

KALYUG

An Art Film For The Masses

LIKE every other Shyam Benegal film, *Kalyug*, slated for release next month, has already received more than its fair share of media attention. The focus, however, seems to have been on the fact that the director has cast commercially established stars such as Rekha, Shashi Kapoor and Raj Babbar in its major roles. The criticism that greeted *Junoon*, his last film, is now being repeated. Benegal, it is being said, has sold out, gone commercial, dumped his art film credentials, and switched to a more paying kind of cinema.

Yet, both artistically and stylistically, *Kalyug*—about the conflict between two industrial families—is Benegal's most ambitious project to date. For the first time, he has chosen to work on a contemporary, and, equally significant urban theme. Unlike his previous films and those of many other art film-makers, there is no attempt to draw from Indian rural experience, no mysticism, and no village romanticism. The milieu is closer to Benegal's own world—city life, industry and intrigue.

However, true to form, he has continued to draw his basic inspiration from tradition—in this case, the Mahabharat. He has not borrowed the plot, or the structure, so much as some of the characters, whom he has placed in latter day situations. Explains Benegal, "I have long been fascinated by the archetypes from the epic."

Changes: In fact, even before he launched *Junoon*, Benegal had wanted to make a Mahabharat-like film with Shashi Kapoor playing Arjun. In 1978 Girish Karnad handed in the first draft of the screenplay that was later to become *Kalyug*, and after the relative success of *Junoon*, Kapoor agreed to

finance a second film. As the script progressed, however, it went through several changes and finally Kapoor has ended up playing Karan rather than Arjun. "It has been a very satisfying role", he says and Benegal adds, "Shashi's character is the pivot around which the film revolves." In a sense, the focus on Kapoor has helped reduce the complexity of a film that with its multiplicity of characters, and ambitious structure, works on many different levels.

Says Benegal of his film: "*Kalyug* has been my most complicated film. I



Shyam Benegal (top right): going commercial and (above) a tense scene from *Kalyug*

have had to develop and establish far more characters than before." The story shows two inter-related industrial families—the Puranchands and the Khubchands—first falling out and then, in the course of the film, destroying each other. The family tree has to be well defined, and each relationship made relevant. The film had to be set in the family homes where the women play a role in the continuing rivalry, as well as in the factories, where labour problems beset the internally crumbling management.

Many of the similarities to the Mahabharat situation, were dropped as the film progressed. "In fact, we now have only about seven 'prototypes,'" Benegal says. "But," he adds hastily, "I wouldn't like to name them, otherwise audiences would seek parallels that are not intended to be there."

In addition to Shashi, Benegal has an impressive cast including Anant Nag—a long-time Benegal favourite, who plays one of the sons in the Puranchand branch, Kulbhushan Kharbanda, Nag's brother, and Raj

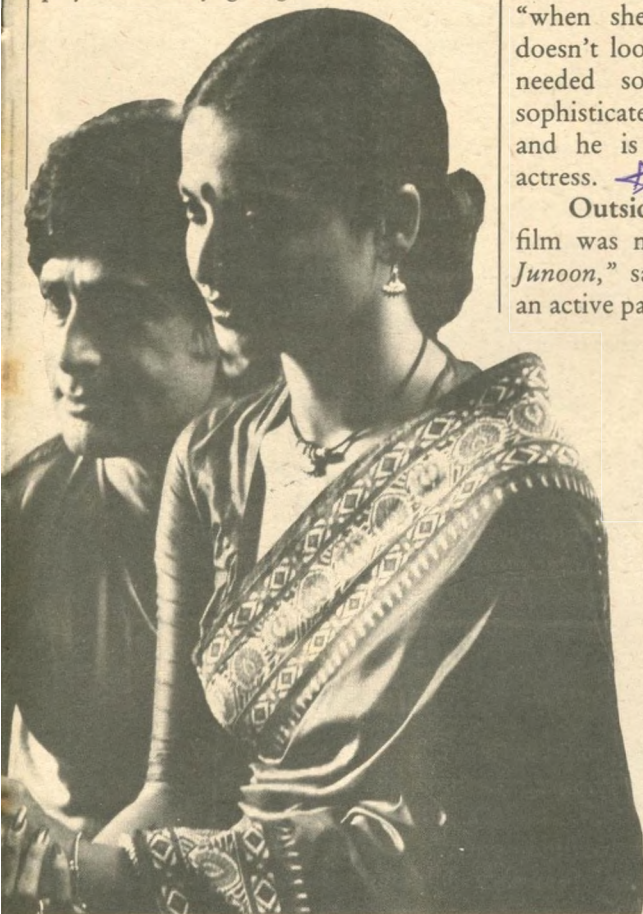
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Babbar, who completes the trio. "I have been watching Babbar since his National School of Drama (NSD) days," says Benegal. "And I took him because he seems plausible enough as the brother of the other two." Babbar plays an easy-going business man,

