

Critique

S Viswanath

Mohandas: Bapu's Peccadillos and Penitence

“I have never been to a cinema. The evil that it has done and is doing is patent. I refuse to be enthused about it. Its corrupting influence obturator itself upon me every day.” – Yes, Mahatma Gandhi, just abhorred cinema, treating it as social scourge to be rid from society.

But then, cinema, and film makers, have never shied away from making Bapu subject for their cinematic narratives. Given that there are wealth of historical material as also Mahatma's own writings on himself, film makers have never been wanting in making a movie about Bapu. Renowned Richard Attenborough gave his own version of *Gandhi* for posterity. Several Indian film makers have touched upon his very many failings as father and family man such as *Gandhi*, *My Father*, *Hey Ram!*, *Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara*, *Lage Raho Munna Bhai*, *The Making of the Mahatma*, et al. But each of them has dealt with the adult Gandhi, with each director, picking on the

thematic track that suited his own political and personal disposition and bring it before audiences. Nearer home, Girish Kasarvalli sought to spotlight on how ‘Gandhi’ was being used for self-serving purposes in *Kurmavata*. However, the renowned Kannada film auteur failed to provide for an engaging cinema. In fact, falling trap to the very objective of his theme of the film. *Kurmavata*, sticking to the familiar clichés, failed to turn out to be an uplifting and enlightening cinematic experience one expects from a meticulous and shrewd director like Kasarvalli.

Now, P. Seshadri, who, one may call the illustrious Kasarvalli's understudy, and has to his credit several socially oriented films such as *Beru*, *Athithi*, *Munnudi*, *December 1*, *Vidaaya*, *Mookajjiya Kanasagalu*, *Bharat Stores*, *Bettada Jeeva*, *Vimukthi*, *Beti*, among others, majorly based on literary writings, brings before audiences the impressionable young boy from Porbandur, his warts and all, in

Mohandas. With noted Kannada writer Bolwar Mahammad Kunhi's play - Papu Gandhi, Bapu Gandhi Aada Kathe: The Story of Mahatma Gandhi, as also Gandhi's own My Experiments with Truth, as thematic texts, director Seshadri presents a hagiographic halo of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, during his student and formative years. One may say that for the first time one journeys through the adolescent phase of Mahatma Gandhi and gets a cinematic outlook on his tentative, troubled teen years as a young boy at a time when Indian Independence movement was still in its infancy, as conceived and presented by Seshadri based on the texts he has drawn inspiration from. That the film, made on the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of the Mahatma, was more so to commemorate the occasion and stamp his own individual contribution championing the *Mahatma* is another matter.



As an aside one is also constrained to state that the tri-lingual film (in English, Hindi & Kannada) did not find favour for a festival screening at the 12th edition of Bengaluru International Film Festival that year (2019) while surprisingly was picked for the Indian language film competition at the Kolkata International Film Festival 2020. The film saw its theatrical release in October, on the occasion of Gandhi Jayanthi.

Seshadri, who has bagged awards by the bushels for his films, in his 12th outing, should be appreciated for treading a different trail. Focusing on the adolescent years of Mahatma Gandhi from 7 to 15 years in the hope that the film would be an object lesson for the young audience towards whom it was aimed at. Dwelling on milestone events that shaped a young Mohandas into world renowned Apostle of Peace he became. That said, *Mohandas*, however, woefully fails to turn out engaging and evocative film. Lacking quintessential subtlety and nuance a film of this nature deserves, given it is aimed at impressionable young audiences, *Mohandas* turns out

rather a juvenile journey. This has been a bane with every Seshadri outing. Given that he “was a journalist” before “I took up cinema as my career” never really trying to push the creative envelope. Explore film making as aesthetic art form that can deliver more if done with deftness making for fruitful engagement.

Virtually almost all his films suffer from this “reportage” syndrome with the exception being *Moakajjiya Kanasagalu*, based on eminent Kannada litterateur Shivarama Karanth and its experiment with magical realism, made endearing by the child artist who covets you with her charming performance. *Mohandas* comes across as visual representations of literary works it is inspired. More a social treatise, rather than director's own perspective vision into chinks in the armour of the great persona. Who, like any other impressionable child of his age, was easily susceptible to succumb to juvenile delinquencies despite a troubled conscience chiding him at every misdemeanour he consciously commits.

