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Faith, hypocrisy and public journalist in Siddharth's Maharaj

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1.0. Introduction

Journalism can better serve society. Journalism can effectively address one of society's most pressing issues, namely social justice. The media's role as a vehicle for social change is well known. "Corrective journalism" has the potential to eradicate the evils propagated in society (Santos & Ndlovu, 2022). Journalists operating in the public domain have the capacity to instigate social transformation with their pen. In addition to providing information, he or she also encourages education and uplifts people by equipping them with knowledge. A new Netflix release, *Maharaj* (Malhotra, 2024), portrays the efforts of a journalist, Karsandas Mulji, who dared to stand up even when the whole society and circumstances were against him. The underdog, Karsandas, waged a battle against superstition and blind faith, advocating for gender equality, women's

rights, and social change. He fights against the atrocities of a powerful godman and reveals his sexual liaisons with female followers.

The movie *Maharaj* is based on Saurabh Shah's 2013 Gujarati novel of the same name. Set in a pre-independence era in India, the novel glamorizes the original landmark libel case of 1862 fought in the Supreme Court of Bombay (present-day Mumbai) (Shah, 2013). Karsandas, a journalist and social reformer, was born in 1832 in the Bhavnagar district of Gujarat during British rule in India. He and his family were followers of Vallabhacharya's *Pushtimarg* sect (Path of Nourishing, Flourishing). Karsandas started journalism in 1851 with *Rast Goftar*, and later he started his own Gujarati-language newspaper, *Satya Prakash*, when he was just 23, in 1855 (Mishra, 2024; Times News Network, 2024). Karsandas published an article in *Satya Prakash* on

September 21, 1861, in which he questioned the behavior of the Vallabh sect's Maharaj, Jadunathji Brijratanji Maharaj, who sexually exploited his female followers. Calling these allegations extremely serious and insulting, Jadunath Maharaj filed a defamation case against Karsandas (*Report of the Maharaj Libel Case and of the Bhattia Conspiracy Case, Connected with It*, 1862).

Film director Siddharth P. Malhotra dramatizes this real incident and skips the judicial proceedings to reach the ending phases of his film. The plot's initial, brief, and unintended incidents portray Karsandas actively opposing societal injustices and untouchability. From a tender age, he consistently interrogates his family members about the prevailing evils in society. Young Karsandas (played by Junaid Khan) criticizes social evils through his writings.

During the Holi festival, religious leader Jadunath Maharaj, aka JJ (played by Jaideep Ahalawat), smears pink *Gulaal* (bright color powder) on Karsan's fiancée Kishori's (played by Shalini Pandey) chest in front of everybody. Jadunath Maharaj, who sexually exploited his female devotees under the guise of superstitious rituals and practices, picked her for '*Charan Seva*' (divine service). After witnessing his fiancée falling prey to Jadunath's unrighteous act at his haveli, Karsandas decides to expose the religious leader. Jadunath Maharaj then files a defamation lawsuit against Karsandas for publishing an article in the newspaper detailing his erotic exploits.

Muckrakers are public teachers

Journalism operates on the fundamental principle that the role of the press is to enhance the standard of public or civic life rather than just providing information or expressing grievances (Lambeth et al., 1998). A public journalist is an educator who has the responsibility to instruct, uplift, and educate others who are within their sphere of impact. Several journalists are playing an important role in raising public consciousness about social evils, hazardous workplace conditions, prostitution, child exploitation, and exposing criminal activities,

corruption, or scandals (Danesi, 2009). Informally, people sometimes define these journalists as "muckrakers" during the progressive era in America. The muckraking era coincided with the progressive social movement, which advocated for more democratic participation among citizens (Demers, 2005). Muckraking journalists had a strong commitment to the press's public service mission (Thornton, 1995). Muckraking had solidified the role of the press as a vigilant guardian of the public interest (Fordham, 2019).

The movie *Maharaj* unfolds against the backdrop of the muckraking era, a time when the Indian social reform movement began with immense passion and enthusiasm. The protagonist, Karsandas, started working with his contemporary social reformer, economic scholar, and journalist, Dadabhai Naoroji. He advocates for gender equality, women's rights, and social change through journalism. Karsandas was, in a way, the pioneer of campaigns like today's 'Me Too' movement (Vyavahare, 2024).

Karsandas, a member of the *Vaishnav* community, has raised awareness about social injustice within his community. He teaches them the lesson not to have blind faith in self-styled godmen. He advocates for widowed marriages and the maintenance of social equilibrium. Even when religious leader Jadunath Maharaj interrupts the printing and circulation of the newspaper, he fights for the protection of press freedom. He criticizes Jadunath Maharaj, but he also attacks fathers and husbands who agree to send their daughters and wives to religious leaders without their consent in the name of *Charan Seva*.

