

Critique

**Bhagyalakshmi Makam**

*Mahaan*



*Mahaan* (The Great One, 2022, Tamil) by Karthik Subbaraj

What is ideology? What is extremism? Is there something called moderation? And who decides how much is enough? How much is extreme? And is blood thicker than water? Does ideology understand the concept of mercy and forgiveness or tolerance? Who brings ideology to life? Isn't it the followers of the ideology, and do they get to decide the boundary between freedom and freedom to make mistakes?

The movie *Mahaan* is an exemplary attempt to explore these questions and many more. Directed by Karthik Subbaraj. With a plethora of films under his belt, he has outdone himself in this movie in terms of ideological frameworks, more significant structures and their applications and

implications in the individual lives of the common man. The story moves from past to present with flashbacks filling in the blanks and bringing plot twists when least expected.

On the surface, it comes across as a story of a man and his family, who are strict Gandhians from the times of Freedom fighting during the independence movement. The family has strictly adhered to Gandhian principles of no liquor usage and no gambling for generations to the extent that even one mistake in adherence causes much trouble. This one mistake by the protagonist, Gandhi Mahaan, has implications that haunt him for the rest of his life.

The first mistake in childhood is forgiven to an extent when his father catches

him gambling, fighting and mingling with the toddy shop owner's son. After that incident, he ends up living in suffocation till he is forty years old with a wife and child in a stereotypical manner of a Gandhian follower, but not necessarily idealising or following it with his heart and mind.

The name Gandhi Mahaan acts as an irony wherein the audience and the other characters think about and understand his character. He brings a multilayered nuance of what it is to be 'Mahaan' viz., great? He veers away from the Gandhian ideology and thinking, lives his life freely, and gets consumed in a hedonistic way of life. Doing precisely what his father and grandfather fought against and what his wife left him for. From drinking and gambling to owning bars, starting their liquor empire, changing government policies, and even playing kingmaker within the government. By the movie's end, he changes and reverses every move he makes to become the liquor mafia lord. He ends up as the great man who closes all the liquor factories in the state. He ends by saying he is now Mahaan ( great) and his son, an accused criminal.

He even quotes Mahatma Gandhi, who said that if man isn't free to make mistakes, it is not freedom. The characterisation of him and his son is multilayered, complementing and supplementing each other in shades of grey as they battle for the whites and blacks of truth, ideology and extremism. The son, too, on the surface, seems like he is on the right path to stop his father's and Sathyavan's liquor mafia running in AP. However, the audience also sees the more profound and darker layers beneath the legal and honest route behind doing the 'Mahaan' work. As we dig deeper into Dada, we see the young boy

whose 'cute' family was shattered because his father came home drunk one morning, ruining the family. On the pathway to hating and banning the liquor mafia, because it broke his sense of family, he embarks on a legal but extremist and violent version of supporting his ideology and ironically killing anyone who tried to stop him. He dismisses Gandhian philosophy's essential traits of nonviolence, truth, ethics, and morality. He plans to kill Sathyavan and his son Rakesh because he believes they are the main reason his father became an alcoholic. He plays with everyone's emotions and gets a kick out of them to the extent that he guilts his dad to kill his best friend, Sathyavan, on the pretext of saving him.

The concept of love for family, the family one is born into, and the family one chooses is explored beautifully in this movie. Sathyvan, Rakesh (Rocky), and Thilakam are Mahaan's chosen family members who have given him acceptance, respect, and love for who he is. They are far more understanding and open to him than his birth family, who threw him out because of one mistake. They were more worried about their family name being shattered rather than hear his side of the story and maybe forgive him for his mistake even though he spent many years begging them to take him back and forgive him. Rocky is naïve enough to think that Dada will change after learning how much Mahaan loves him, but sadly, it costs him his life. Rakesh considers Mahaan much more of a father than Dada ever did.

If one takes Dada's and Jhansi's lens of life into consideration, his pathway seems justifiable, and the deaths of Rakesh, Sathyvan, Anthony and Micheal are collateral

damage. But if one takes out the extremist lens, these deaths look like merciless, undeserving murders. Instead of taking a shot at Mahaan and killing and hurting him for his mistake, he ends up with a trail of innocent lives killed for no fault of theirs.

This is reflected in the dialogues as well when Mahan meets his wife after many years; he confronts her by asking why her son and her are on the path to kill everyone else except him when he was the one who chose to drink; they never forced him to do or to be anything

he didn't want to do or be. He even tells her that they didn't force an ideology down his throat like it was forced on him his whole life.

From his name to his birth certificate changed to 15<sup>th</sup> August, to symbolise and celebrate freedom ironic to what he felt growing up till forty. He was suffocated, living in the same pattern, burdened with the tag of Gandhi Mahaan, not being able to live like freely as he wishes.

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