

Article

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## Shyam Benegal's *Ankur*: 50-Year-Live



Shyam Benegal's debut film *Ankur* (1974) completes 50 years since it was made. Distributed by Blaze Film Enterprises, the film can be called a "seminal film" in that the film has no precedence of any nature and is kind of the same floss. Absolutely a new first film, very original, rooted in social reality amid the feudal era that brought all distinctions in contrasts, conflicts and fissures in the whole strata of modern society. A pretty transparent reflection of our rural and arcadian scenario in India that the director seems to have exploited with absolute command and brevity.

*Ankur* is a seminal film per se. Satyajit Ray, the maestro of Indian cinema, said that "urban pollution" turns the rural fringe into an exploitative system, which can be experienced in *Ankur* (1974; "The Seedling"). This realistic drama set in rural

Andhra Pradesh marked the coming of age of the parallel cinema movement.

The obscure village Yellareddiguda, 25 km from Hyderabad, stands awaiting director Shyam Benegal's fade-in in *Ankur* (The Seedling). The year is approximately 1945. As drum beats grow louder, a skein in the distance unwinds a procession of village pilgrims threading their way to a shrine. They are an unsmiling, stoic company following an exaggerated young acrobat whose virility is set in immediate contrast against the low caste deaf-mute of the village – Kishtaya (played movingly by Sadhu Meher). Kishtaya's young wife Lakshmi (Shabana Azmi in her stunning debut) stands before the mother goddess and prays for a child.

When she conceives, it is after an illicit relationship with the sharp-eyed, sharp-nosed and sharp-tongued Surya (Anant Nag), the

landlord's son who arrives at Yellareddiguda with his gramophone, cigarettes, film magazines, inbred arrogance and impotent fury. Surya's father had put an end to Surya's squandering in the city, refused him graduate study, and arranged his marriage to a child bride before exiling Surya to a landlord's life at Yellareddiguda.

After the news of Surya's misdemeanours in the village – including his affair with the lower caste Lakshmi – reaches his father, there is a confrontation between the dominating father and his upstart son. Surya's wife Saroj (Priya Tendulkar), is sent to the village to ensure stability. This is when Surya's character is given more dimension than that of an overbearing bored brat throwing his weight about. In essaying the weakness of Surya's character, Nag turns in a commanding performance. An intelligent film like *Ankur* burrows deep into the consciousness of the whole society and to the core.

Shyam Benegal's seminal *Ankur* (*The Seedling*, 1972). The emergence of state-sponsored film-making in the late 1960s with Mrinal Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) laid the foundations for a new cinematic discourse, giving way to the next phase in the development of Indian art cinema, deemed by many as 'parallel cinema'. The work of filmmaker Shyam Benegal forms a significant part of the parallel cinema movement and the rural trilogy of films characterising his early work not only sympathised with the oppressed underclass but also established an influential political precedent for many of the young film-makers emerging from the prestigious Film and Television Institute of India. The chapter looks at the origins and

context of New Indian cinema, as well as the definitions of parallel cinema and its importance to the development of art cinema. It also considers Shyam Benegal's authorial status, key ideological strands, and the film's role in politicising cinema in India.

For the first time, we come across Benegal crossing swords against barbarous feminist subjects for a cause. This chapter evaluates Shyam Benegal. Shyam Benegal talks about caste in his first feature film, *Ankur* (*The Seedling*, 1974), when no one else is talking about it so boldly and sensitively. This is one of such films that linger in our minds long after it is watched on screen. One of the reasons for such impact is Benegal's honest and bold portrayal of nuanced characters with their strength and frailty. The film is multi-layered in its meaning and significance. From focusing on gender issues, class issues, and caste issues, this film is a microscopic representation of Indian society. *Ankur* takes a hard look into the deeply engraved caste system in the rural Indian belt.

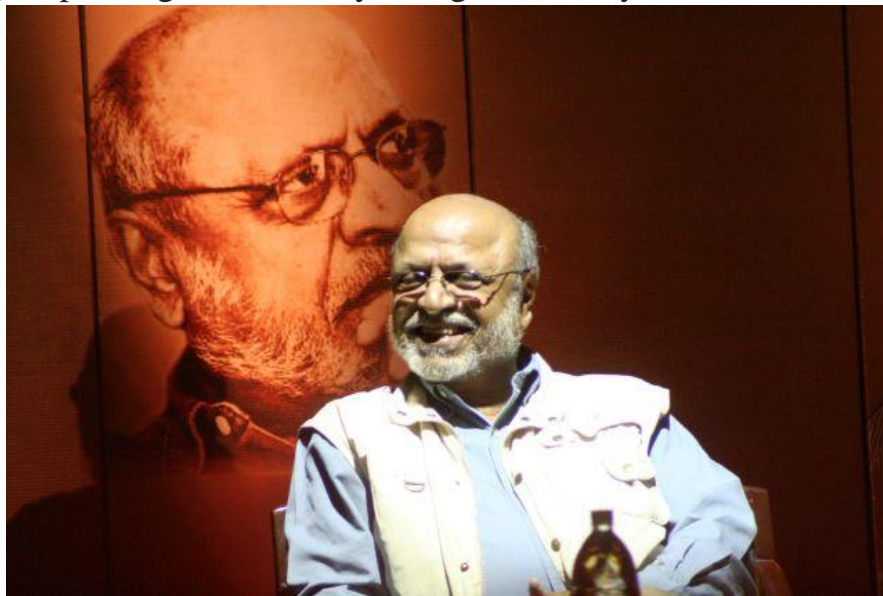
The story revolves around two primary characters: Surya, the landlord and Lakshmi, the housemaid. Surya, who wants to study further, is forced into marriage with a child bride. The social problems related to patriarchy and early marriage with underage girls come to the surface in the very first scenes of the movie.