After a hard-fought legal battle, Chief Justice Matthew Sauce and Joseph Arnold issued a verdict in favor of journalist Karsandas on April 22, 1862, and mentioned him as a public teacher in their judgment. They dismissed Maharaj's suit in 1862, lauded Karsandas's journalism, and made observations on journalism. The court said, "*A public journalist is a public teacher; the true function of the press—that by virtue of which it has rightly grown to be one of the great powers of the modern world—is the function of teaching, elevating, and enlightening those who fall*

within the range of its influence (Report of the Maharaj Libel Case and of the Bhattia Conspiracy Case, Connected with It, 1862).”

Like *Maharaj*, Indian cinema considers the same “David and Goliath” narrative structure in several movies. The theme suggests an underdog scenario, one in which a smaller, weaker opponent confronts a far more formidable opponent. Most recently, the activities of two highly politically active self-styled godmen, Gurmeet Ram Rahim from Haryana and Asaram from Gujrat, influenced the storylines of the movies *Aashram* (Jha, 2020) and *Sirf Ek Banda Kaafi Hai* (Karki, 2023). The court imprisoned both Ram Rahim and Asaram for sexually assaulting their female devotees under the pretext of eternal devotion. In their endeavors to confine the two self-proclaimed religious leaders, much less prominent individuals encountered obstacles. Ramchandra Chhatrapati, a journalist, published the victim girl’s letter and spoke out against Ram Rahim. A small-town lawyer, PC Solanki, fought the case of the victim girl against Asaram without any fees and sent him to jail (Bagchi, 2017; Wadhawan, 2018). Both cinematic representations receive positive responses from critics and the audience. In contrast, the fictional story in the film *Global Baba* (Tiwari, 2016) centers on a criminal who poses as a self-proclaimed godman and sexually exploits female devotees by offering them a “*global Dravya*” (sacred substance). His intricate network of deception ensnares a police officer, a journalist, and politicians.

‘Godmen’ industry and ritualized sexual practice

Currently, India and South Asia are home to an industry of ‘godmen’ that mirrors the Middle Ages European Christian practices of exchanging money for favors and forgiveness (Vajpeyi, 2017). These so-called godmen instill a sense of respect and a significant amount of religion’s intoxicating power in the socially, economically, and educationally marginalized sections. These self-proclaimed religious leaders flourish at the convergence of intense religious devotion, political influence, and often substantial affluence. This leads to blind faith

in self-styled godmen and wrong religious practices (Sharma, 2020).

The term “*Charan Seva*,” which means divine service, is prevalent in society in many forms, as mentioned in the film *Maharaj*. It is a kind of ritualistic sexual conduct that results from unquestioning beliefs in religious individuals. Among these, the *Devdasi* system receives the most attention. This tradition involved the donation of women as temple dancers at a young age for religious purposes. But her life remains a struggle between religion and physical exploitation (Premchander et al., 2016).

The process of donating or gifting a *Devadasi* to that sacred place revealed her origin and status. If a sacred person gave his daughter to the temple, she was termed “*Datta Devdasi*.” Kidnapped women who work in temples are called “*Hruta Devadasi*.” “*Bikrita Devadasi*” refers to a woman sold to a temple administration or priest. A “*Bhrutya Devadasi*” is a temple *Devadasi* who volunteers. Some ladies who serve the temple devotionally are called “*Bhakta Devadasi*.” A lady is called “*Alankara Devadasi*” when she is presented to the temple with decorations after achieving a specific level of competence. When *Devadasis* were paid for temple dancing and music, they were called “*Gopika*” or “*Rudraganika* (Mishra, 2024).”

Not only in India but also in some other countries, such types of rituals were in vogue. The Cambodian Ankor Borei inscription, also known as old *Kambuja*, lists seven dance girls, eleven vocalists, and four violinists in the temple. Egypt, Greece, Assyria, Phinisia, Babylon, and other regions also witnessed this dance. The nobles of Arsmenia used their unmarried daughters to serve Goddess Anaitis. No Babylonian girl could avoid this responsibility before marriage. The Bible mentions Babylonian *Devadasis*. Babylonians required older females to sit in Ishtar’s temple. Whoever dropped a silver coin on a female in line became her property, and they formed a relationship. Ancient Greece appointed *devadasis* in the temple of the Apple and the Sun gods. Records also document the appointment of

devadasis to the temples of Juno, Venus, and Jews in Rome. Priests, kings, and other powerful individuals enjoyed their dance exhibitions in the temple. The tradition of selecting or hiring a young girl to be a temple dancer had the dual purpose of providing entertainment and fulfilling holy duties. Nevertheless, the coercion by self-proclaimed religious leaders compelled these girls, who were not upholding their sacred lives, to engage in prostitution. As a result of this compulsion, they engaged in ritualistic sexual activity (Mishra, 2014; Prasad, 1999; Premchander et al., 2016).

