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Culture

Trials of a nameless hero

'Mohandas' uses the classic man-against-the-system theme to interpret modern India

Sanjukta Sharma

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In one of the first few scenes in the new film *Mohandas*, a feisty television news reporter tries to convince her editor to let her pursue the story of a man in Anuppur, Madhya Pradesh, who has "lost" his name, and subsequently, his identity. The editor is dismissive of her socialist zeal. "Yeh Munshi Premchand ka zamana nahin hai (This is not the era of Munshi Premchand)," he shrugs. But the reporter does not give up. She travels to Anuppur to find the real Mohandas, a young man in his 20s.



On location: The film was shot in UP's Sonbhadra district, which borders MP, in 40 days

Talented but without any wealth or pedigree, angry but powerless, Mohandas is Everyman, reminiscent of many of Premchand's protagonists. His name has been stolen by another man who has taken his job in a coal mine, and by the time the reporter arrives, he has almost given up fighting against a corrupt government and local politicians to reclaim what is rightfully his.

It's a classic motif in Indian cinema: Man pitted against an unjust system. And sadly, never an obsolete one, although only a few film-makers have explored it in recent times. *Mohandas*, directed by Mazhar Kamran, uses it in the context of today's India—where cities are undergoing concrete makeovers, urbanization is changing small towns, and the aspirations of rural and *mofussil* India are evolving rapidly. Until the 1990s, our cinema thrived on catharsis-inducing revenge of the underdog. If not revenge, poetic justice was always his. Many films by Bimal Roy, Raj Kapoor, Chetan Anand, Manmohan Desai, and later, parallel cinema directors such as Shyam Benegal and Govind Nihalani, had messages that reflected the dominant socialist ethos of the times. When Kamran decided to collaborate with his friend Uday Prakash, the critically acclaimed writer of Hindi short stories, for a screenplay of Prakash's book of the same name, they consciously sought to expand the canvas of the real life story on which the book is based—that of Shobhalal of Gunwari in Madhya Pradesh— and not turn it into a morality tale with song and dance or a dark film about the oppressed poor.

In real life, Shobhalal got a job in a coal mine in his youth, but before he could join, his appointment letter disappeared and he later realized that one of his relatives had changed his name to Shobhalal and taken the job. Against many odds, Shobhalal proved his identity and got the job back. It took him about a decade.

The farcical, yet very real outlines of the story and what it said about India egged the writers on. "I wanted the film to have a sweep of the nation. Mohandas' story has a trajectory that moves to the big city (Delhi). As a character, although he lives in a village and moves to a small town, he could be anywhere. The film is as much about the state of our country as about Mohandas," says Kamran.



Beginning in a village where Mohandas (Nakul) It is Kamran's first feature

The protagonist's name intrigued many critics in the West. Shobhalal was changed to Mohandas because, says the director, he wanted the "idea of Gandhi" to be superimposed on the story. "Gandhi would have concern for a man like Mohandas. Someone who is naive and comes from a powerless background, but who is bright and needs the opportunity. Gandhi would believe that this guy should be protected," says Kamran, an experienced cinematographer who made his debut with Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya*.

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film. Vaid) is born to a poor family, the action shifts to the town of Anuppur, where he gets a job with the Oriental Coal Mines. The film then moves to a newsroom in Delhi where Meghna (Sonali Kulkarni), the reporter, receives a videotape in which a harrowed Mohandas claims his identity has been stolen. Meghna travels to Anuppur and unearths the bizarrely sinister plot that Mohandas is a victim of. The imposter is another local (played by Sushant Singh). A long the way, as identities are unmasked, an activist lawyer (Aditya Srivastava) gets involved.

The film is worth a watch. Although its tone is overwhelmingly preachy in parts, Kamran captures the details of the mining town with care, creating a universe teeming with petty bureaucrats, political goons and the silent common man, and cloaked by white dust and concrete. The acting is competent—Nakul Vaid, who plays the lead, is an actor with promise. Prakash's writing has satire and sarcasm.

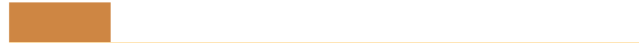
Mohandas released in theatres on Friday.

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Lakshmidhar Said:

I just chanced upon this article. I am extremely delighted to know that my esteemed friend Uday Prakash's story Mohandas has been cinematized. I have read the story. Excellent and most captivating, yet excepting Mohandas, other names/characters like Rahul, Shamsheer etc are much too familiar, and thus lose the hauntingly surreal atmosphere which is the base of this story - in fact almost all his stories! My congratulations to the author/director. Malaviya, Kyoto, JAPAN

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