
BENEGAL AND KARNAD

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF THE MASSES

—CHAITANYA KALBAG

SHYAM BENEGAL

Shyam Benegal grew up in the shadow of the Charminar at Hyderabad. Perhaps that childhood gave him two important outlooks- the first of the quintessentially rural Andhra, the second of a more polished, Urdu-ised, Hyderabad. Whatever the reason, Shyam decided, at a very early age, to grow up and make movies. In this he was single-minded, unlike Girish Karnad (whom we discuss later). For while Karnad graduated from mathematical formulae to cinematic frames, Benegal grew up through advertising films and documentaries into full-fledged feature film-making.

In 1974, with the release of his first feature film, 'Ankur', Benegal shot, a bearded comet, into country-wide prominence. 'Ankur' was an earthy film - it spoke of our country at its grass-roots, of feudal oppression, of peasant exploitation. Loaded with ideological warnings between its exquisite short, 'Ankur' catapulted Benegal, and the relatively fresh cast he had picked, into recognition.

In his early forties, Benegal has a long way to go on the film path. There is in his work a total merging with the ethos he deals with - the same sort of dedication that shot Bengal's Satyajit Ray into international acclaim. He has suffered from one disadvantage, though the fact that his first film was so good. Because people always tend to compare subsequent products with the first effort, and Benegal's second film 'Nishant' was not as brilliant as 'Ankur'. But even in 'Nishant' there was hardly any mediocrity, and one sensed the same dedication as in 'Ankur'. And so the discerning film-goer did not write off Benegal the film-maker. With his third film 'Manthan' due to be released any day, people are waiting for the film with a lot of anticipation.

As a kid in shorts, Benegal was fascinated with films. He saw every movie he could, and grew more fascinated with the medium after each one. There was also the proximity and the charisma of having a famous film-making cousin-Guru Dutt.

Beginning with advertising films, Benegal learnt as he went along. He has made more than 600 ad. films so far. Then he began making documentaries, of which he has made over 30. His documentaries have gone to the Milan Festival in 1968; to France and Britain, and to the World Advertising Congress in 1965. He was awarded the Homi Bhabha Fellowship in 1971, and spent two years touring many countries, studying their motion-picture industries. In 1973, Blaze Film Enterprises asked him whether he was interested in making a feature film. And so 'Ankur', based on a short story by Benegal himself, was begun.

Like all creative people, Benegal is never really fully satisfied with a film he makes. He is constantly trying for better cinema, hemmed in as he is by the demands that a commercialised industry makes. But he is determined not to succumb to the lure of commercial, pot-boiler cinema. Like Karnad, he does not think he can be called a New Wave film-maker. Rather, he could be classed as a Transitional Cinema film-maker, for he is helping the Indian film audience, steeped as it has been in hackneyed plots all these years, to appreciate better, aesthetically satisfying, and more meaningful cinema. What is most heartening is the fact that Benegal has not, comet-like, flashed across filmdom's skies, to disappear into oblivion. He appears to be firmly entrenched in film-making, committed to giving the man in the cinema-hall queue a much better deal for his money.

GIRISH KARNAD

Girish Karnad symbolizes the Bhanap creative intellectual. With his psyche firmly rooted in his Dharwar background, he seems, destined to achieve much more than mere Kanarite, or even Indian, recognition.

Girish has figured a lot in the news in the last few years more as a cineactor and film-

Chaitanya Kalbag (b. 1956) started his journalistic career at 17. For over two years from April 1974, he was Assistant Editor of Hi, a fortnightly youth newspaper. In June 1976 he joined the staff of Stardust. He is also Contributing Editor (India) for Transindia, a monthly newsmagazine published from New York for Indians abroad. In August this year he won a Special Award in the Rajika Kirpalani Young Journalist Competition 1976. He has also been included in An Anthology Of Bombay Poetry 1976 (edited by Edmunds and Kamath). As a free-lancer, he has written for Free Press Journal, Free Press Bulletin, Femina, Onlooker, Cinema Journal, For You, and Film World.

maker than as a literary personality. Strangely enough, his beginnings were Einsteinian - he obtained a Master's degree in Mathematics from Dharwar. Soon afterwards, he did a brief stint at Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship. He has been known to remark that this period abroad was quite uncomfortable for him - "alienation" and "rootlessness" are words that he uses, in regard to his stay in England.

Returning to India, he worked as Assistant Manager of the Oxford University Press in Madras. At around this time, he was awarded the Homi Bhabha Fellowship for Creative Writing.

Then Girish happened to read a Kannada novel, 'Samskara'. He liked it so much that he produced a film of the same title. The film was revolutionary in style and content. And it was banned. However, when it won the President's Gold Medal for the 'best feature film', Karnad was acknowledged as a force to reckon with on the film-making front. He went on to make two more films in Kannada: 'Vamsha Vriksha' and 'Kaadu', and people began to say he was some sort of a Saraswat version of Satyajit Ray. All these films dealt with the undercurrents of rural life, based on topics like untouchability, orthodoxy and rural violence. Two things marked these Karnad films - the apparent and total identification with the rural canvas he presented, and the possibility of making low-budget films with relatively unknown people in the cast.

Around this time Karnad was appointed the Director of the Film and Television Institute of India at Poona, one of Asia's best nurseries of cinematic talent. Creative people rarely make a roaring success of administration, but Karnad settled in admirably at the FTII. Some of his reforms, however, did not find favour with his mercurial pupils, and his tenure as the Institute Director was quite stormy.

In 1974, Shyam Benegal asked Girish to play the lead in his second feature film, 'Nishant', and his performance of the school-master's role was uniformly appreciated. This marked the beginning of another eventful chapter in Girish's life. For, after 'Nishant', he has played an important role in Benegal's 'Manthan', and is playing the lead in Basu Chatterji's 'Swami'.

So, as an actor ('Samskara' 'Nishant'), as a director ('Kaadu', 'Vamsha Vriksha'), as a writer ('Hayavadana'), and as a scholar, Girish Karnad has proved Napoleon right in his famous axiom: "Impossible is a word that does not figure in my dictionary".

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