

## Decoding *Gandhigiri*: A Genealogy of a 'popular' Gandhi

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This article is about '*Gandhigiri*' - a popular neologism coined by the film '*Lage Raho Munna Bhai*'. It explores the allegorical meaning of the phenomenon. For that purpose, it focuses on Gandhism, Bollywood movies, the content of the film, and certain aspects of contemporary society and culture. As a critic of modernism, many ideas of Gandhi have become more relevant for the post-modernists in the present times. The movie '*Lage Raho Munna Bhai*' 're-engineered' certain ideas of Gandhi without going to the deeper meaning of Gandhian philosophy. These selective aspects of Gandhi got the populist appeal. However, the popularity of '*Gandhigiri*' was short-lived and it was soon distorted in the form of memes on the internet. So the article argues that '*Gandhigiri*' phenomenon is characterised by certain aspects of post-modernism. The article focuses on the different dimensions of '*Gandhigiri*', but ultimately indicates that the ideas of Gandhi and his persona are still relevant in contemporary times.

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**Key words:** Gandhigiri, Post-Modernism, Bollywood, anekantavada, meme.

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### Introduction

Coinage of a popular neologism, a commercial 'Bollywood' movie, and Gandhian ideology are different conceptual entities, apparently disconnected from each other. They are distinct from one another and belong to different spectrums of discourse. However, intersections of these discourses in a triangular form were sought to be conceptualised and materialised with the release of the popular Hindi movie '*Lage Raho Munna Bhai*' (directed by Rajkumar Hirani) in 2006 that coined a neologism '*Gandhigiri*' that broadly signifies 'Gandhism'. The film is a sequel to the earlier movie '*Munna Bhai M.B.B.S.*' (2003, directed by Rajkumar Hirani) and it was a huge commercial success and considered as a cult classic.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arunabha Ghosh and Tapan Babu, "Lage Raho Munna Bhai: Unravelling Brand *Gandhigiri*", *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, (2006): 5227.

According to the available IMDb (Internet Movie Database) the film earned around 126 crores (\$17,897,527) worldwide. The term '*Gandhigiri*' as represented in the film stands for Gandhism ('*Gandhivad*' in Hindi),<sup>2</sup> received instant popularity along with the movie and became a popular neologism afterwards. The instant popularity of certain ideas of Gandhi through a neologism coined by a 'Bollywood' movie surprised many. People from different sections discussed the phenomenon in different ways. However, most of the discussions available in the academia related to '*Gandhigiri*' are critical about it. Because many people felt that the term '*Gandhigiri*' itself is sarcastic and it is responsible for degrading the significance and the essence of Gandhian ideology. For example, S Ganesh, Shiv Visvanathan, Arunabha Ghosh and Tapan Babu expressed their sceptical views regarding LRMB and the '*Gandhigiri*' portrayed in the movie. However, in his book *Bollywood Nation*, Vamsee Juluri looked at '*Gandhigiri*' in a positive way and discussed the significance of Gandhi and his ideology in the context of the popularity of the movie. In the current study, however, the scepticism regarding '*Gandhigiri*' is not focused. On the contrary, it tries to understand '*Gandhigiri*' on the basis of the idea that a film carries allegorical meaning connected with different political and social aspects. The paper is an effort to figure out the circumstances and the conditions that linked up three seemingly different conceptual entities. For this purpose, the interconnections of film art and the different political and social aspects are discussed along with the ideas of Gandhi. It explains the relevance of Gandhian ideology in the present context. It argues that several ideas of Gandhi are compatible with the postmodernist views and the selective ideas of Gandhi or '*Gandhigiri*' shown in the movie are quite relevant in the contemporary era. The study also focuses on the popular internet 'meme' of Gandhi in the new media. It tries to understand if there is a transitional relationship between the '*Gandhigiri*' and the recent popularity of internet meme on Gandhi's image.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 5226.

## **Gandhi in Bollywood**

A few movies based on Gandhi were produced by the Bollywood or Hindi film industry before the *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (LRMB). But none of them got commercial success and mass attention like LRMB. Apart from that, the LRMB is a comedy movie while all other movies before LRMB are based on some serious aspects of Gandhi's life and his ideology. In 1996, a very well known Indian director Shyam Benegal directed the movie 'The Making of the Mahatma'. The movie is about the early years of Gandhi's life. In 2007, Feroz Abbas Khan made 'Gandhi, My Father', based on the troubled relationship between Gandhi and his son Hiralal. '*Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara*' is another movie related to Gandhi's memory and his ideas. This movie was released in 2005 and it was directed by Jahnu Barua. All these movies were appreciated by a few critics, but none of these movies received a popular response.

Cinema as a mass cultural product, the commercial appreciation of the masses matters a lot. The socio-political and economic influence of the modern states over the cultural product like cinema is another aspect of film art. Cinema played a crucial role in India from its early days. In this context, K. Moti Gokulsing said:

Cinema not only reflects culture, it shapes culture. When we consider Indian films, we see how they have promoted modernisation, westernisation, urbanisation, new ways of life, a sense of pan-Indianism, secularisation, the emancipation of women and the right of minorities and in particular the relationship between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

Commenting about the role of Cinema in the process of building Indian nation, Ramachandra Guha rightly pointed out that, "India will survive as long as, among other things, its films are watched and songs are sung."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Moti Gokulsing, K. and Dissanayake Wimal, *Indian Popular Cinema: A narrative of cultural change*, Westview House, (London Road: Trentham Books, 2004), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Vamsee Juluri, *Bollywood Nations: India Through Its Cinema*, Gurgaon, (Haryana: Penguin Random House, 2013), 55.

