

Tribute to Shyam Benegal

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Ode to Shyam Babu: A Feminist Filmmaker



A cursory glance at Shyam Benegal's illustrated oeuvre, and one is stuck with two major highlights. One, all his films uphold women's rights intersecting class, caste and religion and his major works coincided with the emergence and proliferation of feminist movements in India and two, he spoke largely on the everyday life struggle of people from the margins. By 1974, when his first hard hitting film *Ankur* (1974) released, the world has witnessed the birth of second wave feminism that claimed equal rights of women in every sphere of life. In India, the movements for female rights appeared late. And fortunately, it coincided with some of the

astonishingly brilliant films being made upholding women's' liberation. The years that had seen the emergence of an angry young man in films like *Zanzeer* (1973) and *Deewar* (1975), Benegal remained true to the roots by highlighting the real problems of India, never camouflaging or portraying it melodramatically.

With a film like *Ankur* (1974) Benegal paved the path of addressing women's problems in India. Like a visionary, he argues against society's treatment of women as secondary to men. In *Ankur* (1974), he questioned the feudal-patriarchal treatment of feudalism towards his subjects that includes a

lower caste woman, Lakshmi (played by Shabana Azmi) and her deaf and dumb husband. The exploitation tantamount to consistent sexual exploitation in the name of consent but when the question of acceptance arises, Surya (Anant Nag) declines and act like a typical master.



Ankur (the seed) indicates the germination of a seed. In this story, it could be Lakshmi's unborn child. It also indicates the seed of rebellion brewing among the villagers and in the next generation. The screen turns red when a child throws stone at the feudal lord's house as a sign of resistance. Thus, Shyam Benegal creates a sublime and provocative examination of hypocrisy, economic disparity, and the social status of women in *Ankur*.

The main difference between Indian feminism with its western counterparts is that our nation is fissured with caste, class, religious differences. Therefore, postcolonial feminism emphasizes the importance of their colonial past and how this tainted past impact gender dynamics. Dalit feminism is a prominent aspect of Indian feminism that

specifically examines the intersectionality of caste and gender. Until then, Indian feminism frequently faces criticism due to its prevalence among upper-caste women and its failure to adequately acknowledge and address the distinct types of oppression experienced by Dalit women who belong to the lowest social stratum of the old Hindu caste system. Dalit feminists emphasize concerns such as violence based on caste, economic exploitation and social marginalization.

This emphasis on the intersectionality, hugely popularised by Kimberlé Crenshaw, was evident in his work from the very outset which is the defining point for Third world feminism. In most of his subsequent films, Benegal addressed post-colonial women's question, be it upper caste, upper class women in *Kalyug* (1981), *Bhumika* (1977), *Trikaal* (1985) or about minority women in the trilogy *Mammo* (1994), *Sardari Begum* (1996), and *Zubeidaa* (2001), commentary on bygone era and its women in *Nishant* (1975), *Junoon* (1979), women in brothel in *Mandi* (1983), working women in *Manthan* (1976), he touched every soul in rural and urban India. Heavily influenced by auteurs from Bengal, he constructed his own identity, impressively one of its kind.

He was a feminist man who throughout his films eked strong women characters be it in *Manthan* (Bindu played by feisty Smita Patil) Rukmini Bai in *Mandi*, Supriya (Rekha) in *Kalyug*, Hansa Wadkar (Smita Patil) or subsequently in the Muslim women trilogy. One of the pioneering figures in the second new wave movement in Indian cinema, Benegal left indelible impact on generations to come. His was also a time, when in

literature and in other art forms addressed women issue. Post independent Indian society was shrouded with patriarchal atmosphere, women started joining the broader work force out of their home front and immediately faced tremendous challenges from the home and the outer world. Balancing both seemed to be a mammoth task. One of the remarkable films in this subject was Ray's *Mahanagar* (The Big City, 1963) adding to his endeavour, Benegal's films commented more on the pan-Indian scenario. One of the reasons for his powerful portrayal of female characters could be his long and consistent association with Shama Zaidi. Shama with loads of life experiences and wisdom, added to the female gaze embedded in Benegal's oeuvre. A die hard feminist, Shama uphold female individualism, women's rights. In her words "*Women are naturally feminists. The problem is not with Indian women but with Indian men. I have a huge problem with Indian men. They're living in a different century. Women are in the 20th century, while men are still in the 18th. That's the conflict.*"¹

