

Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* and the Nehruvian Woman

Robert CROSS

Keywords: Shyam Benegal, *Ankur*, Jawaharlal Nehru, Shabana Azmi, Indian parallel cinema, gender, caste, untouchability, subaltern, gaze

Abstract

The director Shyam Benegal's debut film *Ankur* (The Seedling, 1973) is a landmark in Indian art cinema. The film's narrative reveals Benegal's life-long embrace of the liberal humanistic ideology of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru's grand project to create a new independent India that would be secular, equal and modern included social reforms aimed at protecting the rights of untouchables and women, technological initiatives aimed at creating a modern infrastructure, and educational and cultural drives intended to nurture the rising generation. The achievements of the Nehru era (1947-64), however, are uneven, and the legacy of Nehru himself disputed. It is this initial promise yet subsequent failure of the 'Nehruvian project' that forms the ideological background to *Ankur*. Benegal shares Nehru's fundamental belief that the best hope for transforming Indian society lay in the hands of women. Thus the protagonist of *Ankur* is the untouchable peasant woman Lakshmi, and the story is the drama of her self-empowerment in the face of feudal patriarchal oppression. My argument here is that *Ankur* is both Benegal's recognition of the failures

of the Nehru era and the expression of his unshaken belief that Nehruvian ideology was nevertheless the best way forward (at the time of the film's release in 1973, at least) for the regeneration of Indian society. The figure of Lakshmi is the epitome, therefore, of what I shall call the 'Nehruvian woman', Benegal's torchbearer for the secular, fairer, more advanced India that Nehru envisaged in 1947.

1. Introduction

The Indian director Shyam Benegal (born 1934) burst into prominence with his debut feature *Ankur* (The Seedling, 1973). This landmark film, which garnered a Golden Bear nomination at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1974 and a National Film Award (Silver Lotus) in India for Second Best Feature Film in the following year, focused international attention on the emergence of an exciting new director and style of film-making. The movie was notable also for launching the distinguished careers of the actress (and subsequent political activist) Shabana Azmi and actor Anant Nag in the two lead roles. In 1975, Azmi, who portrayed the dalit Lakshmi, and Sadhu Meher, who played Lakshmi's deaf-mute husband, won National Film Awards for Best Actress and Best Actor respectively. *Ankur*, along with the two subsequent films in Benegal's early rural trilogy, *Nishant* (Night's End, 1975) and *Manthan* (The Churning, 1976), is seen by film scholars, critics and cinephiles in India and the West, as epitomizing Indian 'parallel cinema', a term I shall clarify here.

The arthouse cinema that arose in India in the mid-1950s goes under various names, principally 'new wave cinema', 'new cinema', 'alternative cinema', and 'parallel cinema'. The first three terms are used interchangeably to refer to filmmaking that rejected the values and practices of the commercial Bombay industry. Bengali director Satyajit Ray is widely considered to have launched the new cinema with his debut film *Pather Panchali* (Song of the Little Road, 1955), which was critically acclaimed at

Cannes in 1956. 'Parallel cinema', which emerged in the late-1960s, differs crucially from new wave cinema in its ambiguous relationship with mainstream cinema. The journalist Arvind Mehta coined the term *samantar* or 'parallel' cinema to describe a distinct type of new cinema that existed in a parallel tradition to popular cinema and drew on the praxis of both commercial and the new cinema (Datta 2002: 24-5). Thus it is characterized by its serious content and naturalism as well as by its use of certain 'audience-pleasing' conventions from Bollywood. Benegal is widely considered as the leading practitioner of parallel cinema. The *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* notes that *Ankur* "helped define a 'middle-of-the-road' cinema which adapted psychological realism and regionalism . . . to the conventions of the mainstream Hindi movie" (Rajadhyaksha/Willemen 2002: 416). Benegal has received his share of criticism for this 'crossing over'. Filmmaker Pradip Krishen, noting the "the aura of radical chic and glamour that surrounded his films," has made the withering comment that Benegal was "the first Parallel Cinemawallah to break through to a popular audience" (Krishen 1991: 34-5). Benegal's apparent readiness to compromise is what separates his praxis from the more radical aesthetic and political approaches of such committed Marxist filmmakers as Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak and Mani Kaul.

I turn now to the genesis, background and plot of *Ankur*. Benegal developed the idea for the narrative from something that happened in his teenage years. He recalls in an interview that

There was this little farmhouse not far from where we lived and it was the story of one of the chaps who was a friend of mine. He was sent off by his father to look after the farm with a certain amount of city education. And so I saw it as a very interesting situation, with the father very feudal, while the boy is more part of the middle class . . .

(Van der Heide 2006: 56)

Originally, Benegal used this situation as the basis of a short story he penned for his college magazine. Later, he rewrote it as a film script, recalling that he could then “see the social dimensions of it much more clearly” (*ibid.*). He had written the script at least fourteen years prior to the film’s release in 1973, but had not succeeded in securing funding until Blaze Films, the largest distributor of advertising films in India, came forward with the necessary financial backing. The film is set in the late-1940s in an unnamed village in an unnamed feudal state. The characters’ use of Dakhani, a regional variant of Hindu-Urdu spoken around Hyderabad, however, anchored the location in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. The timing of the film’s release and the geographical location of its story linked it topically to the communist-led peasant uprisings that started in 1967 in the Naxalbari district of Bengal (hence ‘Naxalite’ rebellions) and spread to Andhra Pradesh.