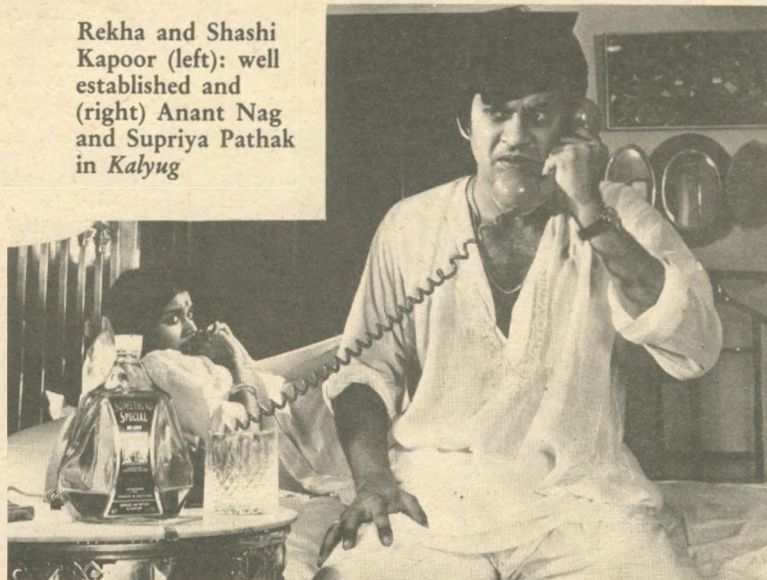
more interested in horses and racing than his work. Claims Benegal, "It will be different from his other roles so far." Playing opposite Babbar is Rekha—a surprising choice. "I picked her because she has such an arresting, immediate personality," says Benegal, "when she appears in a scene one doesn't look at anyone else." Benegal needed someone who could look sophisticated, well-bred and artistic, and he is all praise for the dusky actress. ★

Outside Help: "Working on this film was not as difficult as shooting *Junoon*," says Benegal. Vinod Doshi, an active participant in the *Kalyug* unit,

and a member of the Walchand family was of great help. Probably because of his vast experience as an industrialist, he was very enthusiastic about the project. "In fact," recalls Benegal, "he even came up with a whole new script of his own." Doshi also laid open the Cooper Engineering factory at Pune for the shooting. "The employees and trade union leaders participated in the strike sequences, and so they appear very authentic," says Benegal. Only two or three other locations were used for shooting. Some of the scenes, including a wedding party, were shot at the Bombay Port Trust Chairman's rambling mansion at Carmichael Road.



Rekha and Shashi Kapoor (left): well established and (right) Anant Nag and Supriya Pathak in *Kalyug*



Gobind Nihalani with Shashi Kapoor: a continuing association with Benegal

"The party was a real one, and many guests were unaware that we were shooting," recalls Benegal. On the same evening apparently, Rani Dube from Attenborough's Indo-British unit dropped by and promptly asked for permission to shoot *Gandhi* on the same premises as well! Vinod's brother Chakor Doshi, also lent his Cuffe Parade penthouse apartment for the venture. In fact some of the paraphernalia required for the family scenes was borrowed from the family too.

Those who have had glimpses of the narrative, are very curious as to whether the film is based on any real life industrial family. Benegal, naturally, vehemently denies the suggestion, admitting, however, that some of the

incidents may have come from something that he has heard of, or experienced, of family-owned industry. "Many of the ideas are picked from the Mahabharat itself", he says "and the rest are inventions. But," he adds philosophically, "I can't prevent people from drawing parallels, which I guess they will."

In fact, with Benegal's background of social films, *Kalyug* will be interpreted as a comment against family-



Rekha on the sets: giving her best

owned industry. However, he states emphatically that he has no such designs. "My film rises above that really," he says. "It is not restricted to any one class."

The main reason why Benegal has used powerful industrial empires is that it lends epic possibilities to the film. The plot structure, Benegal admits, is similar to that of a Greek tragedy, in that the characters set some course of events in motion, and their actions set loose a predestined string of consequences, which go beyond their control. And in fact, what Benegal desires

to emerge from the film is a "universal sense of tragedy". Like in his other films, he pursues his inherent belief in moral values. "I want to say," he explains, "that you cannot do something which is immoral, otherwise the brittleness shows." And one has to face the unpleasant consequences of one's actions.

Luckily, Benegal, so far, has been able to weave the moral of his film expertly into the actual tale. In fact, his forte is that he is such a powerful narrator. And *Kalyug* will be a real test of him as a master story-teller. Here, it may not be so easy for him to combine plot and form with cohesion. For one thing, there are far too many characters functioning at different levels. Each has to be developed with a certain integrity and individuality, without making it

appear as if they have been awarded only superficial differences. For another, Benegal will have to put a much tighter rein on his style, if it is not go awry, as in *Junoon*, chasing away at tangential characters, irrelevant to the film.

And so, with *Kalyug* comes a new era for Shyam Benegal, and possibly, for the whole clique of realistic film-makers. Because, for the first time, an authentic look will be taken into the lives of the industrial urban elite—their hopes, their aspirations, and finally perhaps, their inevitable destruction.

