

Film Review:

Title	:	Maharaj
Year	:	2024
Director	:	Siddharth P. Malhotra
Producer	:	YRF Entertainment
Running Time	:	2 hours 11 minutes
Available on	:	2 hours 11 minutes

If Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury's *Pink* (2016), a Hindi film advocating empowerment of women against sexual abuse, pivoted around Amitabh Bachchan's famous dialogue 'No Means No' *Maharaj*, a film directed by Siddharth P Malhotra and streaming on Netflix, revolves around the assertion 'what is morally wrong cannot be theologically right'.

Set in the 19th century Bombay, the film retells for screen the story of Karsandas Mulji, a journalist and a social reformer, who raised voice for women's education, widow remarriage, banning of veil, against untouchability and blind faith and successfully argued against a libel filed by Yadunathji Brajratnji, a religious guru who claimed to belong to Hindu God Krishna's lineage. The famous libel case, documented in book form, was contested in 1862 in what was then called Bombay Supreme Court. Vipul Mehta has adapted Saurabh Saha's Gujarati book *Maharaj* into a screenplay.

The launch vehicle of Junaid Khan, son of Hindi cinema superstar Aamir Khan, narrates how Mulji tried to expose the Yadunathji Maharaj for sexually exploiting young girls and newly married women. Mulji, a young alumnus of Elphinstone College and friend of social reformers like Dadabhai Naoroji who was called 'Unofficial Ambassador of India' (FPJ Webdesk, 2023), Bhau Daji, the Sheriff of Bombay, Justice M G Ranade, one of the founding members of Indian National Congress (now the principal opposition party in the country), and Gujarati poet Narmadashankar Dave, carried on a campaign – first in Naoroji's famous newspaper Rast Guftar, and then in his own tabloid sheet Satyarth Prakash - against the

immoral practice of 'Charan seva' (sexual exploitation of young women) prevalent in the mansion of Yadunathji.

The character of Mulji is appalled when he watches Maharaj having intercourse with his fiancée Kishori in his mansion on Holi festival. He breaks his engagement with Kishori holding her responsible for sleeping with the spiritual Guru. But he is schooled by an accomplice of Maharaj to allow the victims to realize, reform and rehabilitate. He writes an article in his newspaper Satyarth Prakash against the evil practice of *Charan Seva* forcing Yadunathji to file a libel against him and demand Rs. 50,000 in compensation.

The film had great premise. A high priest exploiting women in the name of tradition and religion and a young reformer taking on him in social sphere as well as a court of law – what else could one have asked for! Prakash Jha's web series *Ashram* with a similar premise not only greatly boosted Bobby Deol's sagging career but also provided a leg up to MX Player in the OTT (Over the Top) space. But there are factors which make the final product stale and dull.

Besides *Ashram*, there have been many films and web series exposing misdemeanours of Hindu, Christian and Muslim priests/clerics/pastors etc. in Asia as well as in cinema in continents other than Asia. Sri Lankan film *According to Mathew* chronicles the true story of Father Mathew Peiris, an Anglican priest in Colombo, who had an affair with his secretary and murdered the latter's husband and his own wife Eunice Peiris by causing her to overdose on an anti-diabetic drug. Peiris was awarded death sentence by a court. The film, directed by Sri Lankan auteur Chandran Rutnam and starring Bollywood actress Jacqueline Fernandez, kicked up a controversy around its release in July 2018 (LACROIX, 2018).

Rutnam had quoted the case of Australian Cardinal late George Pell, the Vatican's most senior figure to face sexual abuse. Pell was convicted of child sexual abuse in 2018 but acquitted on appeal by the High Court of Australia (UCA News, 2018). Allegations of sexual abuse in India and East Timor in 2019 underscored the fears of many in the church that clerical sex abuse is rife in South, Southeast and North Asia where the population of Catholics was 120 million (SAINSBURY, 2019).

