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In Conversation With Mazhar Kamran

Nirmala Garimella
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(This article is sponsored by [Attorney Rachel C. Tadmor](#))

Director **Mazhar Kamran** is not a new name in Indian Cinema . The cinematographer of thrillers like Satya and Kaun, Jhankar Beats and Masti, and his work on various documentaries has garnered him a name in the film industry for several years. A graduate of FTII Pune and IIT Chennai, he says that his experience and knowledge of film making, and his own dream of directing led to his first directorial venture 'Mohandas, a two hour-long film that has won both national and international acclaim. The film was India's official representation at the International Film Festival of Innsbruck, Austria, and has received encouraging reviews at many others. Most recent screening will be at the CineAsa festival in Guhawati this week.

'Mohandas' is the curious but compelling tale about a basket weaver belonging to a backward community from a small-town Anuppur in Madhya Pradesh fighting to reclaim his job and identity stolen by an imposter. Sonali Kulkarni plays a Delhi journalist Meghna who takes up his cause and goes to the village to investigate the case. Does a man need proof of his own identity? That is the question that Mohandas, the movie raises to the audience. In the land of the Mahatma, can such an improbable and outrageous tale exist? Director Mazhar Kamran gets inspiration from writer Uday Prakash for this film to raise such a query.

How did the US audience respond to Mohandas as a movie? How about in India ?

The response has been very good. In India the very first showing (at Osian's Film festival) drew a spontaneous standing ovation. It remains a high moment for me. Making it all worthwhile.

Internationally too, people have connected to the subject of the film. Which is why it got picked up by several film festivals- in the US, Switzerland, Austria. In the US, it was shown at three film festivals. In San Francisco, New York and New Jersey. I could not attend all. I came to New York and found a warm enthusiastic response to the film. After the screening, a novelist based in New York invited me over and we could connect so well just because of the film. It is a miracle how art connects people from different cultures. I just wish there was much more of artistic activity in the world than any other kind-- to bring people together. Such experiences show how creative activity is not an abstract thing as it is made out to be. It is very *real*. As real as making bridges and aircraft.

When you started as a cinematographer you had a lot greater influence over the photography as a creative process. How did directors feel about giving up this creative control to you?

Each filmmaker is different. They come with different approaches



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to their work and also in their abilities. Some are good with the writing, some with a particular touch in performances. Most are not tuned in too much to how cinematography shapes a film. So that was good for me! I have had pretty much a free hand as a cinematographer. And I have found that I have contributed the most when I was given the maximum freedom. As happened with Satya, Kaun and Jhankaar Beats. Directors I found are quite happy to have a cinematographer who can take over the visual side of films. They like someone who can push the film in the direction they want to take it.

And now from cinematographer to Director – How has the change or transition impacted you ?

This is something that I have been preparing for. All the time since I started learning filmmaking to the years of doing cinematography. By the time I got into making my debut film as director, I became extremely comfortable with the filmmaking environment. And that was the idea, in the first place. To learn and be comfortable with the mechanics of it.

This helped me to focus on telling the story as well as I could, cinematically, while making Mohandas.

You've worked as a director of fiction and of documentary films. How are they different for you?

Directing documentary you don't have much freedom. You are selecting and focusing. But in fiction you start creating the whole world. And you are telling a story. That is more fun and more exciting. Doing documentary you respect the subject because it is 'real'. You cannot alter it as you wish. It's a different way of expressing. In fiction, there is room for imagination to go to work. These modes complement each other. Because fiction needs to be grounded too, in order to connect with people. That is something you learn by doing nonfiction.

Budget aside, what else impacts the quality of a film like Mohandas compared to a big movie studio film

Not working under a big budget frees you from constraints. You tell the story the way you want to tell it. Without thinking of what you should do to make it wildly popular. That pressure can and does spoil a lot of films.

You can cast people who would do justice to the role, and not merely based on their star appeal.

Though I am not against the star system- but they have escalated their fees beyond all reasonable limits thereby making – in most cases- only silly comedy films viable. As these tend to do well in terms of business. Mostly predictable plots are handled when the stakes are high and people making them too cautious.

Any plans of coming to Boston

I visited New York, out of the three places in the US the film was shown. It was my first visit to the US and a very memorable one. I would look forward to any opportunity to travel again. Though as of now there are no immediate plans.

What does the IIT branding mean for a film maker? Does it mean

breaking traditional boundaries of what the institution always stood for?

I don't think so. I mean it does not matter much to the filmmaking world. But personally, the IIT years taught me a lot that has helped me in life and work. The sense of independent thinking that it inculcates and the confidence that is given to you – that you are respected for being what you are as long as you do things by applying yourself diligently.. the openness of the education environment.. all that remains with you.

The most gratifying experience you had during your career?

It was the day *Mohandas* was first screened for the public. It was at Osian's Film Festival in New Delhi. The genuine sense of appreciation that we got that day from everyone who was present. That day marked for me the culmination of a journey and the start of another.

Your favorite genre

It is hard to pick one genre. I am drawn to interesting stories. And the themes they touch upon. Then the genre does not matter to me. It can be a romantic story if talks about love. Or a gangster film, if it talks about loyalty and friendship. But if had to pick one, I would say the thriller genre. Because it is engaging. It tells a story and keeps you hooked.

Your favorite director?

Again it's difficult to name just one. I have liked the work of many directors in different stages of my growing up on cinema. In the early years, I was spellbound by Bergman and Truffaut and Kurosawa. Then I discovered the strange and intense romanticism of Guru Dutt. I also like Raj Kapoor, of his early years. Bimal Roy for his sense of social issues and personal tragedy.

What are your current projects?

I am working on the screenplay of my next film. I work with writers. It's collaborative. It is a film with elements of fantasy. Giving it final touches.

Mazhar Kamran lives in Mumbai, India and this interview was conducted via email. We thank Vale Sundaravel, a friend who helped in getting us this interview

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