

"Dalits looking for their identity and equality"



Girish Makwana is an Indian film director, currently settled in Australia. Makwana is not merely a director but also a writer, producer and has deep passion for music. Founder of G K Makwana Films, Makwana is best known for his debut international film - Colour of Darkness, which is based on racial violence in Australia in 2009. He has firm views of the caste system in India and believes that Dalits are looking for identity.

UV : Tell us something about your childhood and college days. Your experience during those days seems to have shaped your ideas.

Makwana : I was one and half years old when my left leg got Polio affected. I could hardly go and play with others. I have a lot of physical limitations. We were living in a tiny village called Tundel. My parents were teachers, and my mother had a great passion for reading. Other children used to tease me because of my physical limitations. I used to fight with them as children of my category had strong self-esteem. But my mother gave me books like Champak or Chandamama and was more interested in the pictures. My father bought a harmonium for me. He was a music lover. Here my world started changing.

UV : So, Music was there in your family, and you switched over to Tabla?

Makwana : My father taught me basics like Saregama and a few bhajans, filmy songs. So that's how my journey started. My world was different. Ours was a tiny village, and I had to shift to a bigger town called Anand for further schooling. I was admitted to a school with a hostel facility as I couldn't walk down for half an hour to attend the school. It was a school only for disabled children. It had a little library where I could continue my passion for reading. A cinema hall near a school used to attract me. I had a habit of imagining a story with the help of posters. It was my encounter with cinema.

UV : And what about music?

Makwana : Hostel superintendent's daughter used to play radio music. I was listening to filmy songs. After schooling, I joined B.Sc as Music was considered lavish.

UV : You studied microbiology, and it seems that at the same time, you were attracted to Tabla also?

Makwana : My parents build the house at Nadiad. Then I was in a hostel my brother and sister used to stay with my parents. When I would go home, I didn't want to go to the hostel, and when I went to the hostel, I didn't want to go home. My mother used to tell me you don't have to walk with mom and dad holding them for your entire life. You have to develop yourself and stand on your feet because you are a special kid. That stuck in my mind- later, I went back home. I studied in my town's High school BSC as Music was considered a very great thing. My teacher used to say music is for King or Poor. Raja or Rank. King does not have to worry about the food, and the poor do not care about the food. That time when I was studying, I started learning the rhythm. I was privately learning table. When the Ramayan serial started, I learned Tabla, as my Guru was not interested in watching it. Nobody was aware that I was learning Tabla. Later, I bought Tabla when I passed the 12th standard.

So along with my friends, I opted for BSC. I had little interest in college as I was looking for a formal graduation certificate. I was thinking about literature and music all the time. I participated in various competitions and festivals and won several awards and trophies. I was in a dreaming world.

UV : Was it sufficient?

Makwana : I applied for drama in MS University in Baroda. The teacher from university told me that nobody would give me any chance because of my polio-affected leg. He suggested that to get admission in Music, which I accepted. In MS university, a group was going to Africa when I was 19 years old. They asked me to join. We went to Nairobi. I then applied for the Royal College of Music in London even though my English was very weak. But again, an

advertisement was brought to my notice which was about an institution in Australia. I got a scholarship from the Gujrat government, which was meant for disabled children. And then my research work what you mentioned electric Tabla Tarang was started. Dr Greg Schiemer, my supervisor, and I worked on it. Honestly, it was out of fun. It is the instrument where you have to use your fingers, emotions. I came back to India in 2002 and went on Europe tour as a Performer. I went to Germany and France. Then I went back to Melbourne. In life, it is always like that you are trapped, making money, surviving. You do little jobs. I was a filing clerk, this and that. I was always looking for my own identity, and something was missing. I was performing. We performed in a lot of different festivals. And someone took my picture and asked for modelling? I said I am not a model kind of a fellow. I like to be behind the camera, not in front of the camera. He told me, if you help me, I will help you. Then he introduced me to a gentleman who was the Head of RMS University Film and Television department. I got admission and studied film and Television. And I created one small documentary and one short film. They appreciated it. They offered me the masters. I also made one short film. I had a beautiful script for my masters. As you might have heard, in 2009 and 2010 in Australia, there was a lot