We begin to understand that these social problems are interlinked and the common source of domination is patriarchy and trenchant domination. The patriarchal power play becomes vividly present when we see the systematic domination of the Dalit family by the upper caste men in the village. Lakshmi is appointed as the housemaid to

look after Surya's needs. Surya, being an upper caste, educated man, gives the impression that he is liberal-minded. He gives permission to Lakshmi to cook. Cooking for upper caste families by a Dalit woman is forbidden in such an Indian village. This gesture makes us instantly lean for Surya.

But the following scenes make us realise that this upper caste man to whom eating food made by a Dalit woman is unquestionably easy and similarly exploiting her sexually is equally easy.

The social position of these characters determines their actions in the private sphere. Lakshmi, whose voice is suppressed in a male-dominated society, is



helpless in front of an upper-caste man. She knows that she cannot reject the advances made to her by Surya as it involves her dwindling financial status and the vulnerability of being a lower-caste woman.

Her husband also creates problems for her as he is an alcoholic person who spends every little penny he earns. So the responsibility of running her family is on her shoulders. Being a woman and also a lower caste woman Lakshmi becomes an easy target of the dominant power dynamics prevalent in the society. In the meantime, Lakshmi gets pregnant with Surya's child. Surya, fearing the inevitable shame and humiliation of having an illegitimate child with an untouchable woman, constantly persuades

Lakshmi to abort her child. Lakshmi, however, rejects it as having a child of her own has been her desire for a long time. She could not have a child with her husband, Kishmaya, as he was impotent.

Kashtaya receives the news of her pregnancy with much elation as he thinks it is his child. At this point, Kashtaya becomes serious about his earnings because now he has to look after both Lakshmi and the baby. He goes to Surya's house to ask for a job. Surya,

however, believes that Kashtaya is here to beat him as he has impregnated Lakshmi. The situation turns violent, and Lakshmi rushes to the scene to try to

save her husband from Surya.

The film ends with a scene of an angry little boy throwing stones at the landlord's house. The little kid reflects how rich men's influence is at the root of the odd-ball poverty level. The film shows how deeply exploitative the feudal system is. It also presents the anger, frustration, and resentment of these marginal communities toward the dominant class. Surya's privileges as an upper-caste man and Lakshmi's disadvantages as a lower-caste woman are starkly woven in each film frame.

The scene where Lakshmi watches the socially ostracised woman being humiliated for having an affair with a patriarch and also the shaving of her husband's head proves that it is always the socially vulnerable ones who

are punished and humiliated for actions that society thinks of as crimes. Yet the men of upper caste origin continue to live guiltlessly. This is exactly what happens when Surya no longer shows interest in Lakshmi when his wife comes to stay with him. This leaves Lakshmi unsettled and puzzled and she begins to realise that she has been used for sexual pleasure. The *sub-altern* issue is subtly brought on the surface revealing cunning passages and contrived corridors. That feudalism and robust patriarchy that even today, even now, rule the roost. Benegal seems very clinical and suffers from no *anosognosia* to tackle a taboo subject with power and insight; it is rare at a time when such films were kept under the carpet. Benegal is the one guerrilla fighter who fights it from the front.



*Ankur* (1974) depicts endemic social contradictions that trundle alongside the main narrative. The contrasts of the feudal family are also brought to the fore. Surya's father has a mistress and a son in the village, and both of them are accepted even by Surya's mother. The village priest barely convinces anyone that he is a man of God, yet he holds a secure position. An overseer is allowed to larceny in broad daylight while Lakshmi is driven out for stealing a few fistfuls of rice.

The resignation of the subservient to their lot is never highlighted for sympathy.

But Benegal gives his characters time, reason, and context to help them find their voices. Filmic resilience makes the film uniquely topical and valid. No smart pedagogy is exchanged in the web of the film.<sup>370 × 3</sup>

“Hunger is not merely a call of the stomach,” says a woman with a knife edge to her tone when she is summoned before the panchayat for taking a lover and deserting her unproductive husband. Another wife refuses to be gambled away by her drunken spouse. Lakshmi will not abort her child, distressed though she is and disgusted that her landlord-lover cannot stand up to his tall pledges of protecting her forever.