M. Madhava Prasad in his book *Ideology of Hindi film* contented that, "cinema as an institution that is part of the continuing struggle within India over the form of the state."<sup>5</sup> He further said, "...in a peripheral, modernising state like India, the struggle continues to take the form of contestations over the state form. Cultural production to register this reality through the recurring allegorical dimension of the dominant textual form in the popular cinema."<sup>6</sup> So the portrayal of Gandhi in Hindi film industry and the appreciation of the portrayal by the masses can be considered as allegories of contemporary times. In the language of M. Madhava Prasad, "The film text that reach us as finished products are made possible, not only by cultural factors, but also by the mode of production that prevails in the industry, and in the society in which that industry operates."<sup>7</sup>

The way Gandhi was portrayed in Hindi film industry reveals the position of Gandhi in the post-independence India. Gandhi's ideas were not embraced by the ruling elites of India after independence. Nehruvian ideas dominated the country for a long period. After 1991, the phase of liberalisation started and Gandhi was almost forgotten in the political arena of the country. He became a historical character – sometimes even with some mythical connotation. It was a tragedy for Gandhi and the follower of Gandhism. When the movie LRMB was released, it was a surprise for the adherent of Gandhians of the country. The Gandhian ideology was brought up in the present context by quite an unexpected entity like 'Bollywood'. Some people were even sceptical about the Gandhi of Bollywood. In an article, S. Ganesh said that for Gandhians, "embedded in the past, any approbation of Gandhi, even from an unlikely source such as Bollywood, gives comfort."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Madhava M. Prasad, *Ideology of Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 36.

<sup>8</sup> S. Ganesh, "Lage Raho Munnabhai: History as Farce", *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, (2006): 4317.

In another article in 'The Times of India', the writer wrote about the transformation of Hindi films over the times in the context of LRMB. He wrote that at the initial phases of Hindi cinema the opposition was shown in between the village and town.<sup>9</sup> Some examples of this genre of movie are *Ram aur Shyam* (1967 film directed by Tapi Chanakya) or *Seeta aur Geeta* (1972 film directed by Ramesh Sippy). These movies basically portrayed the purity and simplicity of the village life verses the poignancy of town. These movies attracted the majority of the masses of the country who lived in the villages. It even attracted the urban population, because the country as a whole did not come out from the hangover of the Gandhi dominated pre-independence era. However "the poignancy of town versus country disappeared in the seventies, especially with the rise of Amitabh Bachchan, the first truly urban hero."<sup>10</sup> The hero became urbanised, but he did not stop fighting against the oppressors. However, in industrialised India, the hero continued his fight by embracing new ideas and methods at odds with Gandhian ideals. Industries of the country were growing; people migrated to urban areas from villages and urban poverty increased. The masses of the country were not satisfied with the newly industrialised mechanism of the country, but they did not consider Gandhian ideology as the alternative either. On the contrary, the masses empathised as well as fantasised the 'angry young man' Amitabh Bachchan as their hero and as a role model who fought violently for justice in the movies. Kishore Valicha has rightly named Bachchan as an 'industrial hero'.<sup>11</sup> Gandhi's idea of village economy and anti-mechanistic stand became more isolated and forgotten. Going further ahead, M. Madhava Prasad said that Bachchan became an 'industrial hero' not only in the sense that he played working-class characters but also because he was the hero of the industry.<sup>12</sup> By saying the 'hero of industry' he meant the 'film industry'.

<sup>9</sup> Shiv Visvanathan, "Brand Mahatma", *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 23 September 2006. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/edit-page/Brand-Mahatma/articleshow/2018970.cms>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Kishore Valicha, *The Moving Image*, (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Madhava M Prasad, *Ideology of Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 138.

During that time the 'film making' was gradually turned to be an industry where movies were produced as mass entertainment products.

So the deviance from the Gandhian ideas is quite visible in Hindi films over times. M. Madhava Prasad explained that Amitabh was not only a 'proletarian hero', but also a representative of the state; he explained his point- "the act of switching sides, positioning himself on the side of the 'illegal' (but morally upright) margin that gives the figure its power."<sup>13</sup> Gandhi was forgotten by the Hindi film industry. Only a few selective historical events and personalities inspired Bollywood to make movies, but Gandhi was not one of them. In the Hindi films, the past was always portrayed as heritage or legacy or sometimes as a tragedy. Even in the biographical movies, either the heroic or villainous aspects of the characters were emphasised. In certain movies, historical characters were even portrayed like 'demi-god' mythical characters. In the post-independence era, a lot of movies based on history were produced following these patterns.<sup>14</sup> But a very few movies broke the monotony of these patterns. They tried to see history from a different perspective. For example, the movie '*Rang De Basanti*' (2006 film, directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra) tried to contextualise certain historical event with the contemporary time and politics of India. It 'shows that history has to

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>14</sup> Even the first Indian sound film *Alam Ara* (Released in 1931 and directed by Ardeshir Irani) was based on the story of an imaginary historical kingdom. In the movies like *Jhansi Ki Rani* (1953 film directed by Sohrab Modi), *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero* (2004 directed by Shyam Benegal), *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013 film directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra), *The Ghazi Attack* (2017 film directed by Sankalp Reddy), *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002 film directed by Rajkumar Santoshi), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005 film directed by Ketan Mehta), *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008 film directed by Ashutosh Gowariker), *Kesari* (2019 film directed by Anurag Singh), and *Bajirao Mastani* (2015 film directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali), the heroic and legendary history was shown. While in movies like *Umrao Jaan* (1981 film directed by Muzaffar Ali), *Zubeidaa* (2001 film directed by Shyam Benegal), *Mohenjo Daro* (2016 film and directed by Ashutosh Gowariker), *Amrapali* (1966 film directed by Lekh Tandon), *Anarkali* (1953 film directed by Nandlal Jaswantlal), or *Utsav* (1984 film directed by Girish Karnad) the rich heritage of the country was emphasised. On the other hand, movies like *Garm Hava* (1973 film directed by M. S. Sathyu), *Hey Ram* (2000 film directed Kamal Haasan), *1947: Earth* (1999 film directed by Deepa Mehta), or *Firaaq* (2008 film directed by Nandita Das) focused on some tragic incidents of the history of the country.