The film’s narrative begins with a fertility festival at the village temple, where the female protagonist, the untouchable servant-woman, Lakshmi, and her low-caste potter husband, Kishtaya, devoutly pray for a baby. Following this, the film cuts to a nearby city, where we are introduced to the main male character, Surya, the college-going son of a prominent absentee *zamindar* (feudal landowner). He has just passed some exams and now wishes to study further for his B.A. degree. His domineering father, however, rejects this plan and forces his son to do ‘something useful’ instead by going out to the family’s rural property and taking care of the house and land. The father clips his son’s wings further by swiftly arranging his marriage to a young girl, Saru, who will join him at the farmhouse when she reaches puberty. After the wedding, Surya drives out alone to the village, where he vents his frustration at the recent turn of events on the villagers and servants.

Bored and lonely at the farmhouse, Surya becomes increasingly attracted to Lakshmi, the dalit woman employed to take care of menial tasks like cleaning and sweeping around the property. Baffled by her loyalty to her backward, low-caste and physically handicapped husband and annoyed by her spurning of his advances, Surya wastes no time in removing Kishtaya from the scene. When the poor unemployed potter, who has a weakness for alcohol, is caught one day stealing palm wine (toddy) from Surya's trees, the latter punishes him by having his servants shave his head and parade him backwards on a donkey through the village. Humiliated, Kishtaya runs away and abandons his wife. Lakshmi, now entirely dependent on Surya, yields to him out of economic necessity. Surya, his head full of the romantic fantasies of Hindi cinema, tells Lakshmi that he will look after her now. Unconvinced, she asks: "You sir, till when?" Indeed, their brief affair is abruptly terminated soon after by the arrival of Saru, who has heard rumours of this liaison and dismisses Lakshmi from working in the house.

By now Lakshmi is pregnant with Surya's baby. Surya, fully aware of the shame and ruin that the birth of an illegitimate child will bring upon him, desperately tries to persuade Lakshmi to have an abortion, but she refuses, since having a child had been her devout wish at the temple festival. Next, Surya threatens that he will deny all knowledge of the baby. Banished from the farmhouse, alone and helpless in her hut, Lakshmi wakes up one morning to discover that Kishtaya has returned and is lying beside her. He is overjoyed to learn that she is carrying what he believes is his child, and he innocently hands over to her the money he has earned while he has been away. Emboldened by fresh hope and confidence, and aware of the need to provide for his wife and child, Kishtaya goes over to the farmhouse with the intention of asking Surya for work. Surya, anxious at seeing Kishtaya approaching the house with a stick, misunderstands the latter's purpose and beats him with a heavy rope. Witnessing this from the hut, Lakshmi rushes to her husband's rescue, and unleashes a torrent of curses at Surya, who

makes a swift and ignominious retreat to the house. Saru his wife, looks at him with contempt as he cowers terrified behind the bolted door. In the final sequence, a young boy from the village picks up a stone and hurls it through a window of the house. This act of defiance together with the blood-red screen that ends the film suggests the anger and frustration felt by the restive peasants towards the feudal masters who have long exploited and oppressed them.

The social and political ideology of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal 'Panditji' Nehru (1889-1964) had a profound impact upon Benegal, yet this primary influence on the filmmaker has been neglected by scholars.¹ In this essay, I look into Benegal's relationship to Nehru's ideology by examining the various ways in which *Ankur* functions as a cinematic parable of the hopes and failures of post-Independence Indian society and culture. Specifically, I will look at how the film presents the fault lines separating men from women, high-caste landowning Hindus from untouchable villagers, city life from rural life, and Bollywood from non-mainstream cinema during the Nehru era (1947-64) and the undermining of Nehru's achievements in the decade following it. This discussion is divided into three main sections. In the first section, 'The Nehruvian Project and the New Indian Cinema', I survey the ideology and legacy of the Nehru era (1947-64) and I look at Nehru's impact upon the development of new cinema. In the second part, 'Surya the False Prophet', I examine how the failed promise of the Nehru era is personified in the lead male character in *Ankur*, Surya. In the third section, 'Lakshmi the Subaltern', I examine Bengal's concern with showing how any hope for the implementation of Nehru's progressive social agenda lies in the liberation and empowerment of women. Thus I examine the role and behaviour of the female protagonist Lakshmi, and of the actress who portrayed her in *Ankur*, Azmi Shabana.

2. The Nehruvian Project and the New Indian Cinema

With the assassination of his mentor Mohandas K. Gandhi in 1948 and the sudden death of his Congress Party rival Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in 1950, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru assumed full control of India's destiny and development. In his famous speech at the Avadhi Congress in 1955, Nehru called for a "Socialistic pattern of society" and set out his progressive agenda for the creation of a new India that would be egalitarian, secular and technologically more advanced. The atheist technocrat Nehru was "in love with the future" (Misra 2008: 263), and it was a future full of optimism and hope. Nehru's humanist and liberal socialist ideology has played a central role in Benegal's intellectual development and evolution as a filmmaker. He was exposed to Nehru's influence even as a youngster. At the age of fourteen he was profoundly moved by reading two of Nehru's books, *Letters from a Father to a Daughter* (1928) and *Glimpses of World History* (1934). Later, he read *Discovery of India* (1946), the sweeping panorama of Hindustan over five millennia that Nehru composed while imprisoned by the British at Ahmednagar Fort during World War II.² As a result of reading these texts, Nehruvian ideology permeated Benegal's thinking and his early films, particularly, as we shall see, *Ankur*. Nehru was a figure that Benegal grew to admire greatly because, as he told one interviewer, "I think he provided us with a particular worldview and created in some ways a national consensus on the kind of worldview that India could possibly have" (Van der Heide 2006: 19). Later in his career, Benegal would fully acknowledge his debt to Panditji by creating his documentary film *Nehru* (1983) and the 53-part epic television series *Bharat Ek Khoj* (Discovery of India) based on Nehru's book, which he filmed over a five-year period during 1986-91. A full account of Nehru's initiatives falls outside the purview of this essay. Instead, I offer in this section a brief contextualizing survey of the key elements of the 'Nehruvian project' before examining what I believe to be the neglected

but important question of Nehru's impact upon the development of Indian new cinema.