—Robini Nilekani

SHYAM BENEGAL

Fine Sensibility

THE Sahyadri Films office at Tardeo, looks very much like that of any ad film-maker. Spools and cassettes piled casually in dark corners, the hubbub of conversation interspersed with the working jargon. But, as you go into Benegal's own room, you sense an immediate change—from the gloom of the rear to sunlit brightness, from advertising to art film. Posters of past triumphs are carefully pasted over two walls, interrupted by billboards of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* and *The Thief of Baghdad*. His desk is strewn with unattended mail, besides hard cover books. He picks up his gold-rimmed glasses, lying on one such edition, apologising when they promptly fall off his nose and complains mildly: "Vanraj Bhatia makes them loose by using them."

Benegal's easy camaraderie with his unit is well-known. Most of the people who have worked with him, ascribe to the theory that it is like being on a long picnic. The man himself is as casual, sitting at ease on a straight-backed chair, in his fawn coloured shirt and dark trousers. "Film-makers are such boring people," he says self-deprecatingly, reluctant to talk about himself. "There is no drama in their lives," Drama or no drama, Benegal appears to be a regular film junkie.

Right since his advertising days—after the initial stage of learning the ropes that is—he has been pursuing what has been his ambition since the age of six—films. "I always knew I would make films, not act in them," he says. Apparently, his choice of career was not run down by his family, who, because of cousin Guru Dutt, were already familiar with the film circuit. "My father had a movie camera, which I used to try my hand at," he recalls. "In fact, I made my first mini-film at the age of 12, which I titled, *Chhutiyon Mein Manj Maza*." Naturally, he also would bunk school whenever possible to visit the cinema. Luckily, he seemed

to have professors who shared his interests, because he once spotted his chemistry teacher at one of his truant shows.

Ad Line: "Later on, when I came to Bombay," he says, idly reminiscing about his career to date, "there were unfortunately no film schools." So Benegal, in '59, did the next best thing. He got into advertising. In Lintas, and in Associated Sales Promotion (ASP), he moved from copywriting and client servicing to writing scripts and directing short ad films. In '72, he got his first chance to break away with the Homi Bhabha fellowship, on which he travelled, in India and abroad, made children's films—of which the most famous is *Charandas Chor*—taught, and picked up new concepts in the bargain. Back in Bombay, he also did a lot of work for the fledgling Doordarshan—a series of films on the appreciation of Indian classical music, "which are still shown on and off," as he puts it. "It was only when I had all this experience behind me," he adds, "that I had the courage to make a feature film." For *Ankur*, the story of which he wrote at the age of 16, he had to indulge in a lot of softsell, before he got Freni Varavia and Mohan Bijlani to finance him. And after the success of *Ankur*, Benegal's life has been an open book, public attention dogging his footsteps at every stage.

"I have no notion of having 'arrived'," claims Benegal. "For one thing, my life-style has hardly changed at all, since my early days. My sensibility, is still the same. In other words, I carry the same ideology." Only Benegal's circle of friends seems to have tightened over the years. He associates mainly with people from the same profession now. For instance, Satyadev Dubey, Girish Karnad, form part of this inner circle. "We share a—what shall I call it?—a humanism," he says, regretting that the word probably sounded clichéd. "It's a certain attitude to social inequalities," he adds, trying to explain further what he means.

Benegal tries to "keep the win-

dows open" as he terms it, "on life and the changes taking place in it." Says he philosophically: "You have to be alert, otherwise you can miss the wood for the trees." Benegal, in conversation, is wary of using clichés. This wariness probably stems from the fact that his critics have, sometimes without justice, accused him of oversimplifying a problem, which is also one of the reasons he does not like to talk about his films in retrospect. "They are done and gone," he says. "Whether good, bad or indifferent, they have established a relationship with the audience," adding, "not that I don't analyse my films, it is just that it is difficult to translate the technicalities into lay terms."

Commercially Viable: However, there is little controversy about many

contemporary art films. Which is probably why Benegal is viewed with some cynicism, referred to as a 'picture postcard painter' and damned with faint praise as merely 'competent.'

Colleagues, of course, pick out his outstanding qualities. Says Saeed Mirza, of *Albert Pinto* fame: "Benegal is a good story-teller. He makes a narrative film, and does it well. The form he uses coincides with what he has to say, and so there appear to be clear cinematic solutions."

In any case, although he refuses to fit into any category, either art or commercial film, there is more to Benegal beyond his odd-man-in image. He is one of the very few, who have set themselves up in the government bureaucracy that handles all matters



Benegal directing the actors: "my most complicated film"

of his films, in any case. Therefore, they are not subjected to too rigorous a post-mortem. In fact, one of the reasons why Benegal is so commercially viable is that an audience can easily reach a conclusion about his films. The complexities are probably there for those who want to read them, but by and large, Benegal appears to have found his answers. There is not the painful soul-searching, the doubt and the constant query found in other

dealing with film-making—the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), and the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC). Recently, he was made president of the FTII society, and chairman of its Governing Council, for a tenure of two years. Also, he is on the board of directors in the NFDC. These appointments have laid claim to a great deal of Benegal's precious time. But he doesn't seem to mind.

—Robini Nilekani