Vernacular Modernities and Fitful Globalities in Shyam Benegal's Cinematic Provinces

by Meheli Sen

Indian filmposter, utv

Summary:

As India becomes increasingly imbricated in the global economy, a new genre of Hindi cinema interrogates the liminal, "in-between" spaces between villages and cities. The author analyzes Shyam Benegal's recent films, *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008) and *Well Done Abba!* (2009) in order to unravel the unstable, unpredictable, and often outlandish processes of vernacular modernization presented in these comic satires.

Author:

Meheli Sen is Assistant Professor in the Cinema Studies Program at Rutgers University. Her research area is popular Hindi cinema. She is interested in how the filmic registers of genre, gender and sexuality negotiate specific moments in India's troubled encounters with modernity and more recently, globalization. Sen's work has been published in several Journals *Journal of the Moving Image*, *South Asian Review* and in the anthology *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora*. She is currently co-editing an anthology with Anustup Basu titled *Figurations in Indian Film*.

Keywords:

India, Benegal, politics, modernity

Quotation:

Sen, Meheli (2011)"Vernacular Modernities and Fitful Globalities in Shyam Benegal's Cinematic Provinces", in: *manycinemas* 1, 8-22

In the twentieth century Indians - for that matter, all South Asians - have been obsessed with the mythic journey between the village and the city and have used it to organize important aspects of their public consciousness. The journey is mainly from the village to the city, though it sometimes ends with a tragic attempt to return from the city to the village. South Asians have known this journey for centuries.

Ashis Nandy[1]

The movement from tradition to modernity makes for very exciting times. As a filmmaker, it's extraordinary because every moment there's a new story to tell. Apart from the old stories, there are constant new stories, new narratives to be completed.

Shyam Benegal[2]

In a key sequence in Rahul Rawail's 1987 hit *Dacait*, the hero Arjun Singh (Sunny Deol) comes to speak to the *thakur* (chief) of Kishangadh village. Bhanwar Singh (Raza Murad), the feudal villain, has been trying to forcefully confiscate his family's land, and Arjun who has just returned from the city, attempts to arrive at a compromise. The attempted conciliation, however, fails as Singh continues his saber-rattling diatribe against Arjun and his family. Stung into anger, Arjun retorts that he is aware of the law of the land, and that it applies to everyone equally. Before departing, he also informs Singh that the days of feudal intimidation and oppression are over, and that he (Singh) should change with the times. Bhanwar Singh, astounded at Arjun's audacity, recognizes the "laws of the city" speaking in this moment of confrontation; Arjun, he surmises, must be taught to respect the "laws of the village." What follows this exchange are a series of barbaric attacks on Arjun's family, which destroy his confidence in the efficacy of law-enforcement in the village.

What *Dacait* alerts us to in this melodramatic instance is a staple dialectic in Hindi cinema's idiom: primordial village justice pitted against the impersonal, urban discourses of the judicial apparatus. Hindi cinema has traditionally understood villages and cities as reified categories, oppositional signifiers that require minimal elucidation for its audiences. Harnessed to each term are a plethora of discourses which can be neatly arranged on each side of the divide. So, for example, if the village is posited as a site of poverty, illiteracy, and obsolete traditionalism, the urban - almost always Bombay - stands in for wealth, sophistication, and an all pervasive modern-

ity. The schism between the "rural" and the "urban", in other words, is not simply a matter of spatial segregation, weighty ideological bipolarities are aligned to each term, which until recently have been enclosed categories, hermetically sealed off from each other in crucial ways. This reliance on largely incommensurable binaries is, of course, enabled by Hindi popular cinema's allegiance to the melodramatic mode. In *An Ambiguous Journey to the City*, Ashis Nandy is primarily concerned with charting the travels, exchange and traffic - real and symbolic, empirical and philosophical - *between* villages and cities. However, even here, he recognizes somewhat unyielding nature of the bipolarities that attend to the urban-rural dyad:

> *The village [...] is no longer a village itself; it is a counterpoint to the city [...]. The village symbolizes control over self; the city reeks of self-indulgence and the absence of self restraint. Beyond the temptations and glitter of the city lies the utopia of an idyllic, integrated, defragmented self, not tyrannized by the demands of atomized individualism.*
>
> *(Nandy 2001:13)*

