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FILM REVIEW: *MOHANDAS*

Gandhi in our times

The backdrop is contemporary India, but the thematic concerns of the film are those of Mahatma Gandhi - the village and the powerless man. Shoma Chatterji reviews Mohandas, Mazhar Kamran's film due for release in February.

13 December 2008 - Mazhar Kamran, an IIT-trained engineer who switched to FTII to become a cinematographer, has directed his first film *Mohandas* lined up for a February release. It is a harrowing and surreal tale based on a novel by Uday Prakash, rooted in a real-life incident he happened to experience during his travels in the interiors of the country.

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As the film peels off layer by layer of the ugly truth of corruption at every level of the state machinery from the village to the small town to the metro, we discover, with shock, how Mohandas, a bright young man, is made victim of his brightness and his scholarship for having landed a job that he, as a poor man from the basket-weaving community of Madhya Pradesh, is not supposedly entitled to.

The backdrop is contemporary India because, according to Kamran, "I was clear that my work must have a contemporary setting. It must be about today. So I begin the story in present-day Delhi filled with shopping malls and multiplexes. But the thematic concerns of the film are those of Mahatma Gandhi. The film is centred on a man from a village who is powerless despite his brilliance and his optimism, his integrity and his hope. The village and the powerless man were both central to Gandhi's ideology of welfare and harmonious living. This contrast has vitality."

Gandhi everywhere

When Richard Attenborough made *Gandhi* many years ago, no one in his or her wildest imagination would have thought Mahatma Gandhi would be a good bet to be played at high stakes in the Bollywood market. But times have changed. So have the average Indian filmmaker's perceptions about Indian history. Gandhi seems to be omnipresent in many recent Indian films in terms of ideology, metaphor and essence, though not physically.

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Mutations have been very strong among the contemporary Indian audience, where a film like *Murder* rubs shoulders with *Lage Raho Munnabhai* where Gandhi appears as a motivational ghost in front of the atypical hero Munnabhai. Shyam Benegal's *The Making of the Mahatma* (1995) brought out the sacrifices a woman must make, albeit with reluctance, when she is married to a man with a mission. While Kasturba crusades relentlessly for the security and welfare of her sons, her husband evolves into a leader and slowly gives up on his responsibility as husband and father. Kamala Hassan's *Hey Ram* described a fictitious series of events that led to the assassination of a figure parallel to Gandhi. [Errata: the movie's name was incorrectly printed in the original version of this article]

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Jahnu Barua's *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara* (2005) presents Gandhi as a concept that is lost on Indians today. It revolves around the failure of Indians to live up to his dreams of patriotism, secularism, integrity and commitment today. It raises pertinent questions about an individual's responsibility as citizen both for Gandhi's murder and for India's subsequent failure to disseminate his ideas and his legacy to contemporary India.

Anil Kapoor's *Gandhi, My Father* presented Gandhi mainly as the father of his children. It was a point-of-view narrative by Harilal Gandhi, his eldest son who died, unwept and unsung, alone and unattended to, at Mumbai's Sion Hospital a few months after his father's assassination. "Gandhi has always been compelling, complex and strangely contemporary. I grew up understanding Gandhi through others till I discovered a deep wound he carried in his heart. Somewhere in the shadows of the great man lived his son, roaming the streets of India like a beggar. Mahatma Gandhi could transform the soul of a nation but could not save the soul of his own son," says Feroz Abbas Khan, explaining his inspiration to direct this film.

Does Mazhar Kamran's *Mohandas* fall within this framework of modern-day allusions to Mahatma Gandhi? Let us take a closer look. Oriental Coals Mines in Anuppur, Madhya Pradesh, is a strange place. Mohandas aspires to rise above his abject poverty and social humiliations when he becomes a graduate. He has been a bright student, a fact his upper-class peers did not quite care for. He applies for a job at the Oriental Coal Mines and is even selected. But when he reports to work, the powers-that-be refuse to concede that he is the Mohandas he claimed to be in his application; instead someone else has swiftly usurped his job, indeed his whole identity.

And that would have been that, if Meghna Sengupta, a conscientious correspondent for a Delhi-based news channel, did not happen to receive videotape from a local stringer of Anuppur. It shows a young man being battered and thrown out of office even as he screams to assert his identity. He says he is the real Mohandas but no one is willing to listen. The intrigued Meghna decides to investigate, helped by the stringer in her search for the truth behind Mohandas's tragedy.

Picture: Sonali Kulkarni as the reporter Meghna and Nakul Vaid as Mohandas in a still from the film.

As Meghna tracks him down to unravel the story of a man whose identity has



been stolen, she pieces together an incredible story of corruption that makes every other kind of corruption appear like a child's nursery rhyme. She tries to help Mohandas in his unbelievable plight. Hope comes in the shape of a conscientious lawyer, Harshvardhan, who makes every attempt to fight Mohandas's case against the coal-mine administration and the guilty party. But the entire chain of administrative corruption stops him and silences him for good. Mohandas fails to retrieve his name and his identity.