Cinema in India is looked at as an entertainment, The South Indian people are very smart and they use it for propaganda. This is because Hindi movies only speak about amir and garib while the reality in India is caste system.

of news regarding the Indian students got bashing. When I talked to my father, he said, We Indians don't have the right to tell anyone that they are racist because we are racist among ourselves. We don't have the moral right, and that stuck in my mind. That's why the script of the Colour of Darkness I wrote.

UV : Was it a moment of finding identity, which you were missing?

Makwana : Yes. Because in Music, like a tabla player, you always accompany. You are helping someone you accompany men. That is the nature of the instrument. There is nothing wrong with it. Even if you practice for 16 hours a day, there is no guarantee not everyone can be Zakir Husain. But I had a different background. I am from a Dalit family and also had physical limitations. I had a strong desire to prove myself and probably could not tolerate a situation where nobody counts you. People might have sympathy but not empathy with persons like me. They might be looking at me as a "poor guy," which I do not want to happen. What struck to mind is that there is equality in cinema halls. Be it CEO or a peon. All of them sit together. There is equality. In that sense, cinema is a compelling medium. It has the

strength to pass your message very powerfully. The two things I learned when you make a film or write a book, you have to choose a specific title that can attract an audience or reader. Those titles are your courier. The title attracts people to your production creation. I would say creation rather than production. The title will never give up a story, but we give at least an idea about the story. That was the first thing. The second thing was about darkness. We are talking about two different countries, Australia and India. Let us talk first about Australia. Here people from 190 different countries of the world live. It is a multilayer cultural country; in addition to that, Australia has its problems. Racial issues. It is a young country. There are a lot of originals and migrants, making it multicultural. This is one darkness. Now let's look at India. We have 29 different states. 1800 different dialects. Twenty-two or more different languages and a lot of different religions and multicultural everything. All kinds of cultures and traditions. But the biggest darkest thing is the caste system. Inequality is the first thing, and that is also another darkness. I am just giving you a few examples. The biggest problem is the caste system. The second thing, (state vs state) Maharashtrian people don't like Bihari, UP people, and we have issues like state versus state. Then the again biggest thing is women. We worship women as goddesses, but we don't want to treat them as goddesses. The caste system and gender inequality are two significant problems. (In India) This is another darkness. We have both positive and negative elements.

UV : You mean to say darkness has its roots or origin in inequality?

Makwana : Yes. The caste system or colour may have caused inequality. That is why I choose the title The Colour of Darkness. This title suits the frame of the story. The very famous director has said that it is your film when you make the film as a director. Once you have finished the film, it is a people's film, not yours anymore. Different people mention that you could have made this scene this way or that story should be like this and that. Everyone gives you a different opinion. Some people liked it very much some did not. I got some phone calls asking why you are talking about this thing? India has got beautiful things. That is the problem. This is the first film to talk about the caste system on the international level. Indians have always been an issue with black people, but they forget how they treat their people. They do not want to talk about that. They don't want to look into their backyard. I call them Facebook or keyboard warriors. They do a lot of webinars. They write a lot of things but practically, they do nothing. I always ask people you write about these issues, but what you did for these people? In a practical manner, how you helped them? Talking is a different thing. Do something, contribute something, rather than just talking about it. I guess it is human behavior.

UV : You spoke about the caste problem. Do

Indians in Australia have it? Do they have the same mindset? In Australia also?

Makwana : You have to understand the Indian mentality. We are slaves. It does not matter what caste you belong to?

UV : Slaves of what?

Makwana : Slaves of the culture the way we have grown up. You have got the power and money, but still, the same mentality exists. Yes sir, yes sir. You can respect everyone. I have no problem with that. There should not be sycophancy. But it will take time.

