

**PORTRAYAL OF 'SEXUAL AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE' IN  
SHYAM BENEGAL'S *ANKUR***

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The new wave Indian cinema has a long and influential tradition of experimental films which foreground the nation's socio-political and cultural dimensions. Shyam Benegal (b.1934) has often been regarded as one of the Maverick Indian Film directors of International repute. He played significant role in the formulation of National Film policy as a distinct art form. Most of his films embrace reality and factual world devoid of fantasy. He actively participated in the Film Society Movement initiated by Satyajit Ray. He is an activist film maker with deep consciousness about the India's diverse social and political anxieties. The oeuvre of his films contains a deep cinematic voice of the marginalized people and his strident grappling with nationalistic and social issues of contemporary India. His contribution serves as a trajectory of his social and creative engagement with the sites of inequalities and subaltern concerns which demands serious revision and reconsideration. Once he declined the fact about the social concerns in his films, "I don't know if cinema can bring about change in society. But cinema can certainly be a vehicle for creating social awareness. I believe in egalitarianism and every person's awareness of human right. Through my films I can say, 'here is the world and here are the possibilities we have'. Eventually it is to offer an insight into life, into experience, into a certain kind of emotive/cerebral area"(Benegal : Interview) They are individually improved upon his own sensibilities and predilections about emergent issues of post-independent India. It should be noted that the cinematic world of Benegal whips up a chaotic vision of India entangled in the mesh of binary ideologies and epistemologies of human world. He makes attempt to address the feministic concerns in the narrative of the early feudal based films. About his motives he says, "I'd like to go on making films, I don't think I can do anything as well, India continues to inspire with a variety of different subjects to work on. I love doing films on the temperature of society and capture the transition of this amazingly diverse structure of our nation. But I need to be completely possessed by it." ( Qtd. in Datta : 2002:215) His films offer an impressively wider spectrum of marginalized and 'Dalit' (Downtrodden) discourses. They enunciate issues about national identity, peripheral lives of humans, gender, caste and class. Through his films, he designs broad diversity of perspectives of human evil. It is significant thing to note that the films of Benegal deal with the sufferings of un-empowered or disoriented people of India who have been subjugated and marginalized. The films bring forth the cultural and social milieus than of mere cinematographic productions. Moreover, they play a vital role in liberating the oppressed ones. It should also be noted that Benegal's films are no longer emotive expressions of pain and suffering. His films should be viewed as tropes of national allegories with all their glories and dichotomies. The significant thing to be noted is, Benegal consciously invalidates the earlier propositions and false assumptions that mainstream films and popular films are the real allegories of the 'Nation.' Being a conscious predecessor of Ray, he helped Indian cinema to reconstruct the real national image of Indian cinema based on the bedrock of solidarity and fidelity with the art form. It seems that he juxtaposes cinema and the audience as a symbiotic frame of moral and social scrutiny. The films constantly draw upon marginal voices. They talk about the horrendous sites of human exploitations in terms of gender bias, fetish and libidinous longing of the Upper- caste and feudal people. Another point to be noted is that his films do not merely foreground dissent or protest against the feudal class domination but they focus on the psychic and physical traumas of the suffered and succumbed ones. Sangeeta Datta measures, "Benegal's films