be reinvented to be relevant'.<sup>15</sup> Another example of this genre is LRMB. The movie is not looking back for searching heritage, legacy or tragedy. The movie is not even looking for a utopian future. The movie is just about a certain aspect of a historical figure in the context of specific time and space. But surprisingly this new narrative of the film was highly appreciated by the popular audience. A movie or any popular art form gets wide appreciation from the masses when it can indoctrinate the vibe and experience of contemporary time. But before discussing the movie, we should consider Gandhi and his ideas in the present context.

### **Gandhi as a postmodernist**

Gandhi was criticised by many during his time for being critical about modernism. Post-Modernism is a rejection of what was proposed by Modernism.<sup>16</sup> In that sense, Gandhi himself was a postmodernist. Lloyd I. Rudolph elaborately explained this aspect and described Gandhian ideas as postmodernist in his article 'Post Modern Gandhi'. He challenged the earlier notion of Gandhi as a 'traditionalist' and argued that Gandhi opposed both upper-caste Hindu rituals and high modernism of Nehruvian Congress.<sup>17</sup> So his (Gandhi's) perspective is more relevant in the contemporary era of postmodernism. So the elaborate discussion of 'post modernist Gandhi' can explain why certain ideas of Gandhi have been revived in the contemporary time through the popular mass media as well as new media.

Gandhi was a harsh critic of western civilisation (which was a synonym for modern civilisation) of his time. He said that those people who were supporting the modern civilisation are intoxicated by it.<sup>18</sup> He compared

<sup>15</sup> Shiv Visvanathan. "Brand Mahatma", *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 23 September 2006.

<sup>16</sup> D.F. Nel and J.H. Kroeze, (2008), "Information Technology as an Agent of Post-Modernism", [Online: web] Accessed 13 Nov. 2019 URL: [http://cogprints.org/6207/1/Nel\\_and\\_Kroeze\\_-\\_IT\\_as\\_an\\_agent\\_of\\_post-modernism\\_080909.pdf](http://cogprints.org/6207/1/Nel_and_Kroeze_-_IT_as_an_agent_of_post-modernism_080909.pdf). P 5.

<sup>17</sup> Lloyd I. Rudolph, "Postmodern Gandhi", in Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (eds.), *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essay*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 3.

<sup>18</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938), 31.

the delusional situation by the modern civilisation with a dreaming man. A dreaming man believes what he sees in his dream, but it is not real. He said:

A man whilst he is dreaming, believes in his dream; he is undeceived only when he is awakened from his sleep. A man labouring under the bane of civilization is like a dreaming man. What we usually read are the works of defenders of modern civilization, which undoubtedly claims among its votaries very brilliant and even some very good men. Their writings hypnotize us. And so, one by one, we are drawn into the vortex.<sup>19</sup>

This criticism of modern civilisation can be considered more valid in the contemporary time of postmodernism.

He even pointed out that the colonisation of India is just a result of modern civilisation. He opined that India was under British rule not because of the strength of British but because India is allowing them to rule. He viewed that the adoption of 'English civilization' makes their presence in India at all possible.<sup>20</sup> According to him, the whole situation is an obvious outcome of the process of the modern civilisation. Gandhi said, "... India is being ground down, not under the English heel, but under that of modern civilization."<sup>21</sup> So, when Gandhi said "Civilization is such a disease and we have to be very wary"<sup>22</sup>, he meant the contemporary era of his time, i.e. the modern era or modernism.

So, Gandhi was confident about his principle that, following modernism blindly would be a blunder for the Indians. Gandhi considered the specific context of India while discussing his vision of India. He believed that India would have to choose its unique path. It cannot achieve its goal by imitating or following England or any other nations of the world. Gandhi cautioned, "If India copies England... she will be ruined."<sup>23</sup> However he

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>23</sup> M.K.Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938), 29.

said that the people of England were not responsible for the destruction, but the modern civilisation was. In the context of the critical condition of the people of England as well as Europe, he said, "...the condition is due to modern civilization. It is a civilization only in name. Under it the nations of Europe are becoming degraded and ruined day by day."<sup>24</sup>

For the technological determinist, the printing press had a great role for the Renaissance and the following era of modernism. However, Gandhi's critical engagement with the press is significant. He brought the context of the press while criticising about the British Parliamentary system. He underlined the negative impact of the Press on it. He thought that the press is not honest, as they are partial and serves the purpose of certain groups only. He said, "To the English voters their newspaper is their Bible. They take their cue from their newspapers which are often dishonest."<sup>25</sup> Interestingly he also expressed his negative opinion regarding the frequent shifting of views in the press. He said, "views swing like the pendulum of a clock and are never steadfast."<sup>26</sup> His idea of 'contextual truth' contradicts here. So, probably, as many intellectuals<sup>27</sup> pointed out that his criticism on modernism did not come from the contemporary idea of 'postmodernism', but it originated from the traditionalism. But still, he was quite confident about the 'particular Indian context' while implementing any British based idea. However, it is quite difficult to determine whether this belief on 'context' came from his 'arrogance' of 'superior Indian civilisation' or the scepticism about modernism or the both.