Thus, with very few exceptions,[3] the village-city/urban-rural dyad has endured in the South Asian social imaginary and in what has come to be called the "all India film". Endured, that is, until very recently when Bombay cinema has itself undergone colossal transformations. Following the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 90s and Bollywood being granted "industry" status in 2001, production, distribution, and crucially, exhibition practices, have undergone enormous changes. For the purposes of the current discussion, the rise of the multiplex is key. Multiplexes, in the Indian context, refer to multiple screen theatres that are often nestled within posh, up-market shopping malls that have proliferated in urban areas since 1997.[4] While multiplexes alert us to the protean consequences of globalization and the new economy - including, the changing parameters of the film industry, a new affective geography of consumerism, and a rapidly growing middle-class - it has also generated spaces for the exhibition of a vertiginous range of filmic products. The embedding of the multiplex theater within a variegated space of consumption, its limited seating capacity, and the deliberate targeting of differentiated audiences, has enabled the multiplex phenomenon to be more inclusive of a wider array of cinema:

> *[I]n terms of its exhibit, i.e. the films on its screens, it makes for a space that mirrors a complex cinematic multiplicity. The increasingly curious mix of parallel, regional and art cinema along with the mainstream, both domestic and foreign, is what distinguishes most multiplexes in India, such that the Indian multiplex has come to position itself, not so much by identifying with particular kinds of films, as by being a theatre for accessing the 'latest' from a wide spread of cinematic fare – mainstream or fringe[...].*
>
> (Sharma 2003)

Films previously considered too risky or "off-beat" by the mainstream industry can now secure corporate finance and commercial distribution in multiplexes. Bollywood cinema's recent experimentations with both form and content are enabled by these changes. It is in this new socio-economic dispensation that the dualities that proliferated in the traditional Hindi film are coming to be dismantled. Aided by the multiplex boom, a new genre of Hindi popular cinema now interrogates the liminal spaces *between* villages and cities - spatial and discursive domains that are critically poised to enter into the spectacular metropolitan dispensation, but have not done so quite yet. Several recent successful Hindi films are not only set in these 'border' zones but also engage with the transformational processes of modernity and globalization that are rapidly changing the social and fabric of these areas. This paper will discuss two recent films made by Shyam Benagal, *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (hereafter *Sajjanpur*, 2008) and *Well Done Abba!* (hereafter *Abba*, 2009), in order to unravel the unpredictable, unstable, and often, outlandish process of vernacular modernization as they are rendered cinematically. Set in semi-rural areas, both of these texts negotiate complicated terrains spatially as well as in ideological terms.

That large transformative processes - modernity, capitalism, globalization, etc. - traverse distinct spatial and temporal constellations in a highly uneven manner has now become an axiomatic formulation in humanities and social science research. Perhaps, it is fitting that Benegal would choose to explore these incomplete, contested processes in the "in-between-ness" of provincial India. What makes Benegal's exploration of the semi rural province especially effective is his attention to detail; spatially, both Sajjanpur and Chikatpalli are rendered concrete through a density of visual and aural signs that fulfill demands of verisimilitude, despite being largely shot

on studio sets.[5] From the bustling village square in the former, to the grimy, graffiti-covered walls in the latter, each location is imbued with a plethora of details that speak to the filmmaker's commitment to a certain kind of realism. Additionally, while the villages themselves are fictive, Benegal gives us clear regional markers - Sajjanpur is located in the state of Madhya Pradesh while Chikatpalli is close to the southern city of Hyderabad; dialects, patterns and inflection of speech, clothing and demeanor also signpost regional identities of characters in each film.

However, for the purpose of the current discussion, it is crucial to underscore the sense of rapid mutability and flux that these locations embody. While easily recognizable as belonging to specific parts of India, Sajjanpur and Chikatpalli are in the grip of inexorable transformations brought on by industrialization, globalization - in some sense, the march of history itself. But, as noted above, even time and history do not march everywhere at the same pace or in the same manner. In Benegal's sleepy provinces too, we can note the uneven, almost spasmodic processes of social, political and economic transformation. The films are also comic satires - a generic modality that Benegal has rarely explored in his previous films. This moment, then, also enables a different point of entry into the filmmaker's extensive oeuvre.

