

12th Fail: Great expectations, major victories

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12th Fail

Exactly halfway through “12th Fail”, directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, civil service aspirant Manoj Sharma (Vikrant Massey) receives a visit from his father (Harish Khanna) at the decrepit flour mill in New Delhi where he lives and works. Manoj is at the nadir of his journey from an obscure village in Chambal, Madhya Pradesh, to success in the highly competitive civil service entrance examinations. He has been unsuccessful in his previous three attempts and is preparing for the fourth and last one for which he is eligible. However, the preparations are not going smoothly.

Having lost a relatively more comfortable job as a cleaner at a library, he now works at a flour mill. With little access to books, notes, or training classes at New Delhi’s Mukherjee Nagar, essential for clearing the examination, he faces more challenges. On a recent visit to his village, he learns that his family is in dire financial circumstances. As a result, he works longer hours at the mill to send money home. His budding relationship with fellow civil services aspirant Shraddha Joshi (Medha Shankar) is also on the rocks.

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Manoj's father has had his share of struggles. Earlier in the film, he was dismissed from his government job on false charges of corruption. Abandoning his family in the village, he has been fighting the government in the courts for rehabilitation. But seeing his son in such distress breaks his resolve to continue the fight.

"People like us can never win," he says. "But we will not accept defeat either, will we?" replies Manoj, smiling brightly, his face covered in soot and flour dust. He reminds his father of a poem the latter taught his children: "I write a new rhyme on the pages of time / I sing a new song."

This scene, as described by critic Shantanu Ray Chaudhuri, is one of the several "lump-in-the-throat moments" of the film. It derives its emotive power from the writing, acting, and the music composed of a sitar, a sarod, and a flute by Shantanu Moitra, echoing in some ways the more famous score for the Apu trilogy by Pandit Ravi Shankar.

While watching the film this week, I wondered if this connection was only in my head, if I was being sentimental. However, Director Chopra recently told film critic Baradwaj Rangan how he had acquired the rights to the music of "Pather Panchali", the first film of Ray's trilogy, released to universal acclaim in 1955, but could not muster up the courage to use it. Moitra's sparse score, composed over an intensive two-month-long session, delivers the emotional payload of the scene.

The encounter between Manoj and his father reminded me strongly — not of "Pather Panchali" — but of a scene from "Apur Sansar", the third and final film of Ray's trilogy. In this scene, quite early in the film, the protagonist Apu (Soumitra Chatterjee) and his friend Pulu (Swapan Mukherjee) are out in the evening to watch a play and have dinner. Apu works as a tuition teacher, earning Rs 15 a month. Their conversation reveals that he could have got a job in a railway company but did not take it up because the position was of a strike-breaker. Now, he lives in a decrepit rented room and eats rice, dal, and boiled potatoes every day. A treat of cutlets from his friends prompts him to loudly recite poetry on the streets.

Apu starts narrating to Pulu the story of a novel he is writing. It is about a boy from a village who migrates to the city, abandons his family profession of priesthood, and starts on an ambitious and rationalist trajectory. "Perhaps there is greatness in him," says Apu. "He is not able to do anything yet. But that's not a tragedy. He remains poor. But he never turns away from life. He wants to live."

Apu's friend dismisses the project, calling it an autobiography rather than a novel. In some ways, he is right. Despite all the challenges that Apu faces from his childhood — abject poverty, the death of his parents and sister, and the loss of his wife during childbirth — he refuses to give up. Apu is his nickname; his real name is, after all, Aparajito, which means the unvanquished.

Manoj's story in "12th Fail" is inspired by the real rags-to-riches story of Indian Police Service (IPS) officer Manoj Kumar Sharma, narrated in the eponymous non-fiction book by Indore-

based writer Anurag Pathak. In fact, Sharma and his wife, Indian Revenue Service officer Shraddha Joshi, also have cameos in the film.

Film critic Devansh Sharma writes in the Hindustan Times that Manoj's greatest challenge is not his poverty or lack of opportunities but self-love and validation. In the climactic interview scene of the film, he gets an immense boost of self-confidence when a letter from Shraddha helps him realise that she will continue to love him whether or not he clears the civil service examination.

Dilip Mandal, on the other hand, argues in an article for the Print that many benefits that Sharma enjoys despite being so abjectly poor — free food, entrance into a coaching centre, the love of an “upper-caste” girl — are a result of his caste privilege. Comparing it to white privilege, Mandal writes: “(Manoj) Sharma’s case is similar. He might not even know why all the doors are opening so easily for him. It’s easy for him and others to think that he was smart and worked hard. But we all know that’s not the entire story.”

Both Sharma and Mandal, however, provide only a partial reading of the film, ignoring significant aspects of the text. While Shraddha’s love is an important motivation for Manoj, his journey is not only one from a lack of validation to a miraculous success. On the contrary, Manoj is constantly helped — at times, absolutely selflessly — by multiple people, such as DSP Dushyant Singh (Priyanshu Chatterjee), his friend Pritam Pandey (Anant V. Joshi), and Gauri (Anshumaan Pushkar).

“12th Fail” is not a run-of-the-mill self-help book that focuses on the individual and not the social conditions in which they find themselves. One might even argue that without significant assistance from everyone around him, Manoj would have never made it to his goal.

Similarly, the film does not ignore caste but takes it head-on through the character of Gauri, another IPS aspirant. As Gauri explains in his very first scene, he is from a “backward caste.” This allows him two extra attempts at the examination. But when he fails to clear it, he starts a tea stall where he helps out underprivileged aspirants like Manoj.

The film remains aware of the fact that Manoj’s story is not the norm — it is the exception. For every Manoj, there are a million Gauris. Their lives are not necessarily a failure.

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