To begin with social reform, Nehru was concerned that the newly independent India would be founded upon equality of rights for all citizens, regardless of caste, creed, age or gender. Thus one of Nehru's top priorities was the abolition of untouchability. "How can the concept of equality and of equal opportunities for all exist side by side," he asked in 1954, "with the caste system which divides people into compartments and leads to suppression of one section of society by others?" (in Brown 2003: 230). At Nehru's behest Article 17 of the Indian Constitution declared that untouchability was abolished; in 1955, the Untouchability (Offences) Act became law. Alongside this drive to eliminate caste prejudice, the protection of women's rights was another key provision espoused by Nehru and enshrined in the constitution. "For Nehru," as one of his biographers has observed,

the equal treatment of women, and a new role for them in society and politics was a vital part of forging the new nation. He had argued that the treatment of women was the touchstone of the new nation, the sign of its maturity and modernity. He also believed that women were a powerful agent for social change by virtue of their status in the family.

(Brown 2003: 230)

Nehru's government, struggling against stiff opposition in Parliament, introduced new legislation known as the Hindu Codes Bill during 1952-54 that would protect the rights of women, particularly with regard to such matters as succession and property; divorce and the provision of alimony; and the maintenance of Hindu widows.³ Whilst the new legislation changed the legal framework of the new India, transforming the hearts and minds of

the people would prove to be a far more difficult matter.⁴

Turning to technology and the modernization of India, Nehru and his chief economic planner P. C. Mahalanobis, instituted a series of three Soviet-style five-year plans that would lead to massive industrialization of the country under the direct supervision of the State. This included the building of dams (Nehru's famous "temples of modern India"), hydroelectric plants, and steel mills. Linked to Nehru's support for technology was his desire to invest heavily in education, which he saw as a key tool in the creation of a better future for his country. At one end of the educational spectrum, he implemented universal compulsory primary education; at the other end, he oversaw a proliferation of universities and technical institutes. On a more fundamental level, the decade between 1951 and 1961 witnessed a rise in the literacy rate from 16.6 to 24 per cent as a result of his progressive policies.

Linked to education was Nehru's concern with supporting and fostering the cultural life of the new India. Specifically, the Cambridge-educated Panditji, certainly no populist, was concerned with nurturing *high* culture. Thus his government set out to built art galleries and museums and to encourage, among other things, classical dance, theatre and literature. Significantly, Hindi cinema, the most widespread and popular art form in India, then as now, found no place on this new cultural 'syllabus'. As Misra (2008: 298) notes, "Nehruvian India was deeply hostile to Bollywood." Indeed, Nehru had made no secret of his contempt for the products of the Bombay studios even *before* Independence. In 1939, he lectured the Indian Motion Picture Congress with these stern headmasterly words:

I am far from satisfied at the quality of work that has been done. Motion pictures have become an essential part of modern life and they can be used with great advantage for educational purposes. So far greater stress has been laid on a type of film which presumably is

supposed to be entertaining, but the standard or quality of which is not high. I hope that the industry will consider now in terms of meeting the standards and of aiming at producing high-class films which have educational and social values. Such films should receive the help and cooperation of not only the public, but also of the State.

(in Ganti 2004: 46-7)

Like Gandhi, Nehru was no fan of film *per se*⁵; nevertheless, he was quick to perceive that the potential educational value of a ‘better’ kind of cinema could be harnessed to his grand project of modernizing and unifying the young democracy (Barnouw/ Krishnaswamy 1980: 135-42). Thus Nehru, on becoming Prime Minister, made good on his offer of State assistance in the production of these “high-class” films. To some degree, mainstream cinema took up Nehru’s challenge to produce these better films, with the result that some commentators value the 1950s as a golden age for Hindi cinema.⁶ My concern in this paper, however, is with Nehru’s impact upon the development of the new art cinema and, later, parallel cinema.

In 1952, Nehru was instrumental in the government’s sponsoring and organizing of the First International Film Festival of India in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. This was an event of signal importance: it was the first time that Indian filmmakers had the opportunity to watch and study a large number of films from around the world. The screening of Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950), in particular, had a profound impact on the budding director Satyajit Ray, who watched it three times on three consecutive days, studying and digesting Kurosawa’s stark neorealist style and poetic camerawork. Ray, knowing of the success of this film in the West,⁷ was encouraged to think that his own *Pather Panchali*, then only partially filmed, might one day find a western audience (Robinson 2004: 82). Nehru’s indirect influence can therefore be seen in the creation of this landmark film. More directly, he was instrumental in presenting it to the world. Ray’s film

had initially caused consternation in India. The West Bengali Government, embarrassed by its stark portrayal of rural poverty, strongly opposed the idea of sending it to Cannes in 1956. It was only after the personal intervention of Nehru himself that *Pather Panchali* was sent to the festival (Krishen 1991: 26). If Ray's film marked the birth of Indian art cinema, then Nehru had unquestionably facilitated and overseen its safe delivery.

Nehru's beneficent hand was also discernible in the creation of a vast cinematic bureaucracy designed to foster "good" cinema.⁸ In 1961, Nehru's government established the Indian Film Finance Corporation, the main purpose of which was "to encourage the 'realist' style in preference to the over-heated melodramas favoured by the studios" (Misra 2008: 301). In addition, Nehru's government established the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune, which was designed to train actors and technicians. Significantly, Benegal taught at the FTII between 1966 and 1973 (where he discovered both the actress Shabana Azmi and *Ankur*'s cinematographer Govind Nihalani) and twice served as its chairman in 1980-83 and 1989-92. In those crucial years as he was working on *Ankur* and later as an influential administrator, Benegal was clearly working towards the realization of Nehru's vision of non-mainstream cinema as an instrument in the transformation of post-Independence Indian society.