Sajjanpur and its Citizens

The plot of *Sajjanpur* is fairly complex, involving multiple and overlapping lines of action. However, we can isolate two primary narrative threads for the purpose of the current discussion: one involves the story of the village and its Dickensian range of characters. This line combines village politics with village romances, moments of collective defiance with instances of individual cowardice, both public and the private spheres of the microcosm of the village. The other line of action involves Mahadev (Shreyas Talpade) the protagonist, and his desire to regain his childhood sweetheart Kamla's (Amrita Rao) affections, despite her married status. *Sajjanpur's* multiple narrative strands combine the intensely private with the avowedly public via the trope of the letter, missives that crisscross within the village and also connect it to the world outside. Mahadev, as the protagonist, finds himself embroiled in every line of action as the village's resident letter-writer.

Welcome to Sajjanpur (source: DVD UTV motion pictures)

Sajjanpur begins with the hero Mahadev Kuswaha introducing himself and his hometown to the audience of the film. He is both character and narrator, mimicking the *sutradhar*[6] of Sanskrit theater, a role that resonates with his desire to become a professional storyteller - a novelist. Interestingly, even before the narrative is underway, he describes Sajjanpur as a failure of the Nehruvian project: while the village - renamed from Durjanpur (the land of bad people) to Sajjanpur (a land of good people) by Nehru himself - is considered "developed" by official standards, poverty, corruption and illiteracy remain rampant. While people have access to the latest technologies - email, long-distance telecommunications etc. - many are unable to even sign their own names. Thus, at the very beginning of the film, the postcolonial developmental imperative is unambiguously cast as an incomplete process - a template for social and economic reform that remains profoundly unfinished.

It is this sense of a time warp, of multiple histories and forms of social belonging, jostling cheek by jowl against each other, that gives *Sajjanpur* its strength as a critique of the postcolonial developmental project. Anachronisms abound, and coalesce into believable absurdities and comic sketches in the film. For instance, early on, Gayaram (Joginder Singh), the village grocer and a strident voice of progress, resoundingly criticizes Mahadev's romance with his old fashioned ink-pen. This exchange is followed by a group of snake charmers who come to seek Mahadev's help in locating a lost father. The snake charmers are not central to the plot in any immediate sense, yet form another comic thread in the outlandish tapestry of Sajjanpur. They are also vivid reminders of lives and modes of livelihood that

have come to be tragically marginalized in modern India.[7] Heightening the sense of anachronism, but perfectly in sync with the absurd tone of the film, the snake charmers compensate Mahadev not with money, but with a virility-enhancing tonic, harkening back to yet another non-modern form of commerce - the barter economy. Multiple layers of temporality and multiple modes of being and belonging confront each other with startling directness in this sequence.

The most compelling trope that traverses spaces and time is, of course, the letter. The letters that Mahadev writes incorporate a wide array of information, desires and goals. These letters inaugurate and develop each narrative thread to their logical conclusion. In a sense, the letters function as composite sketches of characters and their licit and illicit desires, including Mahadev's own covert desire for Kamala. Here we must note the multiple ironies that inhere to the letter as an artifact. First, despite the massive postal system established under the colonial government, the format of the letter has become increasingly quaint in post-liberalization India, engulfed in the frenetic pace of new communicational technologies; Mahadev, in one scene, types a text letter on a mobile phone, and the immediacy with which a reply arrives astonishes him considerably. In other words, the letter as a trope speaks to the delay inherent in "snail mail", and the sedate, ambling pace of life that defines Sajjanpur as a location; its citizens' patient reliance on the hand-written letter and the state-run postal system places the village its residents somewhat outside the charmed - if breathlessly chaotic - circle of globalization and late modernity. Second, the community-oriented nature of Mahadev's profession complicates the interface between the private and the public, throwing subjectivities nurtured within a alternative or vernacularized grid of modernity into sharp relief; most of the letters that Mahadev writes are private missives, ostensibly enunciated by individual subjects, and yet his mediation as the scribe enables him to color each epistle with his own subjective opinions, ideals and desires. In a certain sense, then, modern, *private* communication between addressor and addressee is impossible in Sajjanpur. It is in this interventionist mode that Mahadev pens angry letters to Bansi (Kunal Kapur), Kamala's husband, who is away in the city of Bombay. His hope is to create a rift in the couple that will make Kamala love him instead.