The release of Maharaj was delayed by a week as a Vaishnavite Pushtimarg sect claimed in court that it defamed their community and could incite violence against its followers. Gujarat High Court rejected their

claim and cleared the release on June 21, 2024. The sect members were not the only ones who apprehended controversy in the aftermath of film's release. "Maharaj seems (as of the time of writing) to have stalled out in a post-production, likely because of its controversial subject matter. If it is ever release, it will assuredly stoke controversy-and perhaps even provoke legal charges under the Indian penal code" (Scott, 2023). The apprehension, proved to be wrong.

The libel case and the film debates and interprets the important question of personhood and religious authority. "The court tried to determine whether the article had insulted him as a 'private' person or a 'religious' leader. This had implications for the legal rulings applied to his case. To determine whether the accusations were true, a medical examination was conducted which tried to establish whether the Maharaj suffered from sexually transmitted diseases. Not only this examination, but the whole case, altered the public perception of the Maharaj's personhood: "His flesh was thus legally transformed: no longer sacred, it was now a form of private property safeguarded by the British state and regulated through state-sanctioned truth procedures like those of scientific medicine" (FUCHS, 2016).

The first factor that makes Maharaj unbearable is its screenplay and treatment. "Maharaj, directed by Shiddharth P Malhotra who previously helmed Rani Mukerji-starrer Hichki has its problems. The loose screenplay and predictable storyline don't let you enjoy it the most" (Kumar, 2024). Moreover, the director seems to be confused between style and substance. The grand and motley sets make it look more like Sanjay Leela Bhansali's production. Though Yashraj Films is equally good at mounting on opulent sets the Maharaj's crime noir theme would have looked better in dark spaces.

The initial confrontation scenes between protagonist Karsandas and antagonist Yadunathji alias JJ (played by Jaideep Ahlawat) look superficial. The court battle is interesting but it only lasts about last 20 minutes of the over two-hour long film and only comes at the fag end.

The film presents the protagonist as a revolutionary and a staunch feminist. But life is much more complicated than fiction. Karsandas is hardly a feminist when it comes to the case of Kishori, his fiancée. The way he rebukes her after the 'Charan Seva' and breaks the engagement without giving her an opportunity to reform and rehabilitate is as chauvinistic as anything else in the film. Yadunathji's accomplice who sides with Kar-

sandas, in fact, sounds much more progressive than the latter. To say that Mulji is equally responsible for her suicide (death by drowning in a well) would not be an overstatement. "Mulji was a courageous figure, progressive by the standards of his time, but his credentials as a feminist are slightly questionable today, and his vision of reform must be contextualized through a colonialist lens" (Patel, 2024).

Moreover, Karsandas was hardly a commoner as the film portrays him to be. He was no less powerful than Yadunathji Maharaj. Unlike the film, the real life did not have a David vs Goliath template. Patel quotes Canadian historian J B Scott to claim that people like Karsandas, Naoroji, Daji, Dave and Ranade were part of an elite. "These men graduated from Elphinstone and entered into public life, they formed a 'new elite' that eventually wrestled power and influence away from their traditionalist competitors" (Patel, 2024).

The cinematography gets the place and period right. The choreography and song picturisation is commendable but the narrative hardly had scope for songs. The dialogues deserve a definite mention. Junaid in particular has got to mouth some very good lines. Here are a couple of samples. "Wo jhund kis kaam ka jo saath de kar himmat chheen le (What's the point of a community that offers togetherness but takes away courage?) and "Sawaal na pooch sake wo bhakt adhoora, aur jo jawaab na de sake wo dharm (A devotee who fails to question and a religion that fails to answer them will both be found wanting).

Junaid Khan is earnest. But his entry scene could have been more interesting. Even his initial scenes in the film do not have much to write about. His role in comparison to antagonist Jaideep Ahlawat is weak. With a beatific smile and chiseled body adding to his creepy con, Ahlawat towers over everybody else in the movie. Kishori who played a lead role in Ranveer Singh's Jayeshbhai Zordar in the past is good. Virraaj (Sharvari Wagh) brings certain energy to her character.

Narendra Kaushik & Ashutosh Kumar Pandey