

Tribute to Shyam Benegal

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Shyam Benegal has a Profound Impact on Indian Cinema



Numerous titles have been attributed to him, including 'legendary', 'iconic', 'visionary', and 'pioneer', among others. He embodies all these descriptors and more. With a career that spanned well over fifty years, Shyam Benegal is celebrated not only for the approximately twenty-five feature films he directed but also for his significant contributions to television and his roles in various cinema-related organizations. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he served as an educator at the Film and Television Institute (FTII) and later held the position of chairman on two occasions, from 1980 to 1983 and again from 1989 to 1992. Additionally, he was the director of the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) and the Mumbai Academy of Moving Images (MAMI), which hosts the renowned International Film Festival in Mumbai. He also led the Federation of Film Societies of India (FFSI), an organization dedicated to promoting quality cinema through film societies. Throughout these

roles, he earned great respect while continuing to produce films that transformed Indian cinema during that era.

Shyam Benegal stands as one of the most esteemed and impactful filmmakers in Indian cinema, recognized for his significant contributions to parallel cinema. His body of work has achieved both critical and popular recognition, establishing him as a key figure in the evolution of modern Indian cinema. With a unique narrative approach and a keen social awareness, Benegal's films delve into a wide array of themes, from historical narratives to socio-political critiques, frequently highlighting the challenges and experiences of marginalized groups.

Bollywood cinema is often recognized for its grand melodrama and escapist narratives; however, Benegal's films consistently embraced a more grounded, nuanced, and socially conscious perspective, establishing him as a key in Indian cinema.

Prior to his foray into feature films, Benegal gained experience in advertising and documentary filmmaking. His early work in documentaries provided him with significant insights into the medium, often focusing on social issues, which foreshadowed his commitment to addressing real-world challenges.

Benegal made his feature film debut in 1973 with *Ankur* (The Seed), which is widely acknowledged as the birth of India's "New Wave" or "Parallel Cinema" movement. This movement aimed to deliver a more realistic, gritty, and socially aware style of filmmaking, contrasting sharply with the escapist tendencies of mainstream Bollywood. *Ankur* received critical acclaim for its sensitive treatment of themes such as feudalism, oppression, and caste dynamics in rural India. Benegal's skill in depicting complex social issues with authenticity and subtlety distinguished him as a promising filmmaker. The film also marked the beginning of Shabana Azmi's illustrious career.

The 1970s and 1980s were pivotal for the evolution of parallel cinema in India, with Shyam Benegal playing an instrumental role in this cultural transformation. This movement arose as a response to the formulaic and commercially oriented Bollywood productions, with its advocates dedicated to exploring socially relevant and realistic narratives. Alongside other filmmakers, Benegal contributed to the introduction of a more mature and introspective approach to Indian cinema.

Following the triumph of *Ankur*, Benegal proceeded to direct a series of innovative films that solidified his reputation as a leading figure in Indian cinema. Two

prominent examples are *Nishant* (1975) and *Manthan* (1976). Similar to *Ankur*, *Nishant* addressed themes of social injustice, highlighting the oppression faced by peasants under the dominance of landlords. The film's depiction of rural India and the feudal system resonated deeply with audiences.

In *Manthan*, Benegal shifted his focus to the experiences of rural dairy farmers, delving into the concept of cooperative farming and its potential for social transformation. This film was particularly noteworthy for its representation of the cooperative movement in Gujarat, which was significantly influenced by the white revolution led by Dr. Verghese Kurien, often referred to as the "Milkman of India." *Manthan* marked a pivotal moment in Indian cinema due to its social and political issues and was among the first films to be financed through contributions from a large group of farmers, exemplifying a grassroots approach to production at a time when the term 'crowdfunding' was not yet in use.

Shyam Benegal's filmmaking is characterized by a focus on character-driven stories, social realism, and a profound dedication to depicting the challenges and lives of individuals. His works are distinguished by subtle performances, extended takes, skilful camera movements, and a naturalistic style in dialogue and pacing. He frequently chose to collaborate with relatively lesser-known but talented actors, enabling them to authentically embody their roles and reflect the realities of the time.

His narrative style is characterized by its depth and symbolism, often presenting multiple layers of meaning that encourage thorough analysis. The characters he depicts

are frequently simple individuals placed in remarkable situations, and his compassionate representation of them is what distinguishes his work. His films are marked by intricate narratives that captured the changing socio-political landscape of India at that time, while simultaneously emphasizing personal emotions and challenges.

Throughout his career, Benegal consistently produced films that were both artistically significant and socially pertinent. *Bhumika* (1977), featuring Smita Patil, stands out as a pivotal piece in his oeuvre. This film, inspired by the life of Hansa Wadkar, delves into the challenges faced by a woman in a patriarchal film industry and society. It garnered acclaim for Patil's powerful performance and its candid depiction of a woman's internal struggles.

