

## **Statist Documentary or Postcolonial Realist Film? Looking at Shyam Benegal's Manthan Through The Lens Of Development Politics**

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### **Abstract**

Parallel cinema of the 1970s created an "imaginary" yet realist space, seeking to rewrite the metanarrative of the nation. Cinema was a powerful tool used to challenge dominant socio-political processes, ideological state apparatus, hegemonic socio-political structures. Shyam Benegal's third film in his rural trilogy is a controlled exercise in seeking to disrupt a feel-good narrative of nation building, and focus on its ground realities of caste politics and governmentality. The present paper takes a firm look at the film through the lens of developmental politics and shows how Benegal's film creates the space for a realism in cinema that moves beyond the state commissioned documentaries of post-Independence India, into the narrative of cinematic fiction, based on state policy. In *Manthan*, Benegal shows how the State's attempt to bring technological advance to traditional modes of commerce, industry and animal husbandry is a policy statement that the government cannot put effectively into practice, because the State has not factored in the grassroots resistance to change. The very people whom the State wishes to provide for, through the Cooperative movement, reject the statist intervention for its textbook approach to the reality of the beleaguered post-Nehruvian nation.

This paper analyses Benegal's film as representative of how developmental statist policies did not reach the common Indian man, as intended by the State, but were eventually implemented "from below".

**Keywords:** developmental politics, statist documentary, postcolonial realist cinema, nation and narration, Shyam Benegal, *Manthan*

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The narration of the nation that is visualized through the mass medium of cinema is a powerful tool to inscribe particular ideologies among the people and to condition them into accepting patterns of values, ideas and attitudes that construct the national imaginary. What films show and how they are received by audiences is a dynamic and ever-changing process that keep configuring and reconfiguring definitions of national culture and identities. The relationship between nation, discourse and ideology is an interdependent one, and the technologies of cinema play an important role in controlling, regulating and reinforcing the cultural elements that constitute that relationship. Cinema is also literally the 'imaginary' space that rewrites the meta-narrative of the nation, challenges dominant political and social processes and hegemonic structures of institutional apparatuses, and articulates the stories of the marginal and the oppressed. Because of its theatrical power and its reach, cinema becomes a transformative agent of change, especially, for the postcolonial nation in its engagement of tradition with modernity. In short, the reel narrative replicates as well as changes the script of real life.

Ideology and discourse are two central concepts in understanding the cultural transmission of ideas, values, and assumptions. It is fascinating to identify the correlation between films and the popularity of certain set of ideas that are the governing impulse behind the ways in which society behaves at a particular moment in history: What are the particular political and social ideas that films throw up to audiences and what are not shown? How do films, their subjects and characters, style and techniques, capture the predominant mood of the nation? Can films be radical enough to counter hegemonic and majoritarian tendencies leading to social change or political transformation? And, finally, what role do films play in shaping the narrative of the nation?

Films have an integral and symbiotic relationship with political and social discourse in India. After all, the annual turnover of films by Bollywood far exceeds Hollywood, and Hindi films in its capacity to reach audiences, stupendous in size and in diversity, constitutes the most important cultural marker of the Indian masses, perhaps, second only to politics. Hindi films, therefore, in their attempt to capture 'reality', become a

crucial signifier of the political consciousness of the nation. Cinema and politics share the same space in the national narrative that together define the social capital of certain ideas and the type of constituencies that are their proponents. It is in the nature of the public consumption of films that in each era 'aesthetic' elements of cinema as art get allied with issues that define the body politic of the nation in a perpetual mode of reciprocity. While films play a major role in constructing political ideologies that lead to the rearrangement of social groups, the beliefs and value systems of dominant classes conversely shape the nature of cinema also. Consequently, cinema in general, and the films of Shyam Benegal in general, and *Manthan*, in particular, may be looked at as interesting sites for the purpose of engaging with social issues ranging from 'nationalism', culture, position of women, class and caste system or even the nature of the 'hero'. Films and the representations of the social and cultural realities of the nation therein become markers of 'national tastes' and 'national values'.

In *Manthan* (1976), the film most audiences and film critics consider as the last in Benegal's 'rural trilogy', Benegal begins a narrative strain of 'India reckoning'. The development of the postcolonial nation is examined through one of its major projects- the Cooperative Movement. *Manthan* is based on the Operation Flood, the highly successful milk revolution occasioned by Bharat Ratna awardee, Dr. Verghese Kurien. *Manthan* was made and released during the Emergency, which lasted in India from 1975 to 1977. Moving from the dark and pessimistic *Nishant*, (1975), the second in the trilogy, *Manthan* (1977) was made as a 'fiction feature':