To conclude this section, it is fair to note that the commonly accepted view of Nehru's legacy, for all his progressive vision and bold initiatives in the face of such challenges and reactionary opposition, is that it is uneven. His political career, in the words of Sunil Khilnani, "spanned a long history of expectation, achievement, and disappointment and took in the highest and lowest points of India's twentieth-century history" (Khilnani 2007: 89). The highs and lows of his legacy are captured in historian Percival Spear's (1986: 256-7) sober assessment:

Nehru's greatest achievement was his social legislation, because [it

was] achieved with the greatest effort, and [was] likely to influence the future most. His greatest failure was his inability to set up an educated social democracy above the poverty line. Instead, he established an India with all the appurtenances of a modern state. New industry called forth an enlarged middle class. The enlargement and enrichment of this class took up most of the increase in the national income produced by the five-year plans, leaving the remaining eighty per cent much as before. When we compare the state of modern India with its condition in only 1940, the achievement was great, but it was not the achievement on which Nehru had set his heart.

The post-Nehru years witnessed an unraveling of Panditji's great scheme to transform Indian society and culture. In addition to appalling poverty, relentless population growth and rampant corruption in high places, Sumita Chakravarty (1993: 30) cites the problems of "Westernization, the clash of modernity and tradition, and a collapse of a moral sense." Sociologists point, she adds, to the resurfacing of the issues of "caste, linguistic, and communal hatreds and passions." In essence, Nehru had appealed to the best in Indian culture and society in challenging his people to pull themselves up after the humiliation of British rule and the horror of Partition. Yet the failure of the Nehruvian project ultimately to achieve its goals was clear to Benegal, and it forms the broad background to the story of *Ankur*. This film, as I shall argue in the following two sections, addressed in parable-fashion the failure of Nehru's reforms whilst expressing Benegal's undiminished adherence to Nehruvian humanism and his continuing conviction that it was still the best hope for Indian society.

3. Surya the False Prophet

In *Ankur*, the bright promise but ultimate underachievement and failure of

the Nehruvian project is personified by the *zamindar*'s son Surya. His first appearance clearly aligns him with the optimism and progressive potential offered by education and urban life. At first, he seems to represent the rising generation of rational, secular and educated young people so dear to Nehru's heart. His college studies appear to have developed in him an understanding of the need for gender equality. During his conversation with his mother early in the film he expresses laudable Nehruvian sentiments against the oppression of women. After Kaushalya, his father's mistress, and Pratap, their illegitimate son, turn up at the family's city home, he sets himself against his father's oppression and exploitation of his wife and mistress. Surya asks, "Why do you allow them to come, Mother?" Kaushalya has been her husband's mistress for twenty years, the mother tells Surya, adding: "I cannot say a word. And what would be the use? Father will not listen to anybody, and do what comes to his mind." Surya, flaring up at this, exclaims: "Looking at that woman, I feel like . . ." Yet the utterance is left unfinished because, for all his fine display of liberal outrage, Surya will soon be emulating his father's adulterous behaviour when he takes Lakshmi as his mistress. Worse, he will try to force her to have an abortion and threaten to use his high-caste status to banish her from the village. Thus Surya is no progressive Nehruvian supporter of women's rights but rather a throwback to feudal chauvinism and oppression.

Similarly, Surya's initial behaviour and utterances with regard to caste seem to align him with Nehru's rational and secularized ideology. On his first morning at the farmhouse, Surya orders Lakshmi to make tea for him. At first she demurs, mindful of her 'polluted' status as an untouchable. The local priest will be angered, she explains, if she, a dalit, were to prepare food or drink for her high-caste employer. "I don't believe in castes," he declares proudly. Soon after, the priest visits Surya, partly out of courtesy and partly to solicit a donation from the "young Sir" for a festival. During their conversation Surya refuses to allow the priest to assume responsibility

for having his meals are cooked in a brahmin kitchen. Again, this suggests that Surya may indeed be a torchbearer for Panditji's new secular and egalitarian democracy. However, his arrogance and his terrible treatment of the lower-caste and untouchable villagers, as in his sexual exploitation of Lakshmi, his savage beating of Kishtaya, and his refusal of access to irrigation water to Kaulshaya, show how easily this educated young 'Nehruvian' slips into lording it over his so-called caste inferiors.

Surya's use of technology in this deeply rural setting also links him to Nehruvian modernity. First, he drives out from the city in his own car, quite a symbol of affluence and development at this time. The car should have ensured a grand entrance for Surya on the village stage, yet his arrival behind the steering wheel and a pair of 'film star' sunglasses immediately becomes pathetic when the vehicle becomes bogged down in a muddy pothole and has to be pushed out by a group of villagers. Second, Surya enjoys listening to records on the gramophone that he has brought with him from the city. This particular form of leisure not only indicates Surya's wealth but also his sophisticated urban taste, particularly when set in juxtaposition to the traditional music and folksongs that form the diegetic soundtrack of most of the film.⁹ Once again, however, any claim to Nehruvian modernity here is negated, this time by Surya's choice of music, namely popular songs from the Bombay commercial cinema. The values of the mainstream Hindi cinema both before and after independence were particularly regressive and at odds with the progressive ideology of Nehru himself and of new wave and parallel cinema. Surya's predilection for this kind of music and cinema—we also see him cutting out photos of actress pin-ups from a cinema fan magazine—aligns him with this regressive ideology. He even tries to make a 'pin up' out of Lakshmi: "You look like a film star today," he tells her, "You know, heroines in films who sing, dance, make love." Such characters, it seems, constitute Surya's ideal of womanhood. Later, Surya's young wife also hints, ironically, at his fantasy

'Bollywood' relationship with Lakshmi. When he plays a record to her, she asks archly if he has any songs by the popular actress Nimmi. The allusion here is to Nimmi's appearance in the hit film *Barsaat* (Rain, 1949), in which she portrayed the innocent mountain shepherdess Neela, who is loved and abandoned by Gopal, a heartless womanizer from the city. Sura's seemingly innocuous question is thus a coded warning to her husband that she knows all about his bucolic affair with Lakshmi.