offer an alternative history of India as well as an example of film making practice from the margins. This is a history that challenges assumptions about national progress and provokes considerations of the consequences of this development... These films may be read as a cinematic rendition of the story of a nation in continuous transition.” (Datta : 2002 :01) He initiated his film making with the concerns of the Peasant Movements of the 1970s exposing the evils of feudal lords against the poverty-stricken peasants and low-caste farmers. They serve as broader spasm of a Benegal film. Crucially, the Benegal films explicitly demonstrate intersections of class and gender evoking the urge for dissent among the marginalized. They serve the purpose of national cinema as stated by Sumita Charavarty, “A popular national cinema is a social investment, not just in patterning of image and sound but in complex bargain over technology, national autonomy, and identity. A more productive concept to orient the study of the everyday experience of mass culture...” (Chakravarty : 1993: 308-309) What really signifies the new wave Benegal cinema is a an absolute set of enlightened- humanitarian values, the depiction of the plight of the poor and oppressed, a faith in the paradigm shift in the attitude of the oppressors. His is a cinema meant for social change and transformation. It debunks the world of fantasy propagated by mainstream or popular cinema of India. While selecting to narrate the untold accounts of the marginalized, Benegal faithfully embodies the postcolonial hybridity and subaltern subject in his films. His films like *Ankur* (The Seedling, 1973), *Nishant* ( Night's End, 1975 ), *Manthan* (The Churning ,1976) and *Bhoomika* ( The Role, 1976) are appreciated and honored for their active engagement, debunking the false stereotypes of class and caste based discriminations and above all , in creating a deep verve and serious discourses. He takes his audience into the inner psyche of his characters who are deliberately pushed to the margins of the nation state. Datta aptly puts it, “It is almost as if the filmmaker reveals the underbelly or hidden text of the nation in his oeuvre.” (ibid, 26) He uses film as an effective medium of the promotion of national culture. His films are often considered as the cinematic trope plausible for the articulation of a pedagogical and national experience. But initially they lagged behind in disseminating the notions across the world. Now with the advent of globalization the films have been discussed in the film studies department across the premier universities of the world. It should be noted that during the nationalist project and after Independence, the films made were conforming to the standards meant for communicating the nuances of nationalist ideals and socio-cultural tradition. This trajectory was embodied through melodramatic plots circumventing feudal family sagas, farfetched communal values and archetypal and stereotyped characters and their roles based on popular myths. But with the arrival of filmmakers like Benegal Cinema became a site for the nation's rediscovery by offering an occasion for India to differentiate herself from her chaotic past and westernised mindset, becoming more modern but without being any less Indian. Nationalist ideology mobilised in cinema sought to create the experience of solidarity by publicly demonstrating 'Indianness'. Benegal seems to have succeeded in creating his own cinematic world with potential craft and powerful semiotic projections of visual medium. He remained faithful to depiction of contemporary social conditions. His films are globally acclaimed for their epistemological and existential renderings of human world. They honoured for the deep focus on the social milieu and grand social discourses like feminism and gender discriminations. The socio-political conflicts articulated in his films have been evolved out of his iconic and iconoclastic craft, deeply implicated social activism. His cinematic forays are meant for social consciousness and scrutiny. The films demand scrutiny of the ubiquitous patterns of evil that lay in the labyrinth of exploitation of the agrarian communities. This social reality compels him to become activist and radical filmmaker set out to debunk the fetish of established cinematic tradition.

Based on the early feudal film *Ankur* the paper seeks to reflect upon the sites of ubiquitous forms of social evil and the horrendous exploitations of socially disadvantaged people by the feudal -lords and upper- castes. It also makes an endeavor to critique the motives in postmodern context. It focuses on the

fact about how Benegal's conflation of cinematic beliefs that address social issues that generated unprecedented critical reflection and debate over the recent years. The paper deals with the critical engagement of the Shyam Benegal Films with the themes and grand discourses like Gender, Class, Caste; its remapping of the 'nation' and its people at the vantage point of national progression. His films harbinger an egalitarian vision of homogenized Indian society based on fidelity and solidarity.

*Ankur* is quintessentially an agrarian film that won global acclaim. The narrative with Lakshmi is at the centre pose her as a victim of poverty, male gaze and marginality. She becomes victim of physical and sexual abuse. It is as if in her microcosmic web world dominated by feudal oppressions and patriarchy, her fate is pinned up.

The film begins with the band of villagers approaching village shrine. Among the crowd Lakshmi and her husband Kishtaya perform a ritual for want of child. Next moment the film shifts to the urban strand, where Surya, the young son of the feudal lord is focused, he has just completed his matriculation and aspires for the degree course. But his father strongly refutes the notion, he disapproves saying he would be better choice for the ancestral land. He forces him to marry a girl of underage and sends him on his farm to supervise the land. Unwillingly he starts his work and encounters with Lakshmi and her mute and deaf husband. In the manor, Lakshmi does all menial and petty kinds work. She lives in a small thatched hut across the fields. She is not happy with her husband who is too meek and passive. But still she respects him and defends him when he is in trouble. He is drunkard and jobless. Surya plays havoc on the farm land by cutting water supply to his own half brother and warned the peasants against stealing and fetching water from his water tank. He asks Lakshmi to prepare food for him saying that he is progressive and does not believe in caste discrimination. Lakshmi is surprised because she is a low caste woman. One day Kishtaya is caught stealing palm wine. But Surya inflicts severe punishment. Kisthaya's head was shaven as a mark of defacing the body and he was forced to sit on a mule and paraded through the lanes of the village. It is a common practice of punishment in most of the part of Indian states meant to dishonor or disgrace the poor people and carried out till today as the legacy of the past. The stigmatizing act resulted in the sudden disappearance of Kishtiya from the village. After this, Surya establishes his dominance over the peasants. Now he gets drifted towards Lakshmi. He asks her to live with him in the house. He develops with her an intent illicit ties with her. They sleep together and becomes his mistress. Momentarily she worried about the local gossips, her future existence if Saru, Surya's legitimate wife arrives on the farm. But Surya assures her for some good.