Gandhi criticised the machinery of the industries too. He did not appreciate the over-enthusiasm of the modernist regarding the industrialisation. Industrialisation became a primary goal and ambition of

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Many intellectuals did not accept Gandhi as a postmodernist, and they emphasised on Gandhi's traditionalist worldview. For example, Prof. N.A. Nikam described him as 'Discoverer of Religion', Prof. D.D. Ranade called him 'auto-mystic' and Dr R.R. Diwakar explained him as 'the spiritual seeker'.

the post-independent Nehruvian era. After Nehru, other leaders followed his footsteps regarding the industrialisation of the country. Gandhi's anti machinery temperament was not in its entirety based on his traditionalist approach. He criticised the over-enthusiasm of the industrialisation by observing the pathetic condition of the workers in the industrial societies. He said:

Formerly, men worked in the open air only as much as they liked. Now thousands of workmen meet together and for the sake of maintenance work in factories or mines. Their condition is worse than that of beasts.<sup>28</sup>

He threatened, "If the machinery craze grows in our country, it will become an unhappy land."<sup>29</sup> He mentioned his view about industrialisation in his writing without inclining on the arguments of a particular ideology or any school of thought. But, his criticism was somehow influenced by some of his traditionalist views. He said, "Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin." Apart from that, he probably observed the glorified industrialised European society from the perspective of the poorest working classes of the society and tried to articulate their experience and 'their truth' regarding the situation.

However, the post-independent India completely sidelined his idea regarding industrialisation and glorification of machines. After the 150 years of the birth of Gandhi, the present Government is planning 'smart city' along with the campaign of '*Swaccha Bharat*'. In the '*Swaccha Bharat*' campaign Gandhi is being portrayed like an ambassador of the campaign. However, the dream of 'smart city' does not reflect Gandhian vision of India. Gandhi thought that the modern city is an outcome of the modern era. He considered it as an outcome of modernism. He said, "...large cities were a snare and a useless encumbrance and that people would not be happy in them, that there would be gangs of thieves and robbers, prostitution and

<sup>28</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938), 32.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

vice flourishing in them and that poor men would be robbed by rich men."<sup>30</sup>

However, the speculation of Gandhi's view regarding a contemporary issue is not possible, as the idea of city and village has changed over times and as Gandhi always admired multiplicity of opinions. For example, Gandhi's view on 'partition of Bengal' was distinctive and was multifaceted. Instead of providing a popular and emotionally appealing narrative about the event, he tried to focus on different aspects of it. He said, "Great events always produce great results."<sup>31</sup> Supporting his idea Gandhi argued that the event would spur the people to come out from their contented position to resist the imperial power. So he said that the unrest which he defined as 'discontent' is, in fact, helpful for India. He said, "This discontent is a very useful thing. As long as a man is contented with his present lot, so long is it difficult to persuade him to come out of it."<sup>32</sup>

Gandhi's perception on many facets of the notion of truth also enabled him to accept the ambiguities regarding the meaning of '*Swaraj*'. While describing his idea of '*Swaraj*', Gandhi clearly wrote, "It is quite possible that we do not attach the same meaning to the term."<sup>33</sup> He defined '*Swaraj*' or home-rule simply as self-rule or self-control.<sup>34</sup>

So, Gandhi's denial of objective knowledge and master narratives was explained by Lloyd I. Rudolph as 'foreshadowing of postmodernism.'<sup>35</sup> Gandhi proclaimed himself as '*karma yogi*'

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>32</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1938), 23.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>35</sup> Lloyd I. Rudolph, "Postmodern Gandhi", in Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (eds.), *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press,

and believed that human being is only capable of knowing partial and contingent truth.<sup>36</sup> Because of this perception about truth, he believed in the context and pluralism. His idea about pluralism is visible in his writings. Regarding the different views of Dadabhai and Gokhle with him on many issues, he said, "It is bad habit to say that another man's thoughts are bad and ours only are good and that those holding different views from ours are the enemies of the country."<sup>37</sup> However, the genesis of his notion of pluralism of ideas lies mainly in religious texts. He believed in Jain philosophy of '*anekantavada*' which can be referred to as "the doctrine of manifold aspects or manypointedness."<sup>38</sup> So this philosophy accepts the 'ultimate truth' as a complex phenomenon with multiple aspects. But several others have pointed out that Gandhi's view about ultimate truth is quite contradictory. He simultaneously believed in multiple aspects of truth and the existence of an ultimate truth. So it contradicts with the contemporary postmodernist views. Ajit Kumar Jha wrote:

To describe (Gandhi) as a postmodernist is a gross misunderstanding of his philosophy. One of the basic assumptions of postmodernism is the principle of ethical relativism. The Mahatma, whose entire life was dedicated to experimenting with truth, believed, in the absolute truth...<sup>39</sup>

Explaining about Gandhi's idea of truth, Rudolph explained that his idea about truth came from the truism that 'truth is God'; so he (Gandhi) thought that the idea of knowing 'absolute truth in the form of objective truths and universal laws' is a notion of envying

2006), 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>37</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House,1938), 19.

<sup>38</sup> John E. Cort, "Intellectual Ahiṁsā Revisited: Jain Tolerance and Intolerance of Others", *Philosophy East and West*, 50(3): 324.

<sup>39</sup> Lloyd I. Rudolph, "Postmodern Gandhi", in Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (eds.), *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essay*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press,2006), 6.

God.<sup>40</sup> So, for Gandhi truth is like a diamond with many facets or surfaces that that shows partial truth but it is not possible to see the whole at once.<sup>41</sup> Because of this broader perception about truth, Gandhi believed that, “truth had several meanings and forms”.<sup>42</sup> This understanding of truth helped Gandhi to tolerate and respect pluralistic views about everything. He strongly asserted his Hindu belief but he expressed his respect for other religion in every occasion. Many of his critics and even some of his followers were confused about his explanation. Some people even criticised his stand as hypocritical at that time. But the contemporary era is more agreeable along with his ideas. His idea of multiple facets of truth is more relevant in the contemporary era of postmodernism.