During her long association with Benegal, she did art direction in *Nishant* and *Bhumika*, wrote dialogues for *Mammo*, *Sardari Begum*, *Trikal* and *Susman*. In his illustrious career, Benegal directed 24 feature films, numerous documentaries. In his most productive years, mostly in the beginning, he created unforgettable women characters, trailblazers for a changing era. The famous female gaze present in him was palpable in all his works. His craft always took a pro woman, pro subaltern angle that ensured the presence of the absentee people in the Indian screen. Parallel cinema movement received a new life with his arrival. Uncompromising women

protagonists, their sensibilities, not catering to stereotypical female characters all defined his craft.

Another noteworthy contribution of Benegal was his discoveries of outstanding actors and actresses. Shabana Azmi, fresh from the Film Institute, started off her long-lasting journeys with the Indian film industry. His capacity to capture Indian femininity as a cause not as a mean to entertain, certainly make him a feminist director.



In *Bhumika* (1977), Shyambabu explores doyenne of Marathi theatre actress Hansa Wadkar. A rebel in personal and professional life, the film interrogates the difficulties of freeing herself from the tight grip of patriarchy. Her quest for self-discovery was traumatic yet empowering.

Smita Patil played the titular role, and has channelled so much of her own experiences of womanhood into the character, unafraid to present herself in a vulnerable state. His depiction of women is radically different from his contemporary mainstream even from parallel filmmakers. The women in his films often possessed values associated with second wave feminism. The men in *Bhumika* (1977) and *Mandi* are largely nuisances, the films hopes and dreams of complex women, while female friendship, feelings of isolation and a fight against injustice all play prominent roles in the

films. These compelling explorations of women characters in his films allow us to call him a feminist. But besides his dealings with feminist themes, he also explored certain other yet relevant areas not exclusive to women like minority issue, racism, class consciousness etc.



Benegal in *Mandi* (1983) was stupendous. He expresses an interest in the ephemeral nature of brothel life, with an emphatic eye towards women living in that space—having a mind of their own. They are not mere prostitutes subservient to leering male gaze but strong women with burgeoning notoriety with a matriarch (vivaciously played by Shabana Azmi) and the trials of everyday lives constitute this grand drama. Even if it is the story of a brothel, Benegal steer clear from the masculine perspective of representing the women, (that too of prostitutes) as sexual objects. Rather he concentrated on depicting these so called fallen women as empowered beings, having a mind of their own, delving into the intricacies of their power dynamics. *Mandi* is a feminist film that interrogates female existence in a questionable space in the society. Men appears mostly as a subservient to the female

characters, sometimes as mere caricatures, as if an inherent cynicism of the director towards the society in general is present. His ideological commitment shaped his earlier films, when he was at his best.

For example, *Manthan* (1976) produced by Gujarat Milk Co-operative marketing federation limited was aimed to spread awareness. Being the first crowd funded film, *Manthan* talked about the white revolution brought by Verghese Kurian in a fictional manner. Besides his commentary on feudalism (*Nishant*, *Ankur*, *Manthan*) his trilogy on Muslim women (*Mammo*, *Sardari Begum* and *Zubeida*) his modern take on Mahabharata in *Kalyug*, his exploration of colonial era in *Junoon*, the Portuguese era in *Trikaal* and quite a number of significant documentaries and Television shows. He addressed and focussed on the transition from the feudal India to a modern one. And in terms of doing so, he highlighted the evils of class-and caste system, women empowerment, disappearance of feudal values, onset of industrialization and the birth of a middle class.

The variety in his work is phenomenal. His quest to bring a change in the society through his films was praiseworthy. His ideological commitment was evident in his interpretation of the societal ills. The auteurist tradition in his art established him as one of the pioneers of art house cinema movement of the 70's and 80's. Contemporary Indian Independent filmmakers take a bow in his name as a trailblazer of non-mainstream films.