

# Shyam Benegal: Trailblazing Filmmaker Still Going Strong

By ASHFAQUE SWAPAN  
Special to India-West

**B**ERKELEY, Calif. — In the final scene of Shyam Benegal's debut feature film "Ankur," injustice appears to triumph. The feudal chieftain's son drowns his guilt by publicly beating up the deaf-mute husband of a poor woman.

Then a young kid throws a stone that breaks a window — a powerful symbolic warning that tomorrow will be different.

This is probably a symbol for what Benegal himself did for Hindi cinema. His "Ankur" (1973) broke new ground, bringing in a fresh dose of realism into what was — and essentially still remains — a stylized cinema where fantasy still tends to rule the roost.

Recently Benegal was invited by the Pacific Film Archive at the University of California at Berkeley as it screened three of his films, "Ankur," "Bhumika" and "Zubeida." UC Berkeley's Center for South Asia Studies helped in organizing his visit, which was



Filmmaker Shyam Benegal at Caffe Strada in Berkeley, Calif., during a chat with India-West. (Ashfaque Swapan photo)

followed by a visit to UC Santa Cruz.

"We were very excited that Teluride Film Festival had the great

sense to bring Shyam Benegal to this year's festival for a three-film tribute," Steve Seid, PFA video curator, told India-West. "It paid

off wonderfully for us at PFA. Not only were we able to screen his films to large, energized audiences, but Mr. Benegal's generosity and warmth with the audience was something to behold. Like his groundbreaking films, Benegal is truly engaged with the world around him, adding another dimension of import to his provocative body of work."

As the 73-year-old filmmaker sat down for an hour-long chat with India-West, he didn't look anything like the iconoclast he has been — soft spoken, gentle and disarmingly down-to-earth, he was generous and gracious.

Over the years, he has accumulated a formidable array of awards — numerous National Awards, two Filmfare Awards, as well as two of the most prestigious international film awards — the Palm d'Or at Cannes for "Nishant" and the Golden Bear at Berlin for "Ankur."

A previous winner of the Padmashri and Padmabhushan, he has recently won India's top award for cinema, the Dadasaheb Phalke award.

"It is definitely an incredible honor, there can't be a higher recognition," he said. Yet it was not an unmitigated blessing, he said. "I have a kind of mixed feeling about that," Benegal told India-West. "I feel wonderful that the state considers me to be good enough to be part of that pantheon ... on the other hand, I feel that normally this kind of an award is given to people after they have finished their careers and I am still an active filmmaker."

Benegal has come a long, long way since a childhood love affair with films that evolved into a desire to actually make them. He grew up in Hyderabad, and it was the films of American directors like John Ford and Billy Wilder that he grew to like. The 14-month post-independence siege of Hyderabad when the Nizam refused to join the Indian union provided a fortuitous opportunity.

"In those 14 months, English language cinemas had no films to show," Benegal said. "Nothing was coming in. So they would go into their vaults and bring out all these

(Cont. on page C4)

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(Cont. from page C2)

old chestnuts. That's how I got to see all of those films and I fell in love with (the) Warner Brothers films of the '30s."

In college, he was part of Culture Group, which dabbled in the arts and ran a film society. As a long-distance engineer representing the state, he took a trip to Kolkata for a swimming competition. That's where he got an unexpected job of film appreciation.

Based on the suggestion of a Kolkata-based uncle, Benegal saw Satyajit Ray's just-released classic "Pather Panchali."

"It was like an explosion between my ears. I was absolutely struck dumb, (I thought) My God, I've never seen a film like this," Benegal reminisced. "The only thing that registered to me was the Indian neo-realists ... Vittorio de Sica, early Fellini."

"I was in Calcutta over the next week and in those seven days, apart from swimming, I did nothing else but my spend my time in the cinema watching his film over and over again. I saw it 12 times."

Later, he developed a warm relationship with Ray, to whom he looked up as a mentor.

Benegal was involved in theater in college. "Two things that I practiced in the theater, one was to direct — I directed plays in college," he said.

"The other thing that I learned to do was to do stage makeup, particularly prosthetic makeup. To make people look awful and ugly," he added with a laugh.

When he moved to Mumbai in 1958, he had an offer to join a film unit as an assistant, but he wasn't too keen. "I didn't want to join the film industry like that. And some-

how I didn't find the atmosphere congenial also," he said. "So I decided that I was going to make my own way."

"So I did the next best thing. It was to join an advertising agency."

Soon he joined Lintas, a big advertising agency, and as the agency knew about his interest in films, it asked him to make advertising films.

"I went into it with great enthusiasm and made on an average a film every two days," he recalled to India-West. Benegal said it was a valuable learning experience. "It's two things," he said. "You learn discipline. You learn to apply film vocabulary with much greater precision ... apart from learning the mechanics of filmmaking—directing, writing, camera work, sound, editing, the works."



At a reception hosted in his honor by UC Berkeley's Center for South Asia Studies, filmmaker Shyam Benegal (2nd from l) is seen with (l-r) economist Prof. Prakash Srinivasan, CGSS chair Anika Ray, classical music enthusiast Prabha Gupta and political science Prof. Pradyumn Chhabra (seen partially). (Ashfaque Swapan photo)



Shabana Azmi and Anand Nag in "Ankur," Shyam Benegal's debut feature film. The film, Benegal's debut feature film in Hindi, was one of three films screened at the Pacific Film Archive.

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