A third and final link between Surya and Nehruvian technological progress in the film concerns agricultural methods. Nehru's initiative for promoting "agrarian uplift" included schemes to improve wells and irrigation; to promote cattle welfare; and to introduce more efficient methods of cultivation through the use of new seeds and chemical fertilizers (Ramachandra Guha 2007: 216-7). All three initiatives are alluded to in the film, with Surya in each instance performing an 'anti-Nehru' role with his destructive interventions. First, when Kaushalya, the mistress of Surya's father, makes her first appearance in the film, she proudly brings sacks of rice harvested from the fields allotted to her by the father. He commends her, saying: "This time the crop in your fields is good." Pratap, their illegitimate but 'good' son, adds proudly that they will be able to harvest two crops instead of one. By contrast, the first act of Surya, the 'bad' son, after arriving at the farmhouse is the spiteful cutting off of precious irrigation water to Kaushalya's fields, thereby threatening the next harvest. Second, later in the film, he becomes similarly unpleasant when he discovers that the village priest is allowing his cattle to graze in Surya's (or rather his father's) fields. He has the cattle driven off and tells Lakshmi to warn the priest that "next time, I will break their legs and send them to the pound." Third, in the same scene, Surya orders Lakshmi to tell her husband to go with the bullock cart to fetch fertilizer from the city house. Lakshmi, representing rural India, doesn't understand this new-fangled technology, so Surya writes the word 'fertilizer' on a piece of paper. Once again Surya

seems to become the agent of Nehruvian development as he introduces this new agricultural method. In reality, however, Surya is uninterested either in crops or harvests; he merely wants Kishtaya out of the way so that he can flirt with Lakshmi. Indeed, Surya's only 'success' in fertilizing is when he impregnates Lakshmi and makes her pregnant. These moments in the film demonstrate clearly that any links between Surya and Nehruvian progress are introduced merely to be turned upside down and to make Surya an agent of regression and chauvinism, a false prophet of Nehruvian ideology. Benegal employed the figure of Surya to show how Nehru's initiatives were undermined in the last years of the Nehru era and in the decade or so after Panditji's death by the refusal or inability of men to renounce old patterns of behaviour and mindsets. I now turn to a discussion of how Benegal, following Nehru, saw women as the chief hope for transforming Indian society.

4. Lakshmi the Subaltern

In common with most of Benegal's other films, *Ankur* reveals the director's preoccupation with depicting the struggles of subaltern characters to reclaim and assert their dignity.¹⁰ In his cinematic narratives Benegal has been particularly concerned with portraying female subaltern subjectivities. If Surya personifies the failures and shortcomings of the Nehruvian project, then the hope of progress is embodied in the self-empowerment of the film's oppressed women characters, principally Lakshmi. As a dalit woman, Lakshmi's gender and outcaste status make her a doubly marginalised figure. Yet Benegal takes Lakshmi's twofold subalternity and turns it around in order to privilege her subject position over and above that of Surya, her gender and caste 'superior'. Benegal accomplishes this reordering of the social relations in the film chiefly in two ways: first, by his privileging of what I shall call Lakshmi's 'subaltern gaze'; second, by allowing Lakshmi, and other female villagers, to assert themselves by 'speaking up' for

themselves. I turn my attention first to the question of gaze.

Laura Mulvey argues in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” that cinema offers spectators a number of pleasures, chief among which is scopophilia, the pleasure of looking. She notes that Freud, in his *Three Essays on Sexuality*, “associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 1975: 8). In cinema, particularly mainstream cinema, this controlling gaze is almost exclusively a *male* gaze; this is equally true, as Asha Kasbekar (2001: 286) argues, for Hollywood or Bollywood. With regard to this notion of gender-determined spectatorship, Mulvey (1975: 11) observes that

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.”

Cinematically, *Ankur* is a film that thematises and interrogates the act of looking and the situation of being looked at: Surya, the ‘superior’ gazing male subject, and Lakshmi, the ‘inferior’ gazed-at female object, appear at first to act out the inequalities of gender and caste that characterise both traditional Indian society and Hindi cinema. Yet Benegal shakes up the gaze-driven interaction between Surya and Lakshmi in order to redress the power imbalance between them and to point to a new Nehruvian realignment of gender roles. Surya, as the feudal *zamindar*’s son and representative, is set after his arrival at the farmhouse to control all that his eyes behold, including Lakshmi herself. Yet Benegal deconstructs this conventional gender hierarchy in film as well as in society, by allowing Lakshmi to

empower herself through her reversal of the gaze—through her quietly determined assertion of her ‘subaltern gaze’.