"My film *Mohandas* makes almost no direct reference to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Yet, Gandhi is present everywhere. I believe in Gandhi's theory that India lies in its villages. His whole concern was for the weaker man. He wrote this in one of his last notes in 1948. He explained that one should measure the soundness of any step one takes by the effect it will have on the weakest person in society. That is the quote I begin my film with. I chose it because it states a view of Gandhi that has all but vanished from our consciousness, especially from the concerns of our political leadership, where it must be rooted. It would be good to remember it," says Kamran.

The film moves backwards and forwards in time, tracing the growth of Mohandas as a young man, distanced from the mainstream both by his brightness at academics and his poor background. The quiet Mohandas accepts the open barbs a failed, muscular classmate targets him with, determined to prove himself in action and execution. He gets married and his young and supportive wife delivers a son. But his world collapses with the shock of discovering that someone has usurped his name and identity forever.

What made Kamran choose this over other stories? "Uday Prakash, a noted writer, was my natural choice for my first film as we relate well and share similar views. I was working with him, exploring other stories, when he once came back from his village in MP and narrated a strange story from a happening in that place. That story stayed with me. He later wrote it and was published in a Hindi magazine. Somebody read that story and got interested. So that subject became my first film. I started out from the premise but added a frame story and a few new characters and wrote a treatment. With this treatment as the base, Uday and I re-worked the entire story."

The film opens in the plush interiors of Meghna's Delhi office, where she watches the clip. It closes with her trying to rediscover the Mohandas who is now lost to both worlds – one, the world he was born into, and two, the world he dreamed of and worked towards fulfilling through honesty, integrity and hard work. Mohandas' outrage at every link in the chain that conspires to abort his desperate and honest attempts to what it his by right - his name, his identity and his job, slowly changes into a search for the man who stole it from him, as if, right from under his nose.

Who is this man? Mohandas is determined to find out. He does, and the film acquires new momentum, the chase taking on the elements of a thriller, moving across narrow labyrinthine gullies of the small town, to offices where files are opened only with the cliché 'paperweight.' His fact-finding mission turns into a rebellion of a different kind – he retreats into a new no-man's land, disowning his identity that he realizes, no longer belongs to him. When the relentless Meghna knocks at his door, he is a changed man – disillusioned, embittered, his head bloody, but unbowed.

"The story, is like a fable for me. I see it as more universal than it may seem at first. It represents how deep the malaise of cynical loot has gone into so-called democracies

everywhere. It applies not just to our country but is equally true of developed nations. I feel almost everywhere systems are in place, but human beings keep subverting those systems for narrow personal gain," Kamran adds.

The characterizations are full, in their grays and their ambers. The local stringer was actually using Mohandas' story as a vertical ladder to the top. At the end of the film, he has shifted to Delhi to join a famous Hindi news channel. Meghna on the other hand, represents the face of a committed journalist who tries her best to rise about the limitations of her channel. Sometimes she succeeds, sometimes not. Kamran has gathered an ensemble cast of actors chosen mostly from television. Each one of them has performed brilliantly, their characters one with themselves.

Nakul Vaid's Mohandas is outstanding. His face registering incredulity when he is bashed up and thrown out of an office, back to the naïve young man joking around with his cronies, to the bearded young man who has forgotten to smile, to the bewildered and embittered Mohandas who is shocked to find that the man who has usurped his name, his identity and his life, the man who now lives in the unabashed luxury of bribery and corruption with his mistress-turned-wife, is neither guilty not embarrassed. Sushant Singh as the identity-thief is credible in his brazen villainy, rooted in the revenge that had built in him since the time he flunked college while Mohandas passed out with flying colours.

Sonali Kulkarni as Meghna, Sharbani Mukherjee as Mohandas's wife, Uttam Haldar as the ambitious stringer lend credence to the film not just by their powerful acting, but also by their essentially non-star image. Govind Namdeo is cast against his villainous grain as a judge, who is named Muktibodh after the famous Hindi poet. Aditya Srivastava as the conscientious lawyer is powerful.

Kamran's cinematography has a jet-like pace, gaining in speed, pace and momentum in keeping with the twists and turns in Mohandas' tragic story. Shot extensively on location in Sonbhadra district in a coal-mining area along the border of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, *Mohandas* has an ambience of open-ness to the visual locales that stand sharply in contrast to the dark subject of the film. Kamran has ingeniously roped in local villagers to enact small roles and cameos without hiring junior artists that add authenticity to the setting. Narayan Parasuram's background score is memorable. The only weakness in this entire link lies in the slightly exaggerated coincidence of the imposter turning out to be someone Mohandas knew very well for many years.


"Fake lives are real and the real does not even exist," says Meghna. That sums up the film's strong and satiric message. ⊕

[Shoma Chatterji](#)

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Dr. Shoma A Chatterji, freelance journalist and author, writes on cinema, media, human rights, cultural issues and gender in several print media and electronic publications in India and abroad. She won a Senior Research Fellowship from PSBT last year to research the portrayal of women in Indian soaps and television commercials.

<http://www.indiatogether.org/2008/dec/rvw-mohandas.htm>