While Mahadev's creative writing and rhetorical skills usually produce comic effect - such as the baroque love letter he writes from Ramkumar (Ravi Kishan) to Shobharani (Rajeshwari Sachdev), the melancholic widow - almost all of the letters also elaborate narratives of exclusion, oppression and marginality. The ersatz but vitriolic missives from Kamala to Bansi exposes the latter's acute haplessness as a migrant worker in Bombay; the horrific realization that Bansi will sell his bodily organs to earn money in the city finally brings about Mahadev's change of heart. He mortgages his land in order to help Bansi and Kamala set up their new home in the city. While this particular narrative thread - the love triangle between Kamala, Bansi and Mahadev - comes to a happy conclusion, the tragedy of thousands of migrant workers who pour into the city of Bombay everyday finds allegorical resonance here. And, I would argue that it is the film's ability to gesture towards generality, its evocation of similar domains elsewhere, that makes it an effective critique of modernity, development and globalization.

Sajjanpur is also extraordinary in its invocation of processes of democracy, the idea of a democratic polity and citizenship, as well as the very limited purchase of these discourses in many parts of India. The democratic process - in this case, free and fair elections for the office of *sarpanch* or village head - comes to be a protracted conflict between the aggressive and corrupt Ramsingh (Yashpal Sharma) and the *hijra* (intersex) candidate, Munnibai Mukhanni (Ravi Jhankal). While many of Sajjanpur's citizens recognize that voting for the criminal Ramsingh's wife Jamnabai (Preeti Nigam) would be "like murdering democracy," most of them are too afraid of Ramsingh to actually openly defy him. Ramsingh's unsuitability is underscored repeatedly in the film: he is not only corrupt and a criminal with murder charges having been brought against him, but he is also proudly illiterate, openly flouting both legal and democratic apparatuses. By contrast Munnibai is extraordinarily courageous as a character and the voice of democratic freedoms in Sajjanpur.[8] Thus, the voice of rational, modern democratic freedoms is pitted, fairly melodramatically, against irrational power, aggression and injustice. This Manichean struggle is also rendered through the extraordinary song sequence "abto prajatantra hai" ("Now It's Time for Democracy"), as the villagers joyously celebrate the power of plebiscite. While countless other Hindi films enact this basic conflict between injustice

and righteousness, *Sajjanpur* stages the melodramatic conflict witin the electoral arena where good triumphs over evil, and Munnibai defeats Jamnabai by a landslide majority. *Sajjanpur* is a profoundly populist film and the optimistic outcome of the election is testament to its endorsement of democracy. However, since *Sajjanpur* is also a critique of a certain kind of progress, we witness Munnibai brutally murdered by Ramsingh following her victory;[9] with the destruction of the popularly elected leader, despotic power, presumably, regains its stranglehold on the community.

Sajjanpur is simultaneously a critique of modernity and the developmental imperative as well as a celebration of subjectivities that are nurtured within the developmental mode, however compromised. If Munnibai's deep faith in democracy and eventual victory is one aspect of this idealism, myriad other characters also embody different emancipatory discourses. One of the most comic characters in the film is that of Ramsakhi Pannawali (Ila Arun) a weepy, hapless woman who is incessantly plagued by the apparently impossibility of finding a suitable groom for her ill-starred daughter, Bindya (Divya Dutta). Bindya - according to Ramsakhi - has been born under an inauspicious star, a blighted condition that can be repaired only if she is married off to a dog that is Saturday-born. A vociferously articulate Bindya - who has a job, a scooter as well as a decidedly independent spirit - chafes against her mother's superstitious ways proclaiming several times, "is my life not as important as anything else?" She is both emphatically voiced, as well as acutely aware of her marginal status as a rural woman existing in a historical moment in the grip of a maelstrom of transformation. Finally, the defiant Bindya finds a suitable mate in Mahadev, but not before he is able to prove his worthiness as a partner; the two seem happily married at the end of the film. Bindya is a minor character in the crowded narrative of *Sajjanpur*; her story however, much like the snake charmer's, finds a larger resonance in caste and gender hierarchies that continue to oppress women in especially rural areas of India. The film seems to remind us that while Bindya's fictional woes find a happy resolution, there are hundreds of others like her who will not possess the strength to fight against overwhelming odds.

