Mohandas is a metaphor

Based on a real-life incident, Mazhar Kamran's Mohandas is about loss of values such as honesty, integrity and non-violence, says Shoma A. Chatterji

*M*OHANDAS is the story of an ordinary man and had to be portrayed by a face that was unfamiliar to my audience but also by a powerful actor. I could never have made it with Shah Rukh Khan or Aamir," says cinematographer-turned-director Mazhar Kamran about his directorial debut, *Mohandas*. This qualified engineer from IIT shifted tracks to join FTII Pune to train in cinematography. *Mohandas* was first screened in the Competition Section at the Osians' Festival of Films last July. Since then, it has been doing the rounds of festivals across the country and abroad.

"My film needed an absolutely ordinary man-from-the-crowds face and television actor Nakul Vaid fit into my conception of Mohandas." Nakul and the rest of the cast — Govind Namdeo, Sonali Kulkarni, Sushant Singh, Sharbani Mukherjee, Uttam Haldar and Aditya Srivastava have done justice to the faith the director placed in them. Kamran has not used a single extra but roped in local people to play their natural roles. An interesting scene with rituals followed in marriage within the weaving community was improvised with help from the local weaving community.

Nakul Vaid and Sonali Kulkarni in a still from Mazhar Kamran's directorial debut *Mohandas*

Mohandas does not make any direct reference to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Yet, Gandhi is present everywhere in the film.

Mazhar Kamran

Kamran, who was director of cinematography for Ram Gopal Varma's *Satya*, followed by films like *Jhankar Beats*, had dreamt of direction long ago. "As a student, I became interested in cinema when I saw some classics of world cinema at the Film Club in the campus. I was fascinated with the kind of stories the films told and the amazing breadth of human experience they covered. This was the medium to be in, I decided. I went about educating myself with an intention to direct. *Mohandas* is a fable for me. I can see beyond the story as a universal concept that represents how deep the malaise of cynical loot has gone into so-called democracies

everywhere. It applies equally to developed nations. Almost everywhere systems are in place, but human beings keep subverting those systems for narrow personal gain. At a screening in New York, the response was overwhelming. I reasoned that they too are victims of a system where a few who have placed themselves in positions of power, have become exploiters of the common man," elaborates Kamran, whose depth and width of vision come from his upbringing across the country — from Lucknow to Delhi to Chennai, Pune and now Mumbai.

Mohandas is based on a real-life incident, turned into a novel by Uday Prakash. It narrates how in contemporary India, the values of honesty, integrity and non-violence Gandhi stood for, have decayed so much that a young man who tries to live by these principles, is punished instead of being rewarded for his goodness. The four things Mohandas has in common with Gandhi are — his first name, his honesty, his integrity and his pacifist attitude towards life. Born into a family of a poor weaver, Mohandas tries to rise above his class the only way he can — a good and solid education. He becomes the first graduate in his community. He applies for a job at the Oriental Coal Mines in Anuppur and is even selected for a good post. When the call to report does not come, he goes himself, but they throw him out. When he insists, they bash him up stating that he is not the Mohandas he claims to be and that the real Mohandas has already filled up the vacancy.

"*Mohandas* does not make any 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 weak, the marginal and the powerless. In one of his last notes in 1948, Gandhi 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. It states a world-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. The Mohandas in my film stands for that weak man who should be central to our thinking," says Kamran.

Mohandas' tragedy would have died a silent death had Meghna Sengupta, a correspondent of a Delhi-based news channel, not chanced upon a videotape sent by a local stringer of Anuppur. The intrigued Meghna decides to investigate, helped by the stringer in her search for the ugly truth that lies behind this bizarre story. Corruption is defined as the misuse of public power for private profit. But depriving Mohandas of his rightful job by stealing his name, identity and future does not fall within any definition of corruption anywhere in the world. Yet, his experience is rooted in truth. When Mohandas fails to lay claim to his job after seeking recourse through law and other sources, he shifts focus on finding out who stole his identity, his name and his life, and lived in an official bungalow with the nameplate brazenly showing "D/36, Mohandas, Depot Manager."

The film has been shot extensively on location in Sonbhadra district that lies along the border of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, some parts have been shot in New Delhi and a small slice in the studios. Kamran has made changes in the original story to fit into the language of cinema and also into his personal ideology.

"I want my audience to journey along with Mohandas in his struggle to establish himself and then go back to his shell, never to come out again. I want my audience to leave with a lasting image of a man we have marginalised completely, a man who is necessary and central for the sustenance of a healthy society. Mohandas is a metaphor of millions of people forgotten in the villages and small towns in India because we choose to forget them for our selfish motives. Mohandas is a litmus test for all of us framed by the measuring rod of values Mahatma Gandhi stood for," he sums up.