### **Lage Raho Munna Bhai and Gandhigiri**

The film ‘*Lage Raho Munna Bhai*’ is a satirical comedy-drama about a soft-hearted goon of suburban Mumbai. The critic explained the movie as “simple, racy, witty and uproariously funny.”<sup>43</sup> In the movie, the goon Munna Bhai (acted by Sanjay Dutt) falls in love with a Radio Jockey Janhavi (acted by Vidya Balan). By kidnapping some Professors and forcing them to answer for a ‘phone in Quiz contest’ on Mahatma Gandhi on the occasion of *Gandhi Jayanti* (The birthday of Mahatma Gandhi is celebrated as *Gandhi Jayanti* in India on October 2) Munna Bhai somehow manages to meet his love interest. During the meeting with Janhavi, Munna Bhai introduces himself as a Professor and a follower of Gandhism.

Impressed by his deliberations on Gandhi, Janhavi invites him to deliver a lecture on Gandhi to her home where a commune of a few aged people live like an old age home along with her grandfather. They named their house ‘Second Innings Home’. To impress Janhavi, Munna Bhai starts

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Hay, “Jaina Goals and Disciplines in Gandhi’s Pursuit of Swaraj”, in Peter Robb and David Taylor (eds.) *Rule, Protest, Identity, Aspects of Modern South Asia*, (London: Curzon Press/Humanities Press, 1978), 120 -131.

<sup>42</sup> Lloyd I. Rudolph (2006), “Postmodern Gandhi”, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Arunabha Ghosh and Tapan Babu, “Lage Raho Munna Bhai: Unravelling Brand *Gandhigiri*”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, (2006): 5225.

reading about Gandhi for preparing the lecture. He continues his study for three days without a sleep and as a consequence starts hallucinating. In the process he starts visualising Gandhi corporeally and he even starts conversation with this imaginative figure of Gandhi. His imaginative Gandhi gets ready to help him to impress Janhavi but says that Munna will have to follow his path in return. Munna promises Gandhi that he will follow him. Gandhi helps Munna and in return asks him to tell her the truth – the real identity of Munna. Munna denies following his advice as he feels the fear of losing her.

In the meantime a builder Lucky Singh, for whom Munna Bhai works, tries to take hold of 'Second Innings Home' illegally for giving it as a gift to Mr Kkhuranna. He promised the house to Mr Kkhuranna as he arranged a marriage of his daughter to the son of Mr Kkhuranna. When Lucky Singh comes to know that Munna loves the girl from 'Second Innings Home', he convinces Munna to go for a trip to Goa along with Janhavi and all the members of 'Second Innings Home'. In the meantime he encroaches the house by using Circuit (acted by Arshad Warsi)- the friend of Munna. After coming back from Goa, Munna asks Lucky Singh to return 'Second Innings Home' to Janhavi and the elders. But Lucky Singh threatened Munna that if he tries to take it away from him then he will expose Munna's real identity to Janhavi. Munna was trapped by his lies. Then Munna remembers Gandhi. His imaginative Gandhi shows him the path of the Gandhism. He follows Gandhian method or '*Gandhigiri*' to fight against Lucky Singh. He even tells Janhavi about his real identity. So finally by following Gandhi's path, Munna succeeded to get back the 'Second Innings Home' for Janhavi and the elders. He also gets back his love and eventually, Lucky Singh becomes a changed man.

The '*Gandhigiri*' of the movie got popularity immediately after the release of the movie in 2006. So the paper is an effort to understand this '*Gandhigiri*' in the present context. However, the study is not considering '*Gandhigiri*' entirely based on the contemporary idea of postmodernism explained by Lloyd I. Rudolph in 'Post Modern Gandhi'.

In the context of the present study, "the postmodern mind may be viewed

as an open-ended, indeterminate set of attitudes that has been shaped by a great diversity of intellectual and cultural currents.”<sup>44</sup> So, in other words, it is just an effort to examine and understand a current phenomenon on the basis of the characteristics of the contemporary era. Gandhi is studied, appreciated and criticised by many intellectuals of contemporary time. For Ashish Nandy, ‘four Gandhis’ survived after the death of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The first one is the statist version of Gandhi, the second one is the ‘quite loveable and grandfatherly’ but ‘boring’ Gandhi of Gandhians, the third one is the ‘Gandhi of the ragamuffins, eccentrics and the unpredictable’ who is ‘more hostile to Coca-Cola than to Scotch whisky and considers the local versions of Coca-Cola more dangerous than imported ones’ and the fourth one is the mythic Gandhi that no one really serious about.<sup>45</sup> This observation of Ashis Nandy about Gandhi is significant while studying the movie LRMB and its ‘*Gandhigiri*’. In the movie, the statist version of Gandhi is dominant, the ‘boring’ version of Gandhi is mentioned and the mythic version of Gandhi is visible in certain parts. However the ‘Gandhi of ragamuffins’ doesn’t enter in the movie. So, basically, the Gandhi of LRMB is a Gandhi with a populist appeal. In an article, titled ‘*Lage Raho Munna Bhai: Unravelling Brand Gandhigiri*’, it was rightly said that “Munna’s Gandhi perhaps is not someone distant and historical but someone with whom the contemporary masses can relate”<sup>46</sup>. The movie does not talk about the deeper values of Gandhian thought or the socio-economic ideas of Gandhi. It does not even mention about the basic and unique ideas of Gandhism like idea of the village economy, criticism of modern technology, the idea of ‘*Ram Rajya*’ or any other aspects of Gandhian socio-economic ideas elaborately discussed by Gandhi himself in his different writings and lectures. On the contrary, there are certain statements in the movie that can be considered as ‘anti-Gandhian’.