Sajjanpur ends on a hopeful note with the publication of Mahadev's first novel, eponymously titled *Welcome to Sajjanpur*. He gives the publisher/audience an update on the cast of characters of his novel and the film. At this juncture, we learn that the burgeoning love story between Ramkumar and Shobharani did not have a happy ending: people of their caste murdered them both for having transgressed the code of honor, in this case Shobharani's status as a widow. However, we also learn that Kamala and Bansi are thriving and that Munnibai is a successful political representative of the people. The film's ending is not a neat resolution, but a reiteration of the messy and complex modalities of private and public belonging that animate large segments of lives in rural and semi-urban South Asia.

Dismantling the "Well-fare" State in *Abba*

Like *Sajjanpur*, *Well Done Abba!* is a satire on national progress and development. But here, it is the gargantuan apparatus of the welfare state that is the object of sustained lampooning. While many of the postcolonial welfare imperatives have come to be somewhat redundant in post-liberalization India, the state continues to deploy these in fits and starts. It is this dissonance between the nation's avowedly global ambitions and the undertow of half-heartedly articulated welfare rhetoric in the local realm that the film compellingly addresses. And, in *Abba* too, we can discern two intertwined but distinct lines of action. The first causal chain involves Armaan Ali's (Boman Irani) plan to find a suitable groom for his young daughter Muskaan (Minissha Lamba) in Chikatpalli. The other line of action gets underway when Armaan decides to take advantage of a government-run welfare scheme to get a well dug on his property; once operational, this well would go a long way in easing the water shortage plaguing Chikatpalli. Once again,

Muskaan and Armaan in Well done Abba! (source DVD Reliance Big Pictures)

the private and the public intersect in startling ways, as Muskaan's beau Arif Ali (Sammir Dattani) becomes a key ally in Armaan's struggle for justice against an irredeemably corrupt local government.

Almost as soon as Armaan embarks on his plan to obtain the necessary paperwork for the well, he discovers the enormity of the task at hand. Dozens of state officials at every level of government - from petty clerks to the democratically elected minister - thrive within an entrenched system of corruption and kickbacks. Even before work can begin on his well, Armaan loses the entire sum of money that the government has allotted for him in bribing local officials. "Scheming," and stealing, in fact, come to be central tropes in *Abba*, around which crystallize the desires and aspirations of the principal characters. Armaan himself resorts to chicanery about his economic situation, when he opts to go "permanently" below the poverty line - a status that enables him to avail of the state's welfare opportunities. Although comical in this absurd context, the very mention of the poverty line reminds us of the millions in South Asia who have come to be reduced to a mere statistical formation. And finally, supported by Muskaan and other hapless citizens like him, Armaan is able to recover his "stolen" well; in effect, the government and all its cogs surrender to popular pressure and are forced to have the well constructed. *Abba* evokes the unwieldy and corrupt hierarchies of local governments deftly, and posits the welfare state as a massive dinosaur that is riddled with incompetence, greed and petty power-mongering; however, and in tandem with Benegal's other films, the democratic state - however compromised - cannot be abandoned, nor its outreach curtailed.[10] Instead, a younger generation of Indians is exhorted to infuse the moribund channels of government with new blood and enthusiasm.

