

***MAYA* IN THE MODERN WORLD:  
ART FORMS, POLITICS, AND IDENTITY**

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## DECLARATION

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*I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.*

*I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.*

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the role of the idea of *maya* in India's cultural history with a particular focus on the continued application of this idea in the twentieth century. The principal aim of the thesis is to demonstrate that *maya*, as a foundational element of a worldview which is, in some aspects, antithetical to the hegemonic post-Enlightenment epistemologies of the modern world, still has high cultural significance for India. Moreover, the concept of *maya*, as a way of explaining the nature of existing reality, offers a perspective on truth that is, beyond its purely philosophical application, of worldwide value for political and historical judgements. The thesis draws out these assessments of the idea of *maya* by establishing the significance of the term throughout India's interconnected cultural and religious history. In a selective overview of Indian classical literature, the field of meaning that is encompassed by the concept is demonstrated, as well as its recognition over changing eras and across the spectrum of religions, ethnicity, and language. That broad enculturation is achieved to a large extent, as the thesis illustrates, through mythology and through art, in which *maya* is a foundational presupposition of both aesthetic theory and religious/philosophic exposition. With the historical provenance of *maya* established, it is then related to the twentieth century. Firstly, the idea is assessed as an element of the thought and actions of the iconic leader, M. K. Gandhi. Secondly, the twentieth century's popular art form, cinema, is shown to provide evidence of the continuing forms and uses of *maya* through the idea's role in aesthetic theory and narrative structure, and as a moral philosophy. Finally, the interconnection of the fictional and political realms is examined in a review of the public reaction to the controversial 1998 film, *Fire*, in which the *maya* (the illusory and constructed nature) of 'identity' is demonstrated with reference to both past and present history. In sum, the thesis verifies the importance and continuity of the idea of *maya* for India and the broader world community through clarifying its meanings, through demonstrating its continued use as both concept and term, and through its application as an analytical perspective.

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