<sup>44</sup> R. Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the ideas that have shaped our world view*, (London: Random House, 1991), 395.

<sup>45</sup> Ashis Nandy, “Gandhi after Gandhi”, *The Little Magazine*, New Delhi, May 2000, 38-41. <http://www.littlemag.com/nandy.htm>

<sup>46</sup> Arunabha Ghosh and Tapan Babu, “Lage Raho Munna Bhai: Unravelling Brand *Gandhigiri*”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(51): 5225.

In a dramatic scene of the movie, the protagonist Munna Bhai says, "He thought he will make the country great – exactly like 'imported one' ... but we destroyed everything." This statement is exactly the opposite of Gandhi's vision about India. Gandhi elaborately explained his vision of India in his book '*Hind Swaraj*'. He was critical about 'importing' values, ideas, or western science from the West or any other foreign countries. He criticised the popular vision of his time of material development of the country on the basis of the standard of western developed nations or countries like Japan. He wrote,

We want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger's nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English. And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englستان. This is not the *Swaraj* that I want.<sup>47</sup>

In another scene of the movie – when Munna Bhai interacts with the elders of 'Second Innings Home', he says that Gandhi liberated the country from the foreigners, but then the people of the country has turned strangers to him. This is a political statement of the movie and interestingly this statement comes before the hallucination of Munna Bhai or before he read about Gandhi. The statement mildly directs to the socio-economic thoughts of Gandhi, but which is a "complete no-no for today's consumer economy driven India."<sup>48</sup>

Reacting on Munna Bhai's statement, one member of the 'Second Innings Home' comments that the situation of the country is not so bad and India is developing. Munna gets more aggressive by this comment and says,

To hell with the development!...There are pipes- but not water, there are bulbs- but no electricity...there are more potholes than cars on the road... you can't walk by the footpath because there are shops over there...there are trains, but the name is on waiting list...if ticket gets confirmed then the train gets cancelled.

<sup>47</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, 25.

<sup>48</sup> "Lage Raho Munna Bhai: Unravelling Brand *Gandhigiri*", 5227.

This statement is nothing to do with the Gandhian idea or his vision. This statement is just a popular narrative of the middle-class people about the underdevelopment of the country. These narratives on the daily woes of an ordinary person became popular again during the time of Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement in 2011.<sup>49</sup> In that movement, the corruption of the country was projected to be the sole cause of the underdevelopment of the country. Another aspect of the movie is the language of the protagonist. The movie does not use some 'refined and mainstream' language to talk about Gandhi. Gandhi himself was a person who tried to understand the vibe of the common masses by living their life. Language is a primary aspect to understand and communicate with a particular group of people. A particular language carries a particular worldview. However, after the death of Gandhi, he became an entity that exists only in refined and sophisticated languages of certain groups. As David Hardiman described, he (Gandhi) had just become 'a template' for modern moral activism.<sup>50</sup> Gandhi's stand on anti-imperialism, anti-racism or non-violence asserted its position as an alternative politics after his departure. The moral superiority of these popular ideas got an overwhelming recognition all over the world irrespective of ideologies, political affiliation or belief. But, a puritan moralistic entity is more exclusive. So, his entity became more exclusive in that sense. But in the movie LRMB, Gandhism was taught by Munna who speaks '*Tapori*' - a language often connected to the Mumbai slum dwellers.<sup>51</sup>

In an article, the context and impact of the '*Tapori*' language in the movie were explained, "In a remarkable manoeuvre of communication skill, the street-smart Mumbai *tapori* lingo, peppered with slangs, is used to create instant communication

<sup>49</sup> The leader of the movement Anna Hazare was called a Gandhian by certain media houses and also by some people. However, this view was criticised by many. Even the great grandson of Gandhi, Mr. Tushar Gandhi expressed his objection over calling him (Anna Hazare) a Gandhian.

<sup>50</sup> David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours*, (New Delhi: Pauls Press, 2003), 297.

<sup>51</sup> "Lage Raho Munna Bhai: Unravelling Brand *Gandhigiri*", 5226.

with the audience, especially GenNext.”<sup>52</sup> Explaining the motive, screenplay writer Abhijat Joshi, clarified their viewpoint regarding the language by saying, “It was important for us to dispel the myth about Gandhi being a sedate, ascetic person. We wanted to show his other side – witty, humorous, light-hearted and creative”<sup>53</sup>. The language helped them to fulfil this purpose. In the movie, Gandhi was comprehended and narrated by a language spoken by the ‘goons’ and ‘dwellers of the slum’ areas of the city. Gandhism was defined and explained by the language of a few ‘outcasts’ and it was accepted and appreciated by the masses.

This phenomenon can be appropriated only by the way of thinking of the contemporary time. The contemporary worldview emphasises on plurality and fragmented views. This worldview comes from the postmodernist notion that, “No one’s view of reality can be taken as the truth, since all views are subjective.”<sup>54</sup> In the movie, the understanding of the Gandhism by a ‘goon’ was not mortified and this view of the movie was appreciated by the mass audience.