Abba invokes the new post-liberalization economy *specifically* as an economy of desire. The forces unleashed by globalization have not simply widened the schisms between the "haves" and the "have nots" - the groups are now engaged in an outlandish theater of self-indugent consumption versus abject deprivation. In other words, the visceral, affective discourses of globality have rendered the divide between those who consume and those who cannot, spectacular. Chikatpalli is incompletely, unevenly, even fitfully, integrated in the global economy - it is only a village in many ways - yet, the

markers of a new kind of desire are everywhere. Thus, the families of Muskaan's potential grooms do not simply ask for dowry; they demand specific consumer goods such as plasma televisions and refrigerators that have three doors. Everyone in the film inhabits this rapidly changing universe of desire: from Vikas Jha (Ravi Kishan) the government Sub-engineer who wants his new bride to "get" bigger breasts, so that he can "honeymoon" in five star hotels with swimming pools, to Sakina's mother (Preeti Nigam), who believes that marriage to a Dubai-based sheikh will translate into wealth and happiness for her daughter. Beleaguered inspector Reddy's (Rajit Kapur) wife constantly heckles him for not augmenting his meager government-mandated salary with kickbacks. Everyone in Chikatpalli participates in this libidinal domain where new goods, products, services, and technologies cast an inescapable spell. However, not all aspirations are of the same scale or have similar repercussions. While Armaan's twin Rehmaan and his wife steal chickens and water, the Arab Sheikh first "buys" Sakina with hard cash and then abandons her in Sharjah. While the theft of chickens and water earns the thieving couple nights in prison, the Sheikh goes unpunished for trading in people. Smaller misdemeanors, jostle uneasily alongside the larger dehumanizing effects of globalization and the new economy in *Abba*.

This new domain of desires also creates new subjectivities. As mentioned above, *Abba* is also about Muskaan as a modern, desiring subject. She, like Bindya in *Sajjanpur*, is an intelligent, articulate, educated - while still in high school, but she clearly wants to get her college degree - and independent young woman, with a mind of her own. She does fall in love with Arif, but will not marry him until he promises to agree to her educational aspirations. Muskaan along with Arif - who has also finished high school and has vocational training - are the future of Chikatpalli, those who will reap the benefits of globalization. It is no accident that Armaan finds them indispensable in his fight against the local government; their cognizance of their rights as citizens and general air of confidence make them the ideal future citizens of a transforming India.

Muskaan and Arif's somewhat stealthy romance - Armaan is initially reluctant to endorse the relationship - is also a site where the old and the new collide. While they exchange ardent love poems and couplets in *Urdu* -

tapping into an older idiom of romantic love in Hindi cinema - they do so via text messages over mobile phones. Similarly, the new media is deployed by the wily photographer Reddy (Satish Sharma), who uses his skills in digital manipulation to provide fake photographs to the local citizens. He furnishes an array of photographs of Armaan's phantasmagorial well, artifacts that finally force the local government to fulfill its welfare promise to Armaan by constructing it.

Armaan's final modality of protest - he refuses to drink water unless it is drawn from his own well - also resonates with an older form of political mobilization - the Gandhian *satyagraha*[11]. Following the chaotic, collective protest rallies that remain only partially successful, it is the ethical dimension of this quieter form of protest that galvanizes the government into action. The media - representing the hundreds of television channels that have mushroomed in India following the satellite boom of the 90s - continuously hungry for new programming content, persistently covers Armaan's struggle, thereby bringing it to the city and the seat of government power.

Abba arrives at a happy conclusion, as Armaan finally gets the well he has struggled so hard for. He also accepts Arif as a son-in-law, in spite of the revelation that the latter's origins are largely unknown.[12] With this gesture, Benegal seems to suggest that the futures of provinces like Chikatpalli are bright, peopled as they are by good-hearted, courageous and dignified citizens. The forces of late modernity may temporarily disturb, unsettle and recreate these spaces, but they will come to terms with large transformative processes with fortitude and determination. Benegal rejects sentimentality in his celebration of the plebian folk, but his admiration for their spirit remains evident in *Sajjanpur* as well as *Abba*.

Shyam Benegal's recent cinema dismantles some of Hindi cinema's most enduring binaries, including those of the urban and the rural, tradition and modernity, the global and the local. In doing so, he is able to address the complexities that proliferate in the interface between these reified dichotomies. India's aggressive new economy encloses myriad contradictions, complications, anachronisms, and ironies; in Benegal's cinematic provinces articulate these complexities in a most pointed manner.