Surya’s sexual obsession with Lakshmi is clear from the way he constantly watches her as she busies herself with her chores. The first occasion is on the morning after his arrival in the country. Surya is awakened by the sound of Lakshmi sweeping in the corridor leading to his bedroom. He observes her for some time through the open door before she becomes aware of his eyes on her. After asking her name, he orders her to make tea for him. The traditional and expected master-servant power relations are thus asserted from the start. This changes soon after, however, in their next encounter. Surya, bored with country life, seats himself on the verandah in order to read. His wandering attention is soon captured, however, by the sight of Lakshmi rhythmically grinding spices with a large pestle and mortar nearby. Surya’s dark surreptitious staring becomes voyeuristic. Unable to resist her, he gets to his feet and moves towards her. Benegal emphasises the transgressive nature of Surya’s ogling and stalking by having the camera become the instrument of Surya’s predatory gaze and zoom in close to the still unaware Lakshmi. Yet the camera’s unsettling and abrupt shift from detached objectivity to ‘Hitchcockian’ subjectivity—unsettling since it is the only such moment in the film—serves to highlight Surya’s *lack* of control, since the male power implicit in this mobile POV shot is ‘castrated’ the moment that Lakshmi herself looks up and meets gaze with gaze. To switch metaphors, Lakshmi’s reversal of Surya’s gaze ‘arrests’ the transgressive voyeur; her unwavering look stops the ‘male’ tracking shot in its tracks. The sudden reversal of the gender and caste hierarchy is made explicit in the dialogue that ensues:

Surya: Are you crying?

Lakshmi: Me, crying? No, sir. Why should I cry?

[Lakshmi gazes directly at Surya, now unsure of himself.]

Surya: I thought you are crying.

[Uncomfortable silent pause.]

Lakshmi: Does sir want anything?

Surya: No, no.

[Lakshmi gazes directly at Surya. Surya averts his face.]

Lakshmi: What is it, sir?

Surya: [stuttering] No, nothing.

[Surya turns hesitantly and walks away.]

A Bollywood director would have eroticized a 'courtship' scene like this by emphasizing the sexual imagery implicit in the spice grinding and indulging the gazing and pleasure-seeking hero on behalf of the similarly gazing and pleasure-seeking male cinema spectator. A coy Lakshmi and a pestle-wielding Surya would undoubtedly have sung and danced around the mortar. Benegal, however, refused to affirm the expected male/active and female/passive binary. Instead, he avoided any mainstream cliché and allowed Lakshmi to take back power and initiative by reversing Surya's phallogocentric gaze and driving the 'castrated' male away.

Benegal's privileging of female characters in his films has drawn flak from various quarters. At the 'outraged male' end of the anger spectrum, so to speak, "mainstream industry wallahs" have attacked him for creating supposedly "un-Indian" women in his films; at the 'outraged female' end, by contrast, feminists have reacted negatively to what they see as his portrayal of women as victims (Datta 2002: 4). Both of these positions lack merit. Regarding the first criticism, "un-Indian" may be taken to mean that Benegal's women behave in ways that are 'unchaste'; paradoxically, it may also point to their failure to display themselves as erotic objects to the male gaze. Bollywood asks a great deal of its female protagonists. As Kasbekar (2001: 294) argues,

the Hindi film upholds the patriarchally determined feminine idealization through inflated rhetoric on chastity within the narrative, but resists the very same feminine ideals by offering women as ‘spectacle’ in the song-and-dance numbers, both idealization and fetishization being themselves products of patriarchy.

One can readily see how the Bombay filmwallahs and their audiences would find Benegal’s unchaste and de-eroticized female protagonist unappealing. Benegal, however, did not set out to create such a mainstream heroine; rather, with *Ankur*, he was attempting to challenge the male-female balance of power found in mainstream Hindi films and to realise cinematically Nehru’s ambition of creating an equitable society. He was, in short, setting out to create a ‘Nehruvian woman’. Thus Lakshmi never performs for the male gaze, whether Surya’s or the cinema spectator’s. Furthermore, she is always shown in positions and activities of strength—for example, grinding the spices, saving Surya from a cobra, driving cattle away, rejecting Surya’s demand that she have an abortion, protecting her husband from Surya’s beating, and so on. She is never shown *déshabillé* let alone naked, and she never dances or sings. Finally, Lakshmi, though ‘unchaste’ because of her unlooked-for act of adultery, is never depicted making love. The closest Benegal goes to suggesting this is when he shows her smoothing her hair and sari *after* Surya has made love to her.

I turn now to the second point concerning victimhood. Benegal himself has denied the feminist charge that he has created victimized female characters. In one interview he defended his characterisation of Lakshmi by stating: “She’s not a helpless victim. It goes against my grain to portray people as helpless because if I have any kind of agenda it’s to show that people can empower themselves. That is one of the aspects that you might find in all my films” (Van der Heide 2006: 63). Indeed, Lakshmi, though a subaltern, empowers herself at every turn. Gayatri Spivak has argued that

there is “something of a not-speakingness in the very notion of subalternity” (1996: 289). The marginalized status of a subaltern stems from the fact, in Spivak’s view, that she or he lacks a voice and thus agency. The empowerment of the marginalized characters in *Ankur*, however, refute this pessimistic generalization. Lakshmi not only speaks up for herself but also for her literally mute husband, Kishtaya. After saving him from further beating by Surya, she challenges the ‘master’ with these words: “We are not your purchased slaves. We don’t want your work, your money, or anything of yours. You will never be happy. You have incurred the curse of the poor. You will never prosper.”