The movie LRMB clearly stands for the idea that “Post-Modernism is an opportunity for the world to be re-enchanted.”<sup>55</sup> ‘*Gandhigiri*’ is an effort to re-engineer some ideas and ideals that are considered to be outdated for a long period. The movie makes a clear statement that Gandhi is just an archive or a monument if nobody cares about his ideas. The movie asserts, “History remains inaccessible unless he is reworked as a contemporary.”<sup>56</sup> It sees history from a different perspective. In the context of Gandhian ideology it does not consider ‘history as ideology’, but “it is mere

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> D.F. Nel and J.H. Kroeze. (2008), “Information Technology as an Agent of Post-Modernism”, , [Online: web] Accessed 13 Nov. 2019 URL: [http://cogprints.org/6207/1/Nel\\_and\\_Kroeze\\_-\\_IT\\_as\\_an\\_agent\\_of\\_post-modernism\\_080909.pdf](http://cogprints.org/6207/1/Nel_and_Kroeze_-_IT_as_an_agent_of_post-modernism_080909.pdf). P 5.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Shiv Visvanathan, “Brand Mahatma”, *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 23 September 2006.

information to be tactically used as and when needed.”<sup>57</sup> In a comic scene of the LRMB while the security guard of Lucky Singh slaps Munna Bhai he offers another cheek for slapping as Gandhi said that ‘If someone slaps you on one side of your face, turn the other one to him’. But when the guard slaps him again Munna punches on his face and says that Gandhi did not say anything what to do after the second slap. In another scene, Munna orders Circuit to point a gun towards the astrologer to make the point that astrology is just a superstition. So, in the movie, the protagonist Munna Bhai uses a selective set of ideas of Gandhism as a tactic to handle or face certain specific situations.

In an article, titled ‘Brand Mahatma’, the Gandhi of LRMB was rightly defined as a ‘pragmatic art of life’.<sup>58</sup> It also says, “From distant myth he is now part of modern folklore re-engineered in a new role as agony aunt and management consultant.”<sup>59</sup>

Analysing from the perspectives of Frankfurt School mass media as ‘cultural industry’, LRMB is definitely a product of mass culture.<sup>60</sup> But the cult follower of ‘*Gandhigiri*’ after the movie definitely signifies its appeal as ‘pop culture’.<sup>61</sup> ‘Pop culture’ is not restricted to the dimension of mass production of entertainment product and its consumption. In that sense, popular culture is a more ‘intimate’ process. Popular culture may circulate not only through mass media but also through other forms of human interactions. The idea of ‘*Gandhigiri*’ was coined by the movie, but the appeal of ‘*Gandhigiri*’ was not restricted to the movie only. A lot of people

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> From the perspective of Frankfurt School (Institute of Social Research founded in 1923) ‘Mass Culture’ refers to the ‘contents’ of ‘cultural industry’ like Radio, Cinema, Television or Press.

<sup>61</sup> Pop culture is slightly different from Mass culture. Mass culture considers the ‘production aspect’ but ‘pop culture’ or ‘popular culture’ considers the ‘consumption aspect’. The ‘Pop culture’ is used in a broader sense and it is not always a result of the products of ‘cultural industry’.

came to know about '*Gandhigiri*' or participated in the '*Gandhigiri* influenced movements' without even watching the movie. For example, in 2006, around 2,000 farmers of Vidarbha region of India protested with flowers to persuade a bank to disperse loans by the influence of '*Gandhigiri*'.<sup>62</sup> In the same year, influenced by the film, medical students of the King George Medical College performed a '*Shram Daan*' or, voluntary work and planted several tree saplings.<sup>63</sup> In Lucknow, people protested against a liquor merchant by offering flowers to him just like Munna Bhai.<sup>64</sup> In 2007, '*Gandhigiri*' even influenced some protesters in an American office of Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS).<sup>65</sup> In an article, titled '*Lage Raho Munna Bhai: Unravelling Brand Gandhigiri*', authors pointed out that the movie LRMB branded the Gandhian ideology as '*Gandhigiri*' very successfully and so the brand '*Gandhigiri*' instantly got popularity in the popular culture. It was rightly said, "Gandhi, the man, was once the message. In the India of the post-liberalisation brand *Gandhigiri* is the message."<sup>66</sup> However, this kind of '*Gandhigiri*' continued just for a specific period and after that, it automatically vanished from the memory of the public sphere. So this whole phenomenon signifies the truism that "post-Modernism is pop-culture, characterized by the superficiality of society and the individual being inauthentic and in a constant state of flux, and the image/representation has

<sup>62</sup> Zubair Ahmed, "Gandhi-style protest by farmers", BBC News, Mumbai, 12 October 2006. [Online: web] Accessed 12 Nov. 2019 URL: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/6044476.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6044476.stm)

<sup>63</sup> SawFNews (2006), "Bollywood's Lage Raho Munna Bhai inspires Lucknow's medical students", [Online: web] Accessed 11Nov.2019 URL: [https://web.archive.org/web/20070929100142/http://news.sawf.org/Bollywood/22195.aspx/Lucknow\\_residents\\_play\\_Munnabhais](https://web.archive.org/web/20070929100142/http://news.sawf.org/Bollywood/22195.aspx/Lucknow_residents_play_Munnabhais).

<sup>64</sup> Rediff.com (2006), "Lucknow citizens go Gandhian on liquor merchant", [Online: web] Accessed 11Nov.2019 URL: <https://www.rediff.com/news/2006/sep/21sharat.htm>.

<sup>65</sup> NEWS18 (2007), "Gandhigiri works! Green Card seekers make US change heart", [Online: web] Accessed 11Nov.2019 URL: <https://www.news18.com/news/india/gandhigiri-works-green-card-seekers-make-us-change-heart-269337.html>.

