

# cinema



\* A scene from *The Tortoise, An Incarnation*, directed by Girish Kasaravalli, in which an ageing pen-pusher in a government organisation finds himself cast as Mahatma Gandhi in a television series.

## An interesting take on Gandhi's principles

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Ten years after Mrinal Sen, Basu Chatterjee and Mani Kaul pioneered the New Indian Wave, Girish Kasaravalli quietly walked into this genre with *Ghataashraddha* or *The Ritual*. The film was bold even by today's times. Tearing apart notorious social prejudices against homosexuality, child out of wedlock and tyrannical male chauvinism, the movie won India's highest award, Padmashree (Golden Lotus). As one writer said, Kasaravalli used his actors like Bresson, pruning down the superfluous elements of performance.

Kasaravalli's next work, *Mane or House*, was a grim reminder of how the complexities of urban living could wreak havoc on personal spaces and relationships.

Here is a couple which moves from a village to a city in the hope of strengthening marital bonds

through a sense of privacy. But the city with its hustle and bustle merely accentuates their loneliness and powerlessness, driving a wedge between them, driving them apart instead of bringing them closer. The movie has shades of Rossellini and Hitchcock's *Rear Window*.

Often, Kasaravalli, who makes cinema in his native Kannada, tells us very intimate stories, which, though unfold in larger social arenas.

He is both a socialist and humanist trying to analyse deeply personal issues — certainly gender equations — within the framework of the community. Often his heroes are women who may be victims of the unfair patriarchal system, but yet rise above their misfortunes with great fortitude.

*Haseena* is an excellent example of this, where Tara emerges more or less unscathed from sheer brutalisation.

Some of Kasaravalli's films touch upon extremely novel themes. In *Gulabi Talkies*, we see how a television gifted to a Muslim woman living in a fishing village becomes a source of pleasure and pain. When the television set brings the world into her modest dwelling, it not only gives hours of entertainment to the people living around, but also begins to cause a rift between two religious groups.

*Riding the Stallion of a Dream* is an unusual story of an impoverished grave-digger and his losing battle to uphold and promote tradition in the face of growing importance for wealth and materialism. Does he lose the battle in the end? Does he lose hope?

In a way, Kasaravalli's latest, *The Tortoise, An Incarnation*, continues with this journey dotted as it is with modern maladies. It is an interesting take on Gandhi and his principles. During his lifetime, he spoke about seven ethics which he felt would make the world a better place. Recently, in a long interview with him at his artistically done-up

Bengaluru bungalow, Kasaravalli talks about how difficult it is today to follow Gandhian values.

"Is it possible to do business without the motive of profit?" he asks. This was one of Gandhi's most cherished values.

Kasaravalli's protagonist is an ageing pen-pusher in a government organisation, who is suddenly transported from his humdrum, unsung existence to a world where he is sought after, where his worth is felt. Approached by the director of a television series on Gandhi to play the lead, the very Mahatma himself, the government employee — whose only criterion to be under the arc lamps is his uncanny resemblance to the slain leader — finds himself torn by temptation and demands.

Someone asks "Gandhi" for help to open a tobacco shop next to a school. His son uses the money he gets from the serial to play in the stock exchange. And when "Gandhi" realises that off-screen he is made to do just about everything that the Father of the

Nation abhorred, the old actor wants to quit. But this would mean that his grandson might not be able to get a seat in a medical or engineering college with their huge capitation fees. And he adores the little boy.

"Gandhi" faces yet another dilemma. He sees the series follow a storyline which is quite different from what actually happened in the Mahatma's life. The script says that Gandhi was indifferent to his wife Kasturba. But books on him — which "Gandhi" devours with great relish — say quite the opposite.

Based on a short story written by a renowned Kannada writer, Kum Veerabhadrappa, some 15 years ago, *The Tortoise, An Incarnation*, may not faithfully follow the original, but the spirit of the written word is all too apparent in the visuals that appear on the screen. "I have made some changes here and there", Kasaravalli tells me. But unlike in the case of some helmers, writers have never felt displeased with Kasaravalli's interpretation of their works.

But why a movie on Gandhi now? "The Anna Hazare movement got me rethinking about Gandhi. Also, my own questions about Gandhism and its relevance today. I think it is very difficult to follow the man's ideology now".

This is what the film underlines, the pressure the screen Gandhi faces by just being the Mahatma on television. His television popularity lends itself to unreasonable aspirations outside the studios, and the actor, an otherwise hardworking and upright government employee, finds himself being forced on a path that would have horrified Gandhi. Gandhi of course professed a life away from consumerism and greed. Have as much as you need, not more, he said. But today, India and the world have embraced consumerism. Is there any place at all in this for Gandhian doctrines, Kasaravalli wonders.

So this is not only Kasaravalli's dilemma, but also his protagonist's. "I was merely voicing my own predicament in the movie". Kasaravalli feels that Gandhism needs to be reinterpreted keeping in mind the current scenario. Otherwise, it will degenerate into a farce. "I have heard many Gandhians speak from the podium. They say many lofty things. But the moment they step down, they do things that are so un-Gandhian".

Kasaravalli must be dismayed by what is happening all around him. In *Tortoise, An Incarnation*, the wail of an ambulance, which is heard time and again, probably implies the cry of an anguished soul, clearly unhappy at the way India is moving away from at least one important doctrine of Gandhi. Honesty.

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