Among Benegal's most ambitious and celebrated projects is *Kalyug* (1981), a contemporary reinterpretation of the Mahabharata, set within the context of a corporate conflict. The film's examination of the intricate relationships involving ambition, treachery, and familial ties remains relevant even today. It showcases Benegal's talent for recontextualizing ancient stories in modern settings, making them accessible while still engaging with enduring themes of power, morality, and ethics.

Benegal's dedication to portraying relevant narratives persisted in films such as *Junoon* (1978) and *Trikaal* (1985), which examine the intricacies of colonial governance. Set in the context of post-colonial Goa, *Trikaal* investigates the interplay between personal recollections and collective histories, highlighting the internal and external changes that accompany the

passage of time. The title, *Trikaal*, which translates to "three eras," aptly encapsulates its thematic essence: the intertwining of past, present, and future. This period drama unfolds in the early 1960s, during Goa's transition from Portuguese dominion to Indian independence. It employs this political transformation as a metaphor for the broader theme of change—both personal and historical—while exploring how various generations perceive this evolution. The narrative creatively engages with the concept of time, frequently oscillating between past, present, and future visions. Through the use of flashbacks, dreams, and varying perspectives, the film delves into not only individual memories but also their profound connections to significant historical movements. Among all films set or filmed in Goa, *Trikaal* stands out even today.

While Benegal's work primarily concentrated on Indian society and politics, his films garnered international acclaim for their artistic value and social significance. The late Derek Malcolm, a renowned film critic who contributed to *The Guardian* for over twenty years, once told me that he eagerly waited for the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) to watch Benegal's films and other films makers of the Parallel cinema movement.

Benegal presented the demeanor of an esteemed professor, characterized by his gentle speech and unpretentious nature. He possessed the remarkable ability to listen intently to even unfamiliar individuals, making them feel welcomed. Approximately twenty years ago, during his visit to Goa for the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), I met him in the multiplex parking lot and

requested an interview. He graciously consented and inquired about the newspaper I represented. Upon learning that it was The Navhind Times, he promptly asked if Arun Sinha was still the editor. I confirmed this, to which he told his colleague who was with him, “*Arre apna Arun abhi bhi hain yahan Goa mein, woh jisne apne saath Bharat Ek Khoj kaam kiya tha,*” (Our Arun is still here, the one who worked with us on Bharat Ek Khoj). I was initially perplexed, as I was unaware of this connection and suspected a case of mistaken identity. However, I later discovered that I was the one who was mistaken; the editor had indeed collaborated with him on the famed television series.

In addition to his cinematic achievements, Benegal made notable contributions to Indian television. *Bharat Ek Khoj* (1988), a historical drama inspired by Jawaharlal Nehru’s Discovery of India, was a pioneering endeavor aimed at presenting India’s history to the public in an engaging and informative manner, while maintaining a high degree of historical accuracy. He dedicated a good three years to the project before it premiered on Doordarshan.

His television career began even earlier, as he was a part of the anthology series *Katha Sagar* (1986) and *Yatra* (1986), the latter highlighted themes of unity and harmony through a train journey across India. In *Katha Sagar*, he adapted works from various authors, including O. Henry (The Last Leaf, A Service of Love), Anton Chekhov (Vanka and Ward No. 6), and Guy de Maupassant (The Little Casket), among others.

Benegal’s contributions to television have been widely acclaimed for their intellectual rigor and the insightful manner in which they address complex topics in an accessible way. *Samvidhaan* (2014), produced for Rajya Sabha TV, stands as the authoritative account of the creation of the Constitution of India.

In his later years, Benegal maintained his significance in Indian cinema. Works such as *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008) and *Well Done Abba* (2013) demonstrated his ability to address social issues with a lighter touch, effectively creating a bridge between arthouse and commercial cinema while upholding integrity and vision. Benegal’s legacy is rooted in his capacity to transcend conventional Bollywood norms, utilizing cinema as a potent instrument for social transformation.

During my interview with him, it became evident that he possessed a light-hearted perspective towards himself and the medium, yet he approached pertinent issues with a seriousness that underscores his greatness as a filmmaker.

His impact on Indian cinema is profound. His commitment to examining the intricacies of society, politics, and human nature, coupled with his dedication to realism and social awareness, established him as one of the most significant filmmakers in the nation’s cinematic history. Moreover, his works exemplify the richness and diversity of Indian cinema, providing a deeper and more nuanced examination of societal and political themes. He was not merely a filmmaker but a chronicler of India’s changing social fabric, with his films serving as a rich repository of insights into the human experience.

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