It was an original script again, based on research of how the milk cooperatives were developing. It started when I was doing a couple of documentaries about the co-operative movement, particularly milk cooperatives...I came across many different kinds of incidents and spoke to the man who was behind it all, Dr. Kurien. I told him that if anyone really wants to understand this thing it requires a fiction feature rather than a documentary. Documentaries didn't have the kind of emotional strength and charge that you need. You have to get to see the motivation of the people themselves and how they work, what their relationships are, what the politics of the village is, what the social characteristics are, what the economic problems are and then how they relate to one another in different ways. (Benegal in an interview with van der Heide, 2006: 63)

*Manthan* was a film on the lines of *Bhuvan Shome* (1969) which showed the effect of state intervention through a bureaucracy which the state initiated for the creation of a social contract that would link the growth of the people to the growth of the nation. Benegal turned his attention to the condition of his nation-state locating his narrative in his own contemporaneity. To make a film about milk cooperatives in the immediate aftermath of the Operation Flood was to situate his exposition of statist intervention in the socio-cultural constructs of the nation, and to then cinematically portray the narrative of the nation's failure to plausibly effect a change. The film problematizes the nation's transition from a feudal world order into a modernist and socialist state, where the post-independence government rationalized governmentality in the course of its decolonization of the nation. Decolonizing the Indian mind of its feudal past as well as its colonial hangover was a tough challenge for the post-Nehruvian times that the film is set in. In *Manthan* (1977), Benegal began questioning the nation-state's much touted development projects, critically examining the Cooperative Movements launched by the post-Independence government. This tenor of cinematic narrative is also prominently present in his *Susman* (1987), and *Hari Bhari* (1991). These films, pattern themselves into the projects of 'governmentality', a term by which Michel Foucault conceptualizes who can govern, who is governed and also the means by which the shaping of someone else's activities is achieved. (Burchell et al, 1991: 87-105)

*Manthan's* protagonist, Dr. Manohar Rao, foreign-educated, urban-oriented intellectual is representative of the neocolonial bureaucracy which was the functionary of the developmentalist agenda of the nation, and symbolizes the mobilized state apparatus which during the Emergency, intensified the Congress programme of 'socialist transformation'. In her attempt to break the traditional chain of power in which the traditional ruling elites functioned as intermediaries, Indira Gandhi was aided by a mobilized bureaucracy, which implemented her socialist government's socialist programme. The actual achievements of this programme were of course limited and were cancelled during the Emergency by the new ruling government and its implementation machinery. But the feeling of a mobilized machinery able to effect radical change was very strong. (Prasad, 1998:210)

*Manthan* is an Emergency film, a film about the transformative power of a mobilized bureaucracy. Emergency slogans are heard throughout, on the radio. The film begins with a scene epitomizing the changed circumstances of a nation in transition. The punctual arrival of the train in which Manohar Rao arrives in the village is emblematic of one of the memorable achievements during the Emergency; it shows up the tardiness of the old ruling order's workings, and the new order eager to create drastic changes. The government officials are late, Dr Manohar Rao walks to the government guesthouse, refusing to burden an already old horse pulling the tonga meant for his transportation to his accommodation. Rao is shown to be new school idealist, taking up the challenge of introducing scientific methods of development and progress, challenging tradition with city bred and urban educated modernity. That the nation needed just such infusions of modern science and planning, based on the socialist notion of cooperative farming, through education and dissemination of knowledge for the

collective good, leading to community enhancement and upliftment, meant a rejection and dismantling of old and established power structures. Rao was deputed by the Dairy Board to set up a milk cooperative and include as many individuals as possible within the cooperative, to ensure maximum benefit of modern methods of dairy farming for individual farmers- the removal of the middleman and intermediaries who siphoned large quantities of profits being the immediate aim. The milk cooperative thus is the means by which the activities of the villagers are channelized and thereby governed. This is 'governmentality' at work.

The statist project of economic reforms through concurrent social upliftment, while being laudable, was silent on the method required to level and homogenize a highly stratified community based on the feudal caste system. Neither developmental bureaucracy nor governmentality, could factor in the existing ground level postcolonial reality of the deep-rooted traditionalism of feudalism and casteism while attempting to make the Cooperative functional and viable. Mishra, the resident opportunist and longtime monopolist of the milk trade, rejects Rao's intention to form a cooperative for dairy products as an idealism- which the government was foolish enough to seek to implement. He advises Rao to stick to family planning and health awareness for the poor for their true upliftment, as the tampering with traditionalisms would only create disharmony among the villagers. Mishra the trader's resistance to the cooperative is matched by the Sarpanch's refusal to be a part of any cooperative, which would give equal powers to the Dalit members as the elite. Rao's insistence that the cooperative does not privilege caste over competency, is incomprehensible to the high caste elite and of no real use to the Dalit, who sees any benefit in a Cooperative only as an instrument of loan distribution.