References

Datta, Sangeeta (2002) *Shyam Benegal*, London: British Film Institute.
Mazumdar, Ranjani (2007) *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
Nandy, Ashis (2001) *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Prasad, Madhava (2001) *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Rai, Amit (2009) *Untimely Bollywood: Globalization and India's New Media Assemblage*, Durham: Duke University Press.
Sharma, Aparna (2003) "India's Experience with the Multiplex" on *India Seminar,* available at http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/525/525%20aparna%20sharma.htm [Accessed 18 May 2011].
"Subliminal Persuasion: An Interview with Shyam Benegal", in *Metro Magazine* No. 152 (2007), 72-76.

Filmography

Dacait, India, 1987, dir. Rahul Rawail, Hindi.
Welcome to Sajjanpur, India, 2008, dir. Shyam Benagal, Hindi.
Well Done Abba!, India, 2009, dir. Shyam Benagal, Hindi.

Notes

[1] Nandy, Ashis (2001:11) .

[2] Quoted in "Subliminal Persuasion: An Interview with Shyam Benegal", in *Metro Magazine* No. 152 (2007), 72-76.

[3] Nandy, for example, has argued that the urban slum functions as a village community *within* the city: "Perhaps the cultural logic of the Indian city demands the presence of the village […] the slum is left forever trying to reinvoke a remembered village under different guises. Sometimes that is through the selective settlement of people (so that the slum becomes a ghetto of migrants from one particular caste, region or language group) or through the way it mobilizes collective passions to reconfigure its community life in an atomizing, steam-rolling metropolis […]" (2001). Vis-à-vis Hindi commercial cinema, Ranjani Mazumdar has identified the space of the street - especially the foothpath - as the site where urban and rural modes intersect and coexist: "The city itself is marked, even scarred, by the fuzziness of lines between the 'urban' and the 'rural.' In imaginative terms, the village is never absent from everyday life in the city…The street in the city is a site for the flow of both rural and urban imaginations." (2007:4).

[4] Gesturing towards this embedding of cinema within larger spaces of retail and consumption,

Amit Rai calls these theatres "Malltiplex."

[5] Benegal, in fact, is considered to be a high priest of cinematic realism in South Asia, especially because his most famous films were made within the Parallel or New Cinema impetus in the 70s and 80s, which carefully set itself apart from the commercial mainstream film. Sangeeta Datta describes the movement as having had an "uncompromising realistic creed." (2002:36). Benegal's avowedly realistic films would include *Ankur* (1974), *Nishant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), etc. Benegal's films in this period eschewed song and dance sequences, the overt glamour of mainstream films, and were often shot on location in rural areas with little-known actors.

[6] In Sanskrit theater the Sutradhar is the central figure who pulls the strings. He creates and develops the narrative.

[7] The snake charmers inform Mahadev that they now use rubber snakes in lieu of real ones, because many species of the reptile are now considered endangered. The sad irony of an endangered animal being privileged over human life is, of course, not lost on the film's audience, although Mahadev seems unfazed by these dissonances.

[8] When violently threatened by Ramsingh and his thugs - they destroy her home - she requests Mahadev to write a letter to the Collector, seeking state protection against intimidation.

[9] At the very end of the film, when Mahadev reveals that the diegesis is, in fact, his novel and a somewhat fictionalized account, we are relieved to discover that Munnibai is not dead after all, and continues to thrive in her new political career.

[10] The fact that the Government of India was a major support for the New Cinema movement in its heyday is not incidental in the manner in which the state functions in Benegal's films. Sangeeta Datta confirms Benegal's avowedly "statist" stance as well when she writes, "Benegal …is not questioning the nature of the democratic state. He is looking for changes within the system, not the replacement of the entire secular structure." (2002:81). For an analysis of the relationship between New Cinema and the state, see Prasad.

[11] The Gandhian idea of satyagraha involved non-violent forms of political mobilization and protest including civil disobedience.

[12] We learn from Arif's adoptive father Meherbaan Ali (Lalit Joshi) that he had found the orphaned, abandoned child after a horrific spate of riots between Hindus and Muslims. Meherbaan has no way of telling which religious community Arif had been born into.