Religious leaders have faced allegations of committing various crimes against women, leading to multiple convictions. These instances share a common characteristic that highlights the negative aspects of their divinity. Gurmeet Ram Rahim, the head of *Dera Sachcha Sauda*, a religious institution in India, faced conviction in two rape cases. Asaram Bapu, another self-proclaimed godman who often referred to himself as a “*bhagwan*,” faced a conviction in a minor’s rape case. A female follower accused Swami Nithyananda, another self-styled godman, of rape (Gopinathan, 2017). A self-proclaimed Muslim religious leader, Azam, was convicted in Hyderabad for reportedly committing many acts of sexual assault on a girl under the false pretense of protecting her home from malevolent forces (Natrajkumar, 2019).

Other Asian countries and religious communities have consistently documented similar incidents, in addition to India. Jung Myung-seok, the Christian Gospel Mission’s leader, faced a 10-year term in South Korea for raping three followers while preaching abroad (Chan-kyong, 2022). Wu Zeheng, the founder of the Huazang Zongmen cult in China, received a life sentence in prison for rape and fraud (Associated Press, 2015). A Nepalese court convicted a controversial spiritual leader known as “Buddha Boy” on charges of sexually assaulting a minor in June 2024 (Singh, 2024). In Pakistan, a seminary director received imprisonment for gang-raping a class 12 student in a moving car with two associates (Press Trust of India, 2014).

The film *Maharaj* depicts the practice of “*Charan Seva*” as an erotic escapade with a religious leader, Jadunath Maharaj. The film portrays it as a ritualized sexual practice, as the girl’s mother, father, extended family, and relatives celebrate her selection with joy. To commemorate joy, they make a special sweet *Lapsi* in their home. Even so, Jadunath Maharaj charges a certain amount of money from his male followers, who want to watch this erotic practice live. If anyone spoke out against this, they would face a religious and social boycott.

On the other hand, society is rife with stories of self-styled godmen who developed a specific code word for this type of sexual harassment. In the film *Global Baba*, a self-styled godman gives his female disciples “*global Dravya*” to drink and then exploits them. Ram Rahim’s ashram referred to sexual harassment by forcing people to drink *Jam-e-Insan* as “forgiveness from the father,” while Nityananda referred to it as “*Madhurabhaav*.” Satya Sai, who was involved in sexual exploitation of minors, used to call oral sex a “good luck” chance (Gopinathan, 2017; Thakur, 2019).

Poor writing and editing, incredible camerawork

Director Malhotra tackles a sensitive subject in the movie. However, he faces challenges in transporting the audience to the pre-independence era of India. The technical domains, particularly the art direction and editing, seem to be a little bit ineffective in conveying clear and precise storytelling. The film’s staging and aesthetic bear a resemblance to modern-day Gujarat rather than the pre-independent Indian state. Enhancing the pace would have created a more seamless narrative flow. Although the film doesn’t primarily focus on song-dance sequences, the music in the movie is quite substandard.

The film undoubtedly addresses a significant social issue, where the leader of a religious institution sexually abuses his female followers under the guise of divine service. However, the plot appears somewhat melodramatic due to its portrayal of a deeply personal motive. Karsandas, a journalist and social reformer, only brought the issue to light when

Jadunath Maharaj chose his fiancée for *Charan Seva*. The script and dialogue sections require further refinement. The courtroom sequences, in particular, lack adequate argumentation on a serious matter pertaining to religious faith and the exploitation of women. The most exceptional aspect of the picture is its cinematography, which has a delightful and artistic quality reminiscent of a painting.

The film *Maharaj* features several significant performances in which the actors demonstrate their utmost dedication and skill. Jaideep Ahlawat's portrayal of Jadunath Maharaj is effortless, eliciting an overwhelming dislike from the audience due to his consistent, disquieting smile and restrained performance. Junaid Khan, who portrayed journalist Karsandas in his first film, has yet to establish himself as a gripping starring actor. His performance in the courtroom sequences is particularly unimpressive. Shalini Pandey's performance, in her limited role as Karsandas's fiancée Kishori, evokes a strong emotional response. Sharvari Wagh, as Viraaj, who plays Karsandas's ally in newspaper production, infuses her few parts with liveliness.

Overall, the film *Maharaj* has multiple deficiencies, but the endeavor to portray a delicate aspect of Indian history and the heroic mentality of Karsandas Mulji is praiseworthy. The film showcases a journalist's battle against societal inequalities shaped by religious beliefs. The film concludes with the provocative lesson that *Dharma* (religion) is a means to becoming a decent human being, not a self-styled godman.

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