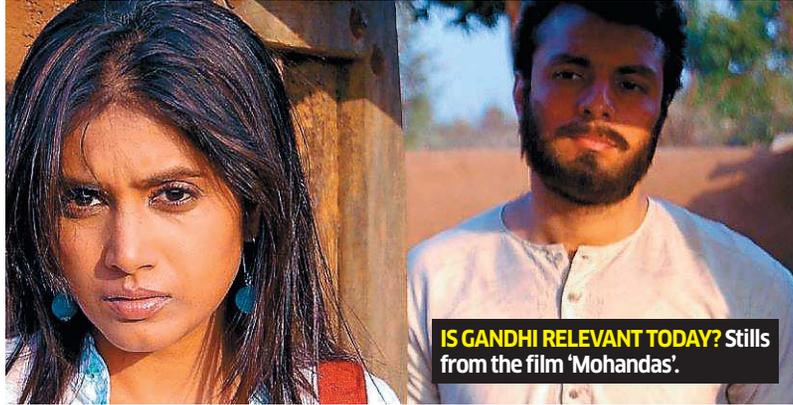


# Of values lost along the way

There used to be a man called Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, whose mode of non-violent protests not only brought independence to India but also continues to inspire legions even now. But would he be able to survive using the same tactics in present-day India, where corruption, nepotism and violence have become the order of the day?

This is the question that is being raised in *Mohandas*, a new Hindi film based on noted writer Uday Prakash's eponymous story based on a real incident. The film, by debutant director Mazhar Kamran, IIT-graduate-turned cinematographer of films like *Satya*, *Kaun*, *Jhankar Beats* and *Masti*, is the story of Mohandas, a poor boy from a family of bamboo weavers living in the interiors of Madhya Pradesh. After becoming a graduate through sheer hard work, Mohandas gets a job in a coal mine, but when he turns up at the mine office, he finds that there is already one 'Mohandas' working there. His identity stolen, Mohandas tries to first reason, then protest and then fight this injustice, but to no avail as his opponents are powerful people with high connections.

A parallel track that converges with the main story throws light on the state of affairs of sections of the electronic media, which thrive more on sensational news than taking up people's issues. One journalist wants to follow Mohandas' story and is allowed to do so by her bosses after she has to really persuade them to do so. As she follows the story, alongside a local lawyer who takes up Mohandas' fight for justice in the court, things become more and more bizarre. In a finale that makes a stinging comment on current Indian society, we find Mohandas being pushed out of the society, forced to live in a remote area much away from his already-remote village.



The film, like the original story, is quite really about the issue of stolen identity, but notwithstanding the black humour of the storyline, there are more than coincidental references to the loss of Gandhian values in today's society. Kamran says that it is the story of a man who is fighting to retain his identity, but that could well be the fight to retain Gandhi's ideals in present-day India. As if to emphasise this point, even if indirectly, Mohandas's wife is named Kasturi and the village from where he comes is called Purbanra, a play on Gandhi's birthplace Porbandar. And the film begins with a quotation from Gandhi himself.

It takes real courage for a first-time director, who already has access to the Bollywood industry in the form of an accomplished cinematographer, to make a film like this, which eschews all forms of glamour and seeks to tell a hard-hitting story. The film for most part stays true to its character despite irritants like a couple of unwarranted songs, and is able to generate empathy for the protagonist. It is an important film of recent films that poignantly



brings alive the story of marginalisation of the common man who is forced to the corners by the politician-criminal-bureaucracy nexus in many parts of the country.

Kamran has cast Nakul Vaid, who came to notice in *Ab Tak Chappan*, in the title role, but though he has given an earnest performance, his urban and soft looks go against the rural, earthy character he plays. Sonali Kulkarni as the journalist who follows up the story of stolen identity, Aditya

Shrivastava as the lawyer who fights Mohandas' case, Sushant Singh as the man who has stolen his identity, and Sharbani Mukherjee as his hapless wife have given earnest performances in this film that creates a real rural India that is being seen very rarely these days in Hindi cinema. The film, being released in July, has already won appreciation in quite a few film festivals for its honest approach.

Kamran, a cinematography graduate from the Film & Television Institute of India, Pune, says that his film is really about the state of our nation. "Gandhi-ji was concerned about people in rural India, and Mohandas is such a person. He is no superman, but is a powerless, marginal, weak man who is facing powerful adversaries. Gandhi is a metaphor here, and that is quite apparent, but the film is not about Gandhi at all," he says. "It is a comment on how in contemporary India, all the values Gandhi stood for, have been reduced almost to a drawback than a quality."

The director says that as a filmmaker, he is concerned that rural India has virtually gone missing from Hindi cinema in recent times. "I decided to tackle it on my own way. Protagonists like Mohandas have got erased from our narratives, be it in cinema or television, the latter concentrating only on plastic reality and plastic sets," says Kamran. The newbie director wants to make films that will entertain, but meaningfully, as "just entertainment without content has no meaning." Kamran's is a film that forcefully brings alive how corruption has eaten away the system in India, so much so that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi probably would not even recognise the country for whose independence he fought his whole life.

**Utpal Borpujari**