UV : The problem is still there, but I can see the shift. This is what I am saying with my personal experience. I guess there is a significant change in the mentality regarding this issue in India. The change is visible in India. Is it not the case also in a foreign country?

Makwana : There are some signs, but the majority of the people have the same mindset. I read the news two days ago, which said a boy was fined Rs—25,000 for entering a temple because he was a Dalit. So, there is a contradiction. Like Hindu philosophy says - The God, whatever - he touches, becomes Parasmani Gold. So now, if a Dalit person enters the temple, the temple becomes impure, so either your God is incorrect, or your philosophy is not correct. How your God or temple can become impure?

The second thing they are always banging around is 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.' The entire world is our family. I love that thing, but the problem is when talking about your Hindu brothers and sisters, then you draw the line. 40% have changed, but 60% still strongly believe in it. I don't blame them because no one taught them, explained, or educated them. We have to change this mentality. My film story's crux is precisely this. If some white man or woman does something to Indian NRI, they say these people discriminate because they don't like us. After all, we are brown or black. But at the same time, they forget, under the caste system, they say, I am Brahmin, I am this and that. These things we have to correct.

UV : Your other documentaries also have some social message?

Makwana : Yes. For example, take the film "Gift." It shows a particular Indian mentality is towards disabled people. When you see this five-minute film, the tagline is - Life is beautiful but not perfect. We want everything perfect and beautiful. Nothing wrong as it is human nature. I don't blame them. In reality, our education system gives the certificate of employment. They are not teaching us how life is.

UV : How effectively have Indian movies taken up; the issue of the caste system?

Makwana : In India, only South Indian films, local films talk about the caste system and not Hindi movies.

UV : Can you please explain this?

Makwana : There are only one or two Hindi movies on the caste system. My emphasis is that a Dalit should be the hero of the film when you

are talking about the caste system. The way they show the entire issue is not correct. They should show this is the society we live in, and this is the problem... instead of crying. The Colour of Darkness shows two different case studies. One is an Indian caste system in 1965, and another is in 2010. So let the audience see and decide. It depends on the way you ask the questions to the audience. I watched the film Article 15. Now he is a high-class inspector. He has sympathy and empathy, but the way everything is shown, he makes everything look good. Because always the victim is who? Poor Dalit, poor they can't do anything. Of course, they can't do anything but the story should be from their (Dalit) point of view. I have never seen a single movie (Especially Hindi) where the Dalit is a hero. I will give you an example of Karnan (Tamil film). That is the Dalit Hero. And there is another Manu Saugandh. (Tamil film) Maybe my pronunciation is wrong. One Dalit dies, and they don't allow the funeral (pass his dead body) through the main streets. That is the issue.



UV : Our generation has developed parallel movies that we can call an art film or experimental theatre. Do you think this school has raised the issue satisfactorily?

Makwana : We Indians never invent anything. We always copy. We always adopt. One has to understand the history of the parallel movies, which started in Italy & French. New wave cinema and its makers broke typical Hollywood concepts. Rather than showing a hero or heroine larger than life, they showed the reality. This started in 1920 -1930. They always tried for social equality. Slowly when that came to India in Kerala and Bengal, they were the first people.

Satyajit Ray and others, you know they did a good job. Satyajit's one film I forgot the name. One untouchable comes to work at Brahmin's house, and he dies there. Few films were audacious. If you are a filmmaker and a writer, you will tell the story from the background you come from. Because I don't know your experience and I can't tell your story. But the reality is that Indian people were already living a hard life.

Ordinary people do not want to go and see another tragedy as they were already experiencing it. People want to forget their problems for three hours and watch good songs and dance. Parallel cinema was also stuck with the elite class. For example, a man who is cleaning gutter every day – why should he watch his sufferings? In India, the person never lives for himself. People live for someone else; that is the social structure we have. Now they want to have entertainment with family. He is going to see a good story that will make him laugh. For the elite class, it is fashion – let's talk about this subject. Their intention may be good, and credit has to be given. But slowly, after the eighties, a new wave of parallel cinema started in India. Corporate people came, and the film was like making a product. They are selling the product Good quality, does not matter for them. Even they do not bother if one is a good actor. The fact considered is that do one's name is sold and let's make a film.