Finally, Surya's wife arrives. She has preconceived notions about her husband's adulterous behavior and relationship with the maidservant. She devises a fine strategy to push Lakshmi out and starts ignoring her. She succeeds in her mission and pushes her out on the grounds of her being a low caste woman. Now the pace Lakshmi's deprivation begins. Lakshmi becomes aware about her pregnancy. Upon this Surya is haunted by the very thought of public disgrace and deleterious status in the society. He meets her and suggests her to abort the child, but Lakshmi strongly rejects it. She silently interrogates by saying, "Must I only feel shame and not you?" She continues with this impasse, but her life becomes very cumbersome under advanced stage pregnancy and joblessness. One day hungers drag her towards Surya's house. Saru becomes sympathetic and assures a plateful of meals and asks her to wait for a while. But Lakshmi is caught stealing grain from the store house. Surya and his wife abuse her and push her out of the house. Now Lakshmi becomes total victim of hunger, gender discrimination, double jeopardy and destitution. She returns her hut and broods heavily over her doomed stature and hapless condition. But the morning brings her glory back, when she wakes up, she finds her husband sleeping near. He is back with some rolled notes of money that he offers to her with dignity. She is moved but burst into tears. He is happy to see her pregnant and accepts her with deep sympathies. Now he emerges as a totally changed and reformed human being. He breathes into her life some kind of solace and happiness.

But the film takes a 'twist in-turn' mode in the end. Kishtaya decides to meet Surya for thanksgiving, request for job and mercy. He takes his stick on his shoulder and begins to approach in fast pace, he crosses the paddy fields. But Surya misunderstands the body movements of Kishtaya assuming that as if he is coming to kill him and defend Lakshmi. In a frenzy moment Surya starts whipping Kishtaya inhumanly. The merciless whipping attracts the small crowd. But nobody dares to avoid the situation. Lakshmi sees the site of horrendous beating and rushes to save her husband. She abuses the master with torrents of words, she vehemently expresses her anger, "We are not your slaves. We do not need your job." She curses him that he can never be happy with the sight of the poor peasant on his soul. Surya runs into his house and closes the door. He weeps behind the doors. Lakshmi takes her almost half dead husband to the hut supporting his shoulders. The film ends with a scene of young boy pelting stone at the manor and runs away. The screen turns red. This seems to be the initiation of the right moment of peasant's revolt.

The film modestly transforms the pan-Indian national ethos into an apologue of disparaging marginality of the peasants and women. Benegal has pinpointed instances of violence, hatred and human subjugation by feudal lords. The film infringes the melodrama and embraces the truth about human deprecation and denigration. It is a poignant account of Lakshmi's constant fight against the power structure. It is a mosaic of human evil and brutality of the so called guardians of society. There is a depiction of ambivalent relationship between the diverse Indian classes with violence, drunkenness, sexism on the parts of the landlords in the early films with their diabolical and atrocious attributions.

The film is a candid account of Lakshmi's quest for identity. Benegal demonstrates how caste and feudal domination converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against peasants and women. About its cinematic motif, Benegal in his interview with William Heid remarked, "Woman as commodity, woman as serf, woman at the mercy of man. All these concepts are fairly traditions to Indian society, but also occur in all societies in the world". (BERG 2006:64) he further maintains "She is a victim of so many factors because She's dependent, she is a serf of the land so she has very few choices when it comes to a personal relationship with her husband, she does have control. It is a feudal situation in which she lives on the landlord's land and remains entirely at his mercy." (ibid: 62) Therefore, the film aims to address such problematic issues of the peasant movements that defy the identity of the nation. The film entails the portrayal of tormented and distressed people who always live at the mercy of the rich and powerful lots. Disillusioned feudal mainstream history of the nation, Benegal endeavors to expose the injustice and exploitation meted out to the marginalized people. Parallel cinema on the other hand follows quite a different trajectory. Rather than disseminating a unified picture of utopian Indian culture, parallel film sought to generate some kind of insight into Indian life by capturing the experiences and contradictions of a society in transition by focusing on small segments of Indian reality but explore their complex layers of meaning (Datta 2002, Valicha 1988).

In short, the film *Ankur* is pervaded by inevitable violence, an abject deprecation, failure of Lakshmi's rebellion and diabolic exploitation of woman by the meek and shrewd son of the landlord. The film can be contextualized the present scenario. Nothing has been changed over the years, neither the landlords of power and land nor their ways of atrocities and subjugation. It seems that, through this film, Benegal shows that these ubiquitous evil sites have transformed their genesis into the oppressive power structures, circumventing the lives of the poor peasants and helpless women of India

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