<sup>66</sup> "Lage Raho Munna Bhai: Unravelling Brand *Gandhigiri*", 5227.

assumed primacy over the physical."<sup>67</sup>

## Gandhi and Internet Meme

Any content of popular culture remains popular only for a short span of time. It fades over time, but its footprints are not negligible. '*Gandhigiri*' is no longer visible in the Indian public sphere, but the neologism '*Gandhigiri*' and the picture of Gandhi is still popular on the new media in a different way. In India, the image of Gandhi is one of the most popular faces of social media like 'Yao Ming's laughing face'. In the popular 'internet meme' of social media, Gandhi's face is often used to talk about morality and utopia sarcastically. The term 'meme' was first used in the cultural context by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. In his book he argued, "the gene as the unit of biological selection and the organism as a survival machine for its genes" and he further added that, "culture also evolves" and 'memes' are the units of cultural selection.<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, a meme is "a unit of cultural inheritance, hypothesized as analogous to the particulate gene, and as naturally selected in virtue of its phenotypic consequences on its own survival and replication in the cultural environment."<sup>69</sup> As examples of memes, he suggests ideas, catch-phrases, tunes (or snatches of tunes), fashions and skills.<sup>70</sup> The term meme was elaborately used for some internet contents. The 'internet meme' was defined in the following way:

An internet meme is a unit of information (idea, concept or belief), which replicates by passing on via Internet (e-mail, chat, forum, social networks, etc.) in the shape of a hyper-link, video, image, or phrase. It can be passed on as an exact copy or can change and evolve. The mutation on the replication can be by meaning, keeping the structure of the meme or vice

<sup>67</sup> "Information Technology as an Agent of Post-Modernism", , [Online: web] Accessed 13 Nov. 2019 URL: [http://cogprints.org/6207/1/Nel\\_and\\_Kroeze\\_-\\_IT\\_as\\_an\\_agent\\_of\\_post-modernism\\_080909.pdf](http://cogprints.org/6207/1/Nel_and_Kroeze_-_IT_as_an_agent_of_post-modernism_080909.pdf).P 5

<sup>68</sup> Kate Distin, *The Selfish Meme: A Critical Reassessment*, (New York: Cambridge University Press,2005), 6.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

versa. The mutation occurs by chance, addition or parody, and its form is not relevant. An IM depends both on a carrier and a social context where the transporter acts as a filter and decides what can be passed on.<sup>71</sup>

So it is possible to trace back the phenomenon of instant popularity of Gandhi on the internet meme. The satirical and comic presentation of Gandhi in the internet meme is surely not an instant and detached event. The 'mutation' process might have happened in different levels, but there are chances that the instant popularity of '*Gandhigiri*' also had a role in that 'mutation process'. The recent proliferation of the internet memes are often connected to Dadaism. As an 'absurd art' movement Dadaism started in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century after the devastating First World War. Dadaist Tristan Tzara commented about Dadaism that "the beginnings of the movement came not out of a desire to make art, but out of a profound disgust with the world."<sup>72</sup> The 'disgust' appeared in the artistic mind of Europe after experiencing the devastating war in the continent. However, the contemporary 'memes' related to Gandhi are not about 'disgust', but mostly about 'scepticism'. They are sceptical about morality, ethics, reality and all the values that once Gandhi considered the virtue of humanity.

## Conclusion

In an article, published in Washington Post (titled 'Postmodernism didn't cause Trump: It explains him', published on August 31, 2018) the writer Aaron Hanlon discussed the popular debate of Post Modernism and the rise of Donald Trump as US President. When Donald Trump won the 2016 American Presidential Election, many intellectuals like Michiko Kakutani or Daniel Dennett blamed postmodernism for facilitating the rise of Donald Trump in the American politics. But Aaron Hanlon, in his article, argued that Post Modernism did not cause Trump, but it can

<sup>71</sup> C.M. Castaño (2013), "Defining and characterizing the concept of Internet Meme", *Revista CES Psicología* 6, 2(2013): 97.

<sup>72</sup> Sam Greszes (2018), "Shitposting is an art, if history is any indication: Drawing a line between an internet pastime and the Dadaist movement", [Online: web] Accessed 11Nov.2019 URL: <https://www.polygon.com/2018/12/17/18142124/shitposting-memes-dada-art-history>

explain why he won the election. In the same way, it will be inappropriate to claim that '*Gandhigiri*' is a deliberate and conscious post modernist effort of the maker of the LRMB; but, there are certain aspects of post-modernism that can explain beautifully the phenomenon of '*Gandhigiri*'. These aspects explain why Gandhism was portrayed as '*Gandhigiri*' in LRMB and why '*Gandhigiri*' got instant popularity all over the country. LRMB broke convention by using a comic treatment for a seemingly serious topic like Gandhism, and the effort was highly appreciated. The contemporaries got this version of Gandhi appealing. As a traditionalist, Gandhi criticised modernism. So, as a critic of modernism, many of his ideas are attractive for contemporary post-modernists. India, however, is not a postmodernist society. But, the masses of the country are sceptical and suspicious about many aspects and outcomes of modernism. The '*Gandhigiri*' portrayed in the LRMB provided a wishful solution over the frustration caused by the Indian version of modernism. Instead of going deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, the movie 'reengineered' some Gandhian ideas to use as a tactic to counter some challenges faced by the commoners in the day to day life. Through the movie, the masses perceived Gandhi as an iconic critic and problem solver for their frustrations over modernism. Not Gandhism or Gandhian philosophy, but Gandhi himself became the message through '*Gandhigiri*'. So, '*Gandhigiri*' became short-lived, and very soon it became ridiculously distorted. People expressed their scepticism about the 'message' by making memes - where Gandhi's image was used to ridicule about morality, utopia or any kind of puritan ideas. The whole phenomenon is a display of the pop-culturist dimension of the postmodernist world. However, it shows that the context of Gandhi is still prevalent, and powerful enough to instigate hope and despise at the same time. The whole phenomenon is a statement against the popular belief of Gandhi's political and societal oblivion.