UV : Why can't be there be some working arrangement in this situation?

Makwana : Of course, there has to be, but many people are trying, but financiers, distributors, exhibitors have a monopoly, and they may not be allowing this to happen. I have a feeling and hope that people will come to the OTT platform. Now you get more freedom, you can make a cheap (low budget) film, and now they want material content on OTT. You don't depend on the cinema theatre. It has broken the monopoly of distributors and exhibitors. But theatres will be there. When the video came, people had similar fear, but they survived. You can't get the same experience as in the hall. Not possible on TV or mobile. I feel that parallel cinema may take some to emerge in the current situation and will come in some different form. We must not forget that cinema is an art.

UV : So you mean to say there is no such category as an art film and all the movies are art?

Makwana : I am a writer, composer, lyricist, and director. I composed the music. I know how to edit and everything. It is one pot with all togetherness. For example, one says – it is a bakwas film. But we can't forget that several people have put in their efforts, whose names one may not be knowing, for the film. One has to take the movie as an art in this manner.

UV : What do you feel about the current status of the film industry. Do you think that they are taking up the real issues?

Makwana : Indian cinema is technically now excellent, but the content is fragile. They don't know about the real issues, but vernacular films know about them. People like Karan Johar will not be in a position to tell you the real story. This can be expected from regional languages. They are more connected to the ground—for example, Bollywood blockbuster Salman Khan and Akshay Kumar films.

Even if they address the real issues, they are sugar-coated.

As against this, if you see the Hollywood cinema, they are honest with themselves.

The story is about the hero. In India, it is opposites; the story changes according to heroes. (in Indian film Industry) Besides, factors, which control by the private sector, will not allow the freedom to tell the real story. They are slaves of the system in this manner. Comparing to Hindi vernacular, movies can take up issues more seriously and effectively. Take the case of Karnan (Tamil) or Asuran (Tamil). They have no famous artists, but they are pulling the crowd. Hindi cinema is in the hand of the first/second rich generation of actors & actresses, and they don't understand what real India is.

UV : Similar question I want to ask there is a kind of awareness among the Dalits in India. What is the contribution of Indian movies to that awareness? About their rights about Injustice done to them?

Makwana : Cinema in India is looked at as entertainment. The South Indian people are brilliant and use it for propaganda. You have to understand MG Ramachandran (MGR) & NT Rama Rao, those Dravidian schools of thought. They bring awareness, but Hindi cinemas are only for entertainment. This is because Hindi movies only speak about Amir and Garib, while the reality in India is the caste system. They talk about economic inequality but not social equality. When Hindi movie tells of the fundamental issues, the audience backs off. We have to understand that the real problem in India is identity. Dalits in India, who have good houses, earnings, and positions, also behave like upper caste people. It shows that Indian society is mentally prepared for equality. It will happen but will take time.

UV : What is their real identity?

Makwana : Identity. Equal identity. Someone was telling me why there should not be reservations. I told him that I agreed with him but are you ready to get rid of the caste? Once you get rid of this mental block, the reservation problem will be automatically solved. Both Dalits and non-Dalits should keep their minds open. Dalits should also remember that they have inequality amongst themselves as there are layers among them. We have to be the education in that direction and not merely for certificates.

UV : What is your next plan? Any new project?

Makwana: I am working on a film called "Sadhu (The Monk)." It is about Aghori Monk. A woman comes to India from the West, looking for spirituality, and falls in love with this monk. And her journey starts, she meets different characters. How her journey takes place, her experience of India, and how she connected with other characters in her journey... This film is more about human behaviour, like human emotion and desires. It says you can win your desire but cannot kill it. Raman Maharshi had said once that one could seek enlightenment and not killing of desire. But here also, enlightenment is a desire.

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