

Review**Latika Padgaonkar****The Mahatma on Celluloid: A Cinematic Biography**

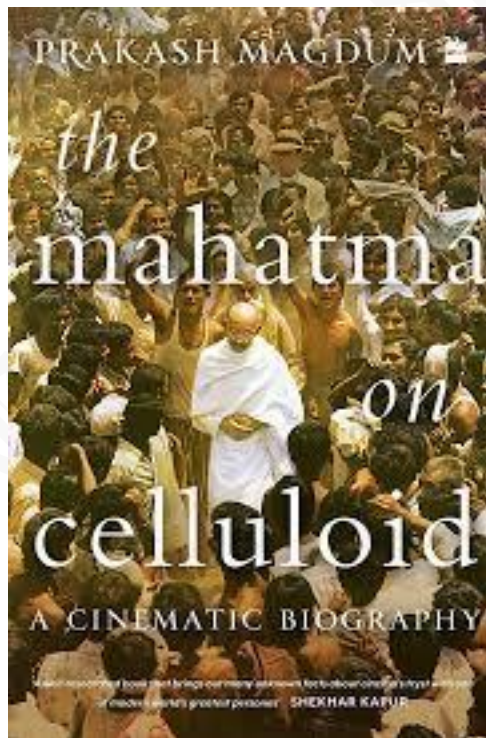
*The Mahatma on Celluloid: A Cinematic Biography* by Prakash Magdum, Rs.389/- PB, 372 pages, 2022, ISBN: 978-9356291638, Harper Collins India.

Few could have used the pandemic years with as much curiosity, extensive research and resourcefulness as Prakash Magdum, former Director of the National Film Archive in Pune. He chose to delve into the story of Mahatma Gandhi and cinema or, as he calls it, *The Mahatma on Celluloid*. His investigation included features, documentaries, ‘topicals’, photographs, footage (both Indian and foreign) on the Mahatma, and films inspired by his life and values. What emerged is a complex yet comprehensive book, the fruit as much of his toil as of his zeal. That it was written and published so amazingly quickly was nothing less than a miracle.

Yet, placing Mahatma Gandhi and cinema together was something of an anomaly. The two were as different as chalk and cheese. In his lifetime, Mahatma Gandhi was one of the most photographed personalities in the world. But paradoxically, he hated being photographed and saw neither joy nor utility in the camera. For all that, the question can be asked, as Shyam Benegal does in his Foreword: how relevant or important was Gandhiji’s tryst with cinema?

That is precisely what *The Mahatma on Celluloid* examines. Magdum’s book (dedicated to Motilal Kothari and A K Chettiar, “two passionate men responsible for Preserving Gandhi on

Celluloid”) is a veritable collection of pearls unearthed from historical records, literature, films, newsreels, conversations et al. during his tenure as NFAI Director. Fortunately, he had an excellent collaboration with his entire team at the Archive. For all that, stringing together both full-fledged stories and charming nuggets of information was Magdum’s. While the camera as a piece of technology was Gandhi’s bête noire, the Mahatma did relent eventually - when pushed by photographers and cinematographers - and allowed himself to be photographed. But no flash photography was permitted, nor any disturbance to his routine.



Magdum takes us chronologically through the happenings in Mahatma Gandhi’s life, filmed and photographed almost unceasingly. The 1930 Dandi March, he tells us, was one such event covered by innumerable film companies and finally shown to lakhs of viewers all over India. Besides, visuals of this “right against might” battle were displayed internationally, too, making Gandhi a famous and revered figure almost overnight.

A year later, three top men from three American companies conducted the first talkie interview with Gandhi and broadcast it worldwide. The interview – in which the Mahatma kept his head bowed all the time and never really faced the camera - proved to be a real challenge. Magdum quotes the interviewer as saying: “Of all the thousands of public men I have filmed or interviewed, none has been more difficult to handle than Mahatma Gandhi – that

curious combination of politician, mystic, philosopher, saint and seer....”

One of the three men, James Mills, also recorded Gandhi’s voyage from Bombay to Marseilles when he was on his way to attend the Second Round Table Conference. For the first time, it had close-ups of the Mahatma. In London, Gandhi met Charlie Chaplin, and pictures of the two together made headlines in the media. Such are the little vignettes that give splashes of colour to Magdum’s book. For instance, Gandhi’s request to meet the Pope was turned down because of Gandhi’s loincloth-only apparel!

We are told that films began to be made in different Indian languages on Gandhi and his ideas: empowerment of women, prohibition, the charkha, patriotism, his anti-untouchability campaign, and even his vow of celibacy.

Only in 1942, at the age of 75, did Gandhi watch his first film – *Ram Rajya* by Vijay Bhatt, at a special screening. He was also shown *Mission to Moscow*, but he walked out, ill at ease with the scanty dresses and dances that he saw on the screen. So forcefully severe was Gandhi’s reaction to the cinema, states Magdum, that he even said cinema was making children sick!

In 1940 A K Chettiar made a film, *Mahatma Gandhi*, which, writes Magdum, was neither fiction nor documentary nor newsreel, but rather, a mix of many things and “something in between”. Chettiar travelled “almost 1,00,000 miles across four continents to collect footage shot by more than 100 cameramen.” “The footage he tirelessly collected totalled a staggering 50,000 feet approximately ...” and, when put together, it became the story of the Gandhian era in Indian history, and went on to be screened not just in India but in but in the US and at the UN too.

Vitthalbhai Jhaveri’s first complete biopic, *Mahatma: Life of Gandhi – 1869-1948*, sought to tell the story of Mahatma’s search for truth. While indeed an ambitious venture, authentic but far too long (5 and a half hours), and did not get the “patronage of either the audience or the government.”