Lakshmi is not the only subaltern woman to empower herself in *Ankur*. Rajamma, the married woman who is literally dragged by her male in-laws to the *panchayat* (village council), defends herself eloquently against the charge of adultery and later takes her destiny in her own hands by committing suicide rather than allowing herself to be forced to rejoin her feckless husband. In a later scene featuring a card game, one drunken villager, having gambled away all his money, wagers and loses the only possession he has left, his wife. On the following day, when the ‘winner’ comes to collect his human prize, the wife is furious to learn that she had been gambled away and lost “like Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*.” Her response is to beat and scold her pathetic husband and send the shamefaced claimant on his way. To conclude, these three subaltern women may have started out as victims at the hands of men, but they each take power back by finding their voices. Benegal’s women, then, far from being passive victims, do exhibit agency and thereby demonstrate that, *pace* Spivak, the subaltern *can* speak.¹¹

5. Conclusion

Nehru’s vision, as we have seen, was the creation of a new India that would be founded upon equal rights and social justice for all. In particular, he was

concerned with the legal protection, liberation and empowerment of women because he saw them as offering the best hope for achieving social progress. Benegal has echoed this in his filmmaking. When asked in an interview if he thought that the modernization of women's roles leads to the modernization of society, Benegal replied: "Yes, because gender equality automatically represents massive social change," adding that in the political and economic life of the country, "the establishment of women's rights is a necessary part of social egalitarianism" (Van der Heide 2006: 64-5).

Benegal's *Ankur* introduced the 'Nehruvian woman' in both the on-screen character of Lakshmi and in the off-screen life of the actress who portrayed her, Shabana Azmi. Indeed, so strong is the resemblance between the self-empowerment of Lakshmi and the political activism of the actress Shabana Azmi that it would be hard to say where 'Lakshmi' ends and 'Shabana Azmi' begins. Azmi's film acting debut in *Ankur* politicized her. This is something she has recognized herself: "I think if I had not started with *Ankur*," she stated in an interview, "I would have landed up somewhere quite different" (Azmi 1999: para. 5) Her performance marked the start of a career during which she became famous, as one commentator has put it, "for depicting characters who, through hardship, undergo an inner transformation, gain new self-awareness, and in turn reject the conventional strictures of class, caste, and gender that imprison those around them" (Halter 2002: para. 4). Thus *Ankur* not only launched Azmi's career as an actress, it propelled her, as an ideal 'Nehruvian woman', into public service as an activist. For Azmi, who grew up "in a family that believed that art should be used as an instrument for social change" (Azmi 1999: para. 8), performing in a film is—or should be—a political act.¹² This recalls Nehru's idea that cinema should serve society. Indeed, Azmi is respected not only for her work as "the most visible emblem of the New Indian [parallel] Cinema" (Van der Heide 2006: 77-8) but also for her political and social activism.¹³ Azmi has been actively involved in fighting AIDS, supporting slum-dwellers

and denouncing communal violence. Since 1989, she has been a member of the National Integration Council and a member of the National AIDS Commission. In 1997, she was nominated as a member of the Rajya Sabha, the upper chamber of the Indian Parliament. Thus Azmi's life and career both in film and in society have made her into the epitome of the self-empowered 'Nehruvian woman' whose ambition is to take Indian society forward.

To conclude, we have seen that *Ankur* functions as a sociopolitical discourse and as a cinematic text, cutting across two time periods—the early years of the Nehru era (late-1940s) in the film, and the post-Nehru period outside the film at the time of its release (1973)—to rearticulate and reassert Nehruvian ideology as the remedy for the problems that India faced in the 1970s. Benegal, a passionate believer in Nehru's vision for a better society in India, lived through the aftermath of the Nehru era, during which he watched Panditji's achievements undermined, reversed and scorned. In making *Ankur*, Benegal showed that he still believed in the ideology of Jawaharlal Nehru and hoped for its comprehensive realization. Perhaps the seedling in the film's enigmatic title is the unborn foetus inside Lakshmi's womb; perhaps it is the new society that Lakshmi's self-empowerment and the little boy's throwing of the stone promise; perhaps, finally, it is the shining example of Shabana Azmi's life of public service that sprouted from her performance as the self-empowered subaltern and Nehruvian woman.

Notes

- 1 Only Sangeeta Datta's book *Shyam Benegal* (London: Film Institute, 2002) recognises Benegal's ideological debt to Nehru. Even her analysis of *Ankur*, however, leaves the sociopolitical and cinematic implications of this connection unexplored.
- 2 *The Discovery* is less a scholarly work of history than Nehru's subjective enquiry

- into the nature of Indian identity written at a time when he was pondering deeply the direction that post-Independence India would take. Sumita Chakravarty (1993: 22) comments that the work was “conceived in the mode of a grand narrative, leaning on the writings of Orientalist scholars of the Max Müller school of romantic-mystical historiography.”
- 3 The Hindu Codes Bill was divided into four separate acts: the Hindu Marriage Act, the Hindu Succession Act, the Hindu Minority and Succession Act and the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act.
 - 4 See Som, Reba (1994) “Jawaharlal Nehru and the Hindu Code: A Victory of Symbol over Substance?” *Modern Asian Studies*, 28 (1), 165-194.
 - 5 Ramachandra Guha (2007: 721) notes that there is no record of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel or many other early leaders visiting cinema theatres.
 - 6 Nasreen Munni Kabir, for example, discussing mainstream cinema in the 1950s, comments that “Nehru’s vision of the newly independent nation was . . . highly influential throughout the decade, and many excellent Urdu poets and writers worked with filmmakers in the hope of creating a cinema that would be socially meaningful” (in Rajadhyaksha 2009: 80). See Desai’s *Nehru’s Hero Dilip Kumar in the Life of India* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2004) for a lively account of Nehru’s impact on mainstream cinema and for the way in which his initiatives and philosophy were represented in many films.
 - 7 In 1951, *Rashomon* won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and effectively put Japanese cinema on the world map.
 - 8 Mira Reym Binford’s two articles “The New Cinema of India,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Vol. 8, Issue 4 (Autumn, 1983), 47-61, and “State Patronage and India’s New Cinema,” *Critical Arts*, Vol. 2 (1983), No. 4, 33-46, provide an excellent overview of the Indian government’s support of non-mainstream cinema.
 - 9 Lord Meghnad Desai, who, like Surya, enjoyed singing along in *karaoke*-fashion to Bollywood records as a youngster in the 1940-50s, recalls that “gramophones were very rare then” (Desai 2004: 11).
 - 10 ‘Subaltern’ is a contested term. Here I follow the definition of the word set out by Ranajit Guha in his preface to *Subaltern Studies I* (Guha 1982). He uses it, he explains, “as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.”
 - 11 I am alluding here to Spivak’s controversial essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1994), 66-111.