The reality in Benegal's world means that even though resilience may not immediately be rewarded, the truth will win out. In *Ankur*, a nameless child, the hope of the future, serves as the voice of justice. He squeals to Surya about Kishtaya stealing from the fields and watches his disgrace—Kishtaya is shaved and then paraded around the village on a donkey. At the end of the film, it is the same child who delivers the metaphorical master stroke against the landlord and his ilk.

An eye-opening moment is when Lakshmi dispassionately narrates the circumstances of her marriage to Kishtaya, once a skilful potter who is now defunct, thanks to the availability and preference for aluminium ware. In private, Lakshmi yearns for sexual fulfilment and berates Kishtaya for his drunkenness. But she cares for Kishtaya as she would for a helpless animal, and even in her vulnerable position, she resists her master's sneers at Kishtaya's worthlessness.

“The faces of the cast – particularly the ravishing Shabana Azmi as the peasant girl – are a landscape in themselves,” remarked



Nigel Andrews in a *Financial Times* review. This adds to Ankur's unvarnished, spare look with its carefully constructed set design and costumes. Guided by Benegal's objectivity and lack of pontification, Govind Nihalani's camera subtly offsets poor and plenty – the sun-bleached hay of Lakshmi's little hut and the verdant green of zamindari acres; the meagre mouthfuls of rice that Lakshmi serves at home and the bulging burlap sacks from which she steals – tropes which, over the years have become less nuanced types in post-*Ankur* cinema.

Lakshmi's inchoate and conflicting emotions – relief and despair, trust and guilt, attraction and repulsion – could never have seen better light or faded less gently into darkness. Sound editor Jayesh Khandelwal brings Yellareddiguda's days and nights to life – drum beats of different rhythms announce events of consequence, human voices sing in the distant fields, a bird, trills distinctly above others, only a few strains of music wash out a curtain of silver rain. Finally, there is the bitter, hate-filled, anguished cry of a single woman that resonates against hegemony for all time.

The village head is depicted as the ultimate decision-maker of the community. He forces Rajamma, who wanted a divorce from her impotent husband, to go back to him. Further, he rebukes her for having a relationship with a man from another village and caste. Not only that, he clearly mentions that a woman belongs not only to her husband but also to the entire household, caste, and community. So, even if her husband cannot satisfy her, the brother-in-law can compensate for it. Hence, it's implied that a woman's choice of a sexual partner cannot be taken into

consideration. She has to be the passive recipient in any sexual relationship, leave aside her emotional satisfaction!

The festival of Diwali marks the ultimate capitalist exploitation. The poor village children could only glimpse Surya's display of pomp and splendour. On the eve of Diwali, he engages in gambling and drinking with other upper-caste men of the village. One of the men even puts his wife at stake during this foul play.

In spite of being a moderately educated guy, Surya had agreed to marry a child bride. Further, while waiting for her to grow up, he is involved in an incestuous relationship with Lakshmi to fulfil his sexual urge. Instead of trying to change the system, Surya succumbed to the pressure of masculinity. He readily agreed with his wife when she refused to let Lakshmi cook on account of purity and pollution.

Saru also mentions in a scene that since she was of the lower caste, she would better be falling sick in her own house. He also pressurizes Lakshmi to abort their illegitimate child and bluntly refuses to take responsibility if born, unlike his father. Although he had promised to take care of Lakshmi forever, he finally abandons her and verbally abuses her in front of his wife Saru.

This guilty conscience made him profusely whip Kishtayya at the end of the film. While Kishtayya was coming to Surya with a stick in his hands just to get back his job as a bullock cart rider, Surya thought that he was coming to thrash him for impregnating his wife on account of his greater physical strength. This is the film's most vivid scene of class oppression based on caste.

Tendrils of *Ankur* have spread through Benegal's work over the '70s and grafted themselves into the bedrock of Indian cinema. Critics and academicians will argue over content, style and treatment, whether parallel cinema germinated from *Ankur* and whether Benegal did indeed bring on the Indian New Wave, but viewers will remember the slow penetration of *Ankur* deep into the core of their consciousness

The reason for this is her social position. Benegal brilliantly portrays the subtleties in Lakshmi's character and Surya's sluggish maturity. The film makes its viewers uncomfortable and rightly does so because the issues raised are seldom discussed, even daily. It becomes a must-watch Hindi film not only for its rich performances but also for the commentary it makes on serious social issues. The form and content sound very strong, and its structure is infallible. Mainstream Hindi films rarely talk about the domain of the caste

system in India. These films can easily be dodged.

Benegal still guards the flame of good and pro-life cinema, starting with *Ankur*, till this time burns bright.

(Shyam Benegal was born on 14 December 1934 in Hyderabad to a Konkani-speaking Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmin family, Shyam Sunder Benegal. His father hailed from Karnataka. When he was twelve years old, he made his first film on a camera given to him by his photographer father, Sridhar B. Benegal.)

#### AWARDS

- National Film Award for Second Best Feature Film(1975)
- National Film Award for Best Actor: Sadhu Meher (1975)
- National Film Award for Best Actress: Shabana Azmi (1975)
- Berlin International Film Festival: Golden Berlin Bear: Nominated (1974)



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