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Remixing Mother India for a new generation

A distilled version of *Mother India*, rescored by a DJ, screened in London on Saturday to mark the 62nd anniversary of India's independence. **Alex von Tunzelmann** met its makers and judged the results

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DJ Tigerstyle performing at Mother India: 21st Century Remix. Photograph: Jonathan Murray

A shy girl in a wedding sari and bright red lipstick arrives in a village. A struggling man's arms are crushed when he tries to lift a rock. In the swirling monsoon floods, a mother must literally carry the weight of her family on her shoulders. Children are forced to scavenge for rotting roots. With no oxen, a farmer pulls the plough herself.

Mother India

Release: 1957

Countries: India, Rest of the world

Cert (UK): U

Runtime: 175 mins

Directors: Mehboob Khan

Cast: Nargis, Raaj Kumar, Sunil Dutt

[More on this film](#)

Mother India: 21st Century Remix (MI21) is a "re-imagining" of Mehboob Khan's 1957 classic, conceived by producer Indy Hunjan. The film has been cut down from 163 to 45 minutes. Sound and subtitles have been removed, and it has been re-scored by turntablist DJ Tigerstyle, a cellist and a drummer. It's the kind of project that, if it doesn't hit the right note, could end up feeling like a scene from *Nathan Barley*. Fortunately, any cynicism is laid to rest by the thoughtful editing of the film's monumental setpieces by Josh Ford, and the impressive restraint of the new music. Tigerstyle creates an elegant, haunting score that enhances the emotion onscreen without overstating it.



Photograph: Jonathan Murray

almost three hours, every possible misfortune befalls her.

The film's misery can feel relentless. Moreover, the fact – as in most [Bollywood](#) movies – that the characters often break into song and dance routines is something western audiences find notoriously difficult to take seriously. Hunjan insists MI21 is conceived as a restatement of *Mother India*, not an improvement. Nonetheless, it was striking at the performance in London how readily non-south Asians (around half of those present) connected with the film. Removing the need to read subtitles, and the culture shock of the songs, allows new audiences direct access to the film's emotional core.

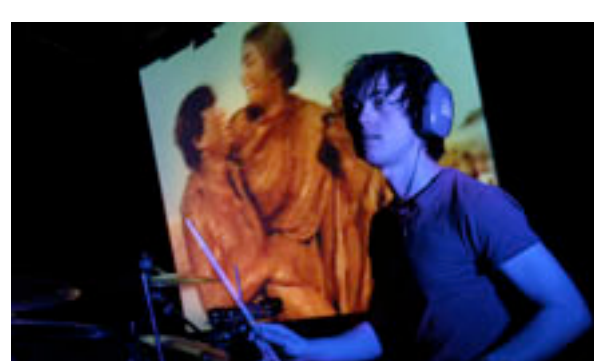
Mother India is often compared to [Gone With The Wind](#). Both are epic melodramas, following one woman's turbulent life. In *GWTW*, Scarlett faces the challenges of the Confederate south in addition to her own romantic strife: war, destruction, reconstruction, the end of slavery. In *Mother India*, Radha faces the challenges of India's poor in addition to her own family problems: hunger, debt, caste, illiteracy.



Photograph: Jonathan Murray

Unlike *GWTW*, *Mother India* is not adapted from a novel – but it does have the feel and structure of one, sitting somewhere between [Thomas Hardy](#) and [Charles Dickens](#) on one hand, and Rohinton Mistry and Vikram Seth on the other.

It is also intensely political. "Radha is a strong female role model," says Hunjan. "She fights her corner with grace." Her plight has some parallels to the Hindu legend of Sita, which implies that a woman's duty is to suffer endless trials. Largely thanks to Nargis's extraordinary performance, *Mother India* does not end up feeling anti-feminist, but it is certainly open to interpretation. So, too, is its view of poverty, which takes it into a heated Indian debate. The view of MK Gandhi was that poverty was a spiritual blessing that should be glorified and extended to all. The view of Jawaharlal Nehru was that poverty was a social evil that should be ended. *Mother India* does have a Gandhian sense of dignity emerging from poverty, of suffering as a path to triumph. Yet it makes forceful Nehruvian arguments for education and industrialisation.



Photograph: Jonathan Murray

Inevitably, these are lost from the shortened version. Even so, MI21 is a powerful and moving glimpse of a challenging, unwieldy masterpiece. After the performance, an old man congratulates Hunjan. "I was there when *Mother India* was being filmed," he says. "We all went from our village to the set, hoping to be chosen as extras. I have seen it hundreds of times. Tonight, I felt again like when I saw it for the first time."

Like many in the audience, he had tears in his eyes. Even 52 years on, *Mother India* still has the power to turn on the waterworks. Though, to understand that reference fully, new audiences may have to seek out the original.

• [More information, including tour dates, for Mother India: 21st Century Remix](#)

• Alex von Tunzelmann's book, *Indian Summer: The Secret History of the End of an Empire*, was published in 2007



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