- 12 Azmi's father is the celebrated poet and screenwriter Kaifi Azmi and her mother is the stage actress Shaukat Azmi, both of whom were members of the Communist Party of India.
- 13 Alongside her five National Film Awards for Best Actress, Azmi has received, among other honours, the Yash Bhartiya Award (1988) from the Government of Uttar Pradesh for her work in highlighting women's issues, the Rajiv Gandhi Award (1994) for "Excellence in Secularism", and the Gandhi International Peace Award (2006) from the Gandhi Foundation, London. In 2002, the University of Michigan honoured her contribution to arts, culture and society by conferring on her the Martin Luther King Professorship award.

References

- Azmi, Shabana (1999) "Art Should Be Used As an Instrument for Social Change." Interview by Nermeen Shaikh. Accessed Aug. 5, 2010 at <http://asiasociety.org/arts-culture/film/shabana-azmi-art-should-be-used-as-instrument-social-change>
- Barnouw, Erik and S. Krishnaswamy (1980) *Indian Film*. Oxford and New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Benegal, Shyam (2007) "Secularism and Popular Indian Cinema." In Needham, Anuradha Dingwaney and Rajaswari Sunder Rajan (eds.), *The Crisis of Secularism in India*. Ranikhet Permanent Black, 225-238.
- Brown, Judith M. (2003) *Nehru: A Political Life*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Chakravarty, Sumita S. (1993) *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Datta, Sangeeta (2002) *Shyam Benegal*. World Directors Series. London: British Film Institute.
- Desai, Lord Meghnad (2004) *Nehru's Hero Dilip Kumar in the Life of India* New Delhi: Roli Books.
- Guha, Ramachandra (2007) *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Guha, Ranajit (1982) (ed.) *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. New Delhi and London: Oxford University Press.
- Halter, Ed (2002) "Action Heroine," *The Village Voice*, Sept. 24, 2002. Retrieved from www.villagevoice.com/2002-09-24/film/action-heroine/1/

- Kasbekar, Asha (2001) "Hidden Pleasures: Negotiating the Myth of the Female Ideal in Popular Hindi Cinema." In Dwyer, Rachel and Christopher Pinney (eds.), *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*. New Delhi and London: Oxford University Press, 286-308.
- Khilnani, Sunil (2003) *The Idea of India*. London: Penguin Books.
- _____ (2007) "Nehru's Faith." In Needham, Anuradha Dingwaney and Rajaswari Sunder Rajan (eds.), *The Crisis of Secularism in India*. Ranikhet Permanent Black, 89-103.
- Krishen, P. (1991) "Knocking at the Doors of Public Culture: India's Parallel Cinema." *Public Culture*, Vol. 4 (1), 24-41.
- Misra, Maria (2008) *Vishnu's Crowded Temple: India since the Great Rebellion*. London: Penguin Books.
- Mulvey, Laura (1975) "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 6-18
- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish (2009) *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish and Paul Willemen (eds.) (2002) *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*. New revised edition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Robinson, Andrew (2004) *Satyajit Ray—the Inner Eye. The Biography of a Master Film-Maker*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris.
- Spear, Percival (1986) *A History of India 2*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1996) *The Spivak Reader—Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. Edited by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean. New York and London: Routledge.
- Van der Heide, William (2006) *Bollywood Babylon. Interviews with Shyam Benegal*. Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Vasudev, Aruna (1984) *The New Indian Cinema*. Delhi: Macmillan.

《日本語要旨》

シャーム・ベネガルの『芽ばえ』とネルー主義の女性

シャーム・ベネガル監督のデビュー作品である『Ankur/ (邦題) 芽生え (1973

年)』は、インドの芸術映画の功績である。この物語は、インド初代首相であるジャワハルラール・ネルーのリベラルな人道主義的イデオロギーを、ベネガルが終生信奉していることを明らかにしている。非宗教的で、平等かつ近代的な、新しい独立国家インドを創出するという、ネルーの壮大なプロジェクトは、不可触民や女性の権利を保護することを目的にした社会改革や、近代的なインフラを整備するための技術的な戦略、若い世代をはぐくむ教育的で文化的な活力を含んでいた。しかしながら、ネルー時代(1947年～64年)の業績は一律でなく、ネルー自身の残したものについては論争がある。『芽ばえ』のイデオロギー的背景にあるのが、後に失敗に終わる「ネルー主義のプロジェクト」のこの初期の期待である。ベネガルは、インドの社会を変える最大の希望は、女性の手の中にあるとするネルーの基本的な信念に共感している。そのため、『芽ばえ』の主人公は、被抑圧的階級である不可触民であるラクシュミであり、物語は、封建的で家父長的な抑圧にもかかわらず、彼女が自分の能力を高めていくというドラマになっている。本稿は、『芽ばえ』が、ベネガルがネルー時代の失敗を認めると同時に、インド社会の再生のためには、それでもなおネルー主義のイデオロギーが最善の方法である(少なくとも映画が公開された1973年時点では)と信じていることを表現していると主張する。したがって、本稿で呼ぶ「ネルー主義の女性」である、ラクシュミが象徴する人物は、ネルーが1947年に構想した、非宗教的でより公正で進歩的なインドのための、ベネガルが抱く指導者像である。