The historic Congress session at Gowalia Tank in 1942 in Mumbai (where Gandhi gave his

Quit India call) was filmed but unfortunately went missing. Later, however, some footage (of Nehru, Patel and Gandhi) turned up inexplicably. Apart from this, there were foreign companies, too, making shorts on newsworthy topics, for example, the 1942 meeting in Wardha and the riots in Noakhali.

Such was the fervour Gandhi inspired that there was even a short film made on two little Indian girls in America boarding a ship for London to meet him and hand him an invitation to come to the US. Alongside, newsreel companies continued to film and interview the Mahatma and these – like so much else – were publicised in all major newspapers. A little aside here: Gandhi did not know what it was when he first spoke into a mike. He asked, “Do I talk into this thing?” And when it was over, he said, “Well, that’s over.” All this was heard on the waves! There was even a mock newsreel made as late as 2006 – a fictionalised story of Mahatma Gandhi visiting the US secretly in 1933, walking to a basketball stadium in his loincloth, bat in hand, and even playing the game.

As we can see, numerous films have been made on the Mahatma or his ideals, ideas and values, beginning with the silent *Bhakt Vidur* (1921). They include Shyam Benegal’s *The Making of the Mahatma* (1966) and Girish Kassaravalli’s *Kurmavtara* (2012), and some popular ones in Hindi too, among them *Achhut Kanya* (Dir: Franz Osten, 1936), *Jagriti* (Dir: Satyen Bose, 1954), *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai* (Dir: Radhu Karmakar, 1960) and *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (Dir: Rajkumar Hirani, 2006), to name a few.

For all that, there was no significant tribute to Mahatma Gandhi on this birth centenary in 1969, apart from four special shorts by Film Division. BBC made one, and a play was produced as well.

Interestingly, though, some footage that Magdum discovered at NFAI showed the “actual spot where Gandhi fell (when he was killed), barricaded by rope, and people taking away the blood-stained soil” and women carrying his mortal remains...

Gandhiji’s assassination was explored cinematically in two films: *Nine Hours to Rama* (1963, a fictionalised account related from the killer’s point of view), directed by Mark Robson, and an

experimental film, *At Five Past Five* (Dir: Kumar Vasudev, 1969). These works chose to deal with very different perceptions about the assassination. The former (based on a book) “dwelt on the nine crucial hours before the killing”; the latter on four conspirators who are on a mission to kill the Mahatma, but shortly before the act, one of them has second thoughts.

What is most remembered, though, is Richard Attenborough’s multiple award-winning films *Gandhi* (1982) - and the magnetic performance by Ben Kingsley. The public at large, however, has little idea of the enormity of the task that went into it. The idea was Motilal Kothari’s, a man possessed, and Magdum gives an overarching view of the magnitude of Kothari’s efforts. For twenty years, Kothari - who hailed from Satara district in Maharashtra but had settled in Britain – toiled relentlessly to make his dream come true - moving from country to country, trying to get the best personalities on board, including the best directors and actors in Hollywood.

The ups and downs of making *Gandhi* (under which banner it should be produced, who would finance it, who would direct it, who would play Gandhi, how to put together the best creative minds in India, Britain and the American film industries) is a riveting tale in itself.

How did Attenborough come on board? Kothari had in mind a few other illustrious American directors. When Attenborough was first approached, he was somewhat unsure since he had not directed a film for nearly twenty years. But one reading of Louis Fischer’s book, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, and he was in thrall.

The approval came in 1963 from Mountbatten and Pandit Nehru (who told Attenborough not to “deify” Gandhi). Kothari worked like a madman but did not live to see his idea come to fruition on the screen. He died in 1970. But the film was released more than a decade later, in 1982. It was dedicated to Motilal Kothari, Nehru and Mountbatten. What clinched the deal was the choice of Ben Kingsley (born Krishna Pandit Bhanji) for the role of Gandhi. So convincing was he that we are told people watching the shoot would bow to him in reverence.

Magdum writes about Shyam Benegal’s *The Making of the Mahatma: Gandhi Se Mahatma Tak* (1996), which explored the problems of racism and injustice Gandhi faced in South Africa. “With Rajit Kapoor, as Gandhi writes, “Benegal beautifully traced the graph of the slow and steady growth of an unsure man into a leader with tremendous self-belief.”

Jahnu Barua’s *The Price of Freedom* (1999) and *Maine Gandhi ko Nahin Mara* (2005), and Girish Kasaravalli’s *Kurmavatara* were other more recent films of note which are discussed in the book. So is *Gandhi My Father* (2007) by Feroze Abbas Khan, a study of the strained relationship between Gandhi and his son Harilal.

I have dwelt on just a handful of snippets and cameos to give the reader a foretaste of what this cinematic biography contains. But Magdum’s work has a range of little stories on every page – all of them informative, some of them moving or alluring. His narrative is as impassioned as were Kothari’s efforts to put Gandhi on celluloid. Each page overflows with information that is both interesting and relevant. His style is ardent and enthusiastic, and you, as a reader, recognise the ardour and enthusiasm he felt as he gathered and sifted through this enormous volume of information. The research into the life and work of one of the tallest men of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and one of the most complex too, could not have been easy. But the author dug in, and the more he dug, the more he seemed to lay his hands on and the more gems he brought out for the world to know and learn from. And all this about a man who was shy, even wary of the camera.

“By any standard or yardstick, the personality of M K Gandhi was not made for the movie camera,” writes Magdum in his Postscript. “His looks were unimpressive. From no angle was he photographic. His personality was also not overbearing...his bare body repelled many people...in his later years, he was bald, an old man with a voice one could hardly hear beyond a distance... but there was a charm and personal magic about him. It grew over a period on anyone who met him or tracked him...Gandhi is almost indispensable to Indian cinema.”