme they still imbibed Gandhian scheme of personal commitment to nation. The idea was to orient women as serious thinkers of self, community and nation. In the context of UP, social change and gender relations were thought over by the reading and writing public where as Hindu reformist (Arya Samaj or Sanatanist) and Hindu political leadership (such as Madan Mohan Malviya) maintained an explicitly narrow and to a certain extent, conservative position on gender relations. Largely, the ideas
and writings of the emergent middle class in UP, even when they were slightly progressive, remained individualized and local. This was clearly evident in case of women writers.

Mahadevi Verma’s writings on womanhood are representative of her position of an isolated social entity and did not connect either to the experience of a labouring peasant woman of the low caste or to the high caste elite women asking for voting rights. As shown in this thesis, Priyamvada also symbolizes this tension of location. Priyamvada re enters her widowhood as a changed character. There are limitations within which she imagines widowhood and sexuality. Her narrative comes closer to that of a purdanshini widow. Living in her own self contained world, she does not encapsulate what widowhood and remarriage meant for a peasant/low caste or rural widow. At the most she conceptualizes labour of women as sexual labour (as a rakhel or a prostitute). It remained beyond her imagination to capture the plight of a rural widow. In Bengal it were the questions of social reform and social change that got implanted in the colonial administration and legal machinery by the western educated Hindu intelligentsia while in UP, political debates, especially regarding Hindi-Urdu controversy, took precedence over the social question. As has been shown in the thesis, discourse on widows in particular and women in general, was framed within the political struggle for freedom. At the most, the focus remained education and charity for women.

Debates over ascertaining the share of widow over her husband’s property (Mitakshara or joint family in case of UP) for her maintenance, reconfirms the meta - narrative of this thesis – that widow’s oppression was grounded in the male fear of her sexual transgression. The widow was treated as an ‘outsider’ both in her parent’s house as well as in her dead husband’s house. No where her sexuality was above suspicion. There is a striking continuity in independent India of widows being treated unkindly and with suspicion within the households. In the 1933 debate, the responses from UP clearly shows how deep seated was the idea of ‘social death’ of a widow. The widow’s share in the property was denied simply on the basis that it was against morality of a widow to ask for such a share and she usually got minimum subsistence money out of mercy from the relatives or family members. Even though women’s activism both within as well as outside UP, led to the major changes in the women’s inheritance pattern by the 1956; as early as 1930s, we encounter a new category of activist – the ‘male’ feminist. Harbilas Sharda, the prime mover of Hindu Widow’s Right to
Maintenance Bill of 1933 was well acquainted with the fear of sexual transgression of the widow amongst Hindu men and her economic vulnerability. He strongly articulated the fact that this was sexual bias against the widow and denial of her right over property made her unequal in society. This call for recognizing the widow as an equal citizen was a remarkable break from the 19th century perception of widow as a subject of reform. Over fifty law cases analyzed in the chapter help us understand the nature of the 'litigious' widow. Interestingly, Priyamvada in her novel confronts the question of subsistence for the widow. After being denied shelter in the name of 'honour', at both her parents and husband’s house, she eventually becomes a rakhel (or a 'kept woman'), which gives her a worldly existence and economic sustenance.

This thesis shows the amazing continuum of the cultural force of the image of an ideal Hindu widow in the Hindi region. Scholars have very often pointed out to the phenomenon of 'sexual death' of a Hindu widow. It has been pointed out that in Upanishads and Dharmashastras, the fear of unattached women coexisted with the lure and fear of widows. They continued to be a part of their dead husband’s family. The fear of their sexual involvement with consequent disruption of the family and the social order was certainly deep. In some ways the shastric legislations had reversed the order of Mahabharata and Arthashastra. In this context, Chaturvedi Badrinath’s observation is particularly significant. He writes:

'The shastric repression of widows was primarily sexual. They were expected to eat only once a day, no more than a subsistence diet. They were not to wear colours, or adorn themselves with flowers and perfume. Their heads were shaved their bodies were bereft of all ornaments they were required to not even brush their teeth. Their place for sleeping was on floor, and during festivities in an unseen corner. The shastric aim was to destroy their sexual impulse and leave them sexually unattractive. Should any sexual thought still enter their heads, they were voluntarily to undergo a series of purificatory rituals. They were brainwashed into fearing that since their widowhood was a consequence of their past karma, any laxity in observing 'the dharma of a widow', which the shastris decided what it would be, was sure to invite a similar punishment in the future life.'

The evidence collected in this thesis in various chapters demonstrates clearly the correctness of the observation made in the above quotation regarding the control of widow’s

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sexuality through a matrix of cultural codes, moral values, and institutional structures and their practices. Irrespective of caste and class the attitude towards widow with little variations continues to be of the same. What differs according to caste and class are rigidity of forms of control of sexuality and the punishment inflicted on widows. Therefore, across the society there is a kind of shared attitude and overlapping patriarchies of various castes and classes which in turn had been sustained by colonial policies. These societal practices vis a vis the widows continue even in post colonial India. A cursory look at the maps in this thesis makes this clear that there were/are certain shared patriarchal codes and practices in the United Provinces. In UP, gender relations were considerably determined by high dependency on natural resources such as land and water. The redistribution of resources, general impoverishment, placed pressure on women’s labour. This in turn circumscribed patriarchal codes intensifying the need to control economic production and biological reproduction of widows.

On the whole this thesis is an attempt to venture out of the paradigm based simply on the reformist versus conservative discourses and in the process to explore the specific context of gender relations and widowhood in UP. This specific context of gender relations in UP was predominantly caste yet location of the family land and need for women’s labour determined largely in terms of interaction between the two sexes. The context in which land and women are intertwined also determines cultural symbols of land, motherhood and widowhood. The thesis also adds to women’s history by documenting what widows in UP have been ‘doing’. This work is testimony to the fact that widows (even though it mostly included propertied class) used courts frequently to battle out their claim to property. As an addition to the intellectual and cultural history, the thesis contains evidence of women’s own intense self reflections on gender relations through writing about their bodies and emotions.