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TIMES REVIEW

In Pursuit of Mohandas

IITian Mazhar Kamran, cinematographer of Satya, on how he escaped the fate of becoming a techie in America, and how he transformed instead into a film director

It was not an unusual day, the day I went to see a film in Chennai. I was a student at IIT, pursuing the spirit of science and technology. A good student of physics, in particular. I dreamt of doing research in fundamental physics one day. It so happened that near the IIT campus was another institute, the Film Institute of Adyar. It was there that I went to see the film. And nothing remained the same afterwards. So here I am, having spent some years in the 'film industry' (it's a strange term for an area of activity as delicate as cinema). Here I am ready with my first film.

What a journey this has been. Some images appear. I am talking to the professor of IIT's Fibre Optics Department, Professor Raina, asking him to let me take out one of the several cameras they have, and shoot. Shoot what? Anything. The deer on the campus. Colourful festivals. The idea was to sink into the medium. Learn the brush-strokes before you paint. While others took part in dramatics and elocution, I went around filming with a video camera.

A few years later, at term-end, I am in the swimming pool. And Professor Raina walks by and asks 'So have you made up your mind about studying cinema?' I say yes. Come to my office, he says, I will write you a recommendation letter to any university you want to go.

Where else but in IIT could such a scene take place? They have such infinite trust in their students. No university in the world comes even close. I decide against going to any distant university for 'Film Studies'. It seems too academic and remote. FTII (Film and Television Institute) in Pune seems just right. But my parents, they get into a state of shock. From IIT to FTII. To them, it was like a U-turn. "Are you crazy? No way". My father tries hard to dissuade me. From his perspective (he works as a scientist in the Army Supply Corps) the future belongs to scientists and technologists. He's right, it does. But he finally relents.

I am nervous about FTII's entrance exam. In my naïveté, I think literature and the arts in general would have better prepared me for such a test. Would I qualify? Surprise. The results say I am just the right candidate for the course. Aha. Welcome to the new calling. The result re-enforces my belief that I am doing the right thing.

The change in campus was not so big. By the time I reached FTII, I was already so immersed in cinema, it seemed like home. Little did I know that the real journey was to come. The film 'industry' was a long way outside the film institute. I finally made my "entry" (yes the language here is peculiar) as a cinematographer with the film *Satya*.

Seven films later, I feel a bit at ease with the industry. It's a whole world in itself. People are big on likes and dislikes. And I like Ram Gopal Varma. He took a chance with me in *Satya*. Had a strange humility throughout its making. Then offered me his next film. When the posters of *Satya* were up, he was as excited as I was. He said, "Did you see the hoardings?" I hadn't. See them, he said. He had made sure my name was on them. Even the marquees of theatres carried it.

Never happened since. I don't like a few people in the industry but would rather not name them. I'm not 'big' enough (that's another important concept here. There's a size to every one. XL, XXL).

To get on with my story, after working as a cinematographer in seven films, I decided it was time to do what I had come here for. Make my own movies. *Mohandas* is the result. Again, a scary moment. They say the rites of passage are birth, marriage and the big D. But for a film-maker, giving birth to the first film must count as much.

This film, like all films, began with a story. My friend Uday Prakash, with whom I had been working on several scripts for my directorial debut, narrated a story one day. A strange tale of a man whose name has been stolen from him. What happens when a man wakes up one day and realises someone else is claiming to be him and has all the documents to prove it? The forces of goodness try to fight on his behalf against a corrupt system. This story reminded me of the sacrifices made by people like Shanmugam Manjunath and Satyendra Dubey. Why was there no place for them but to die? It was inevitable that this tale will become a film. And it became *Mohandas*.

Before I end this piece, I must mention the name of the film I had gone to see that fateful day in Chennai. It was *Wild Strawberries*.

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