By making elder brother as black venomous villain and Mohandas crystal white demurring conscientious cowering younger sibling, Seshadri renders *Mohandas* a tale of two disparate brothers never really rising above rudimentary texts on which he has relied upon. From theft to watch street side bioscope on Shravana, smoking cigarette, consuming meat, being lured into house of ill-repute, the film portrays young Mohandas falling wilfully to pulls and pressures of physical pleasures despite an unwilling spirit conscientiously telling him it's wrong. Fed on stories of selfless devotion to one's parents, to speaking the truth despite the most trying of circumstances as Satya Harishchandra, a guilt-ridden Mohandas turns a mental wreck unable to confess his deceitful doings to his parents. This thanks to the elder brother who towers tall over the hesitant young Gandhi not wanting to hurt his elder kin but at the same time needing to make a clean breast of all his follies and suffer the punishment that it may entail. His elder brother threatening him at every stage if he spilled the beans. If father is bedridden and busy talking politics, an equally nonchalant mother brushes away young lad's need to pour his heart out.

The inner turmoil that the young Gandhi goes through is captured through the troubled dreams that the lad being unable to unburden himself before his elders.

While the film truthfully depicts the young Gandhi navigating the complex emotions he is confronted with, where it falters is Seshadri does not go beyond the call of ready texts to bring in his own intuitive interpretation and idea of cinema into Mohandas without ruffling any constituencies. In trying to be accessible to young impressionable minds hoping to inculcate in them Gandhian principles of sagacity and self-realisation, Seshadri, sadly makes Mohandas pedantic and prosaic perfunctory watch.

While the film brings to fore the hitherto read and imagined facet of the Mahatma it does not seek to explore the situations, the circumstances and the general social ambience that eventually moulded the young Mohandas into the messiah of the masses he went on to become. There is not one classroom setting / situation to understand how was Mohandas in a school and the kind of friends he had. Likewise, the film is simply driven by the single point agenda of visually depicting whatever the Mahatma himself has claimed of his childhood rather than digging deep into the same. It may be true that Mahatma's father – Karamchand Gandhi was confined to bed due to old age and illness, played rather pathetically by Marathi director Anant Mahadevan perpetually in bed swallowing pills. This device turns out more of a contrived convenience rather than natural outcome which could have been shown visually with a few active shots of the father-son interaction. And when it does happen it is more to strum the emotive chord of the audience than a realistic portrayal. We have only one scene of Karamchand discussing the politics and business situation in the country with the Britishers ruling. Similarly, the mother is in a world of her own caring too hoot to even listen to what her dear son wishes to confess to her. She is busy cooking, eternally in prayers, flitting in and out of rooms, and visiting friends with not a minute to spare

to hear her son out. The entire thing is so unrealistic with his elder sister simply tugging along with her mother and having no role whatsoever except to tell her mother she should have made an effort to listen to her son. This only shows the director's inability to imagine what would be the outcome should that happen and how to construct his film further on. Relying and emphasising just on the written material and never allowing the liberty of scripting to bring in a nuanced exploration of the young Mohandas, Seshadri simply makes the film a series of visuals trudging along like a train on wheels towards its predetermined denouement.



It is really sad that Indian cinema and its film makers suffer from this complex of just bringing what is already known and never venturing beyond the call of the immediate readymade text and information than boldly go beyond the text providing much more researched script that would add value to their venture. True, as India's first Prime Minister Pandit Nehru had wisely counselled Sir Attenborough: "whatever you do, do not deify him" for Gandhi "had all the frailties, all the shortcomings. Give us that. That's the measure, the greatness of a man," Seshadri does this with honest intention. That's about it.

He, however, fails to go beyond this immediacy of narrative. Therein lies the film's ultimate shortcoming – where social drama succeeds, cinema as aesthetic craft fails to pass muster, with Seshadri lack the courage of conviction to push the envelope of creative cinema's demands. As Seshadri confesses in an interview: "It is difficult to take creative liberties with the subject and there is very little information about his childhood."