The ideology of a Cooperative is a new social discourse, which Rao seeks to introduce and implement. Introducing change from the outside is again the Spivakian rhetoric unfolding that the subaltern needs intervention 'from above' for the subaltern to appropriate voice as well as agency for his own progress. *Manthan's* narrative introduces the discourse of change and progress through the appropriation of power and agencies of change by those who have been hitherto disempowered, by thus effecting power from below, and change from within, though occasioned, from without.

Rao is the eager government official out to make a difference, be the agent of change in the development plan that he truly believes in. He is insistent that the divide between the low and high caste be bridged for the betterment of society at large, for individual profit and upliftment and also thus the proper implementation of his duty given to him by the State. Rao's idealism is mocked by Mishra, and the Sarpanch, whom they see at first as a negligible threat, and later a strong enough one to merit retaliation in self-interest. The figure of Rao is thus one who is a representative of that very state machinery which is created for the citizenry, to create efficiency, profit and equality in remuneration, opportunity and social standing. That the state encounters resistance from the same people that it seeks to help, grow and nurture, is the difficulty it faces in establishing discipline and order in the system.

What Benegal shows in *Manthan* is the conflict of two modes of power at the site of the Indian rural community. One mode of power is state-controlled that is operated from the Centre: the milk cooperative scheme is the State's project that is initiated and implemented from the 'outside' as part of its development scheme. The second mode of power originates from and operates at the local level. It is grounded in a feudal set-up and is specifically reactive in nature. So, like the introduction of the nationalization of banks that was opposed by the cartel of village and town moneylenders, the cooperative milk scheme is resisted because it threatens to cut out the profits of a few powerful men. The site of this rivalry between Rao and the government agents and Mishra, the Sarpanch and the upper-castes is a demonstration of what Foucault calls 'the diffusion of power'; the circulation of power in various forms and degrees that bring its agencies in a contestatory relationship with no definite outcome. (Rabinow, 1991)

In *Manthan*, Rao is the 'organic intellectual' who brings the Indian State's cooperative scheme to the village not in a negative, coercive or repressive way but in a positive and productive way. He is cast as the socialist idealist who fully backs the government's agenda of empowerment through change. He brings new knowledge to the village which he feels will vastly benefit the local, and put an end to the economic and social exploitation. Rao is assisted by his team of two others- Deshmukh and Chandavarkar- who are both more interested in creating a large membership of both Dalit and elite, in the milk cooperative, rather than just the dalits who form a big chunk of the village demographic. Rao and his team instruct the villagers literally in classroom situations. A documentary film is screened to show the benefits of the cooperative methods of farming milk. Anuradha Dingwaney Needham observes:

On the one hand, the film's recognition of Mishra's advice which downgrades and dismisses the nation state's development efforts – as a form of ideological containment, implicitly identifies both Rao, and the State's agendas he is linked to, as opposing forces that can transform the power relationships within the village (of which Mishra is a beneficiary and the poor milk producers victims.) On the other hand, Mishra's infantilization of the village as children who need 'teaching' spills over into, and infects the pedagogical enterprise of the state and Rao and his team as well. (Needham, 2013: 154)

The documentary film was a ubiquitous statist device in the Nehruvian socialist agenda of empowerment through education. Using cinema as a pedagogical tool to teach, advertise and implement state policy, is another aspect of governmentality that Benegal weaves in efficiently as a cinematic device. The screening of the documentary does not create a change in awareness or in the mindset of the tradition-bound villagers as much as the assurance by Bhola to Rao does: though Rao, the government agent, has failed in sustaining the cooperative, he has succeeded in giving agency to the villager to carry forward the cooperative's purpose. Benegal, himself a prolific documentary filmmaker and ad-man, infuses his film with the realism of postcolonial socialist India and creates a spectatorial awareness of this agenda by making *Manthan* a feature film, rather than a documentary. Contemporaneous audiences viewing *Manthan* lived in the dual reality of the recall of personally having watched countless government sponsored documentaries extolling the nation-state's progressive agendas and living the fictionalized reality of the feature film narrative.

In the postcolonial nation, the poor and the illiterate had already experienced how political independence had done little to change their lives for the better. They became embittered when they witnessed how the political changeover had only resulted in the transfer of power, from the former colonial masters to the politicians, tradesmen and government officials. The nation's modernity and development had simply bypassed them, leaving them in the same marginal position they had been in colonial times.

So the members of the Dairy Board are held in suspicion of their motive in coming to the village. Rao is considered an idealist by the elite and an interloper by the Dalits. Mishra is the first to voice resistance to change by saying, "all change is not necessarily always for the better." Mishra's attempts to dissuade Rao from interfering in local governance is also a telling comment on the inefficacy of hitherto governance to have wrought any ameliorating change of note. Mishra's resistance to Rao is typical of the way in which the rural masses viewed the bureaucracy or the intelligentsia- with distrust and suspicion. However, Rao and his team manage to persuade the villagers to form a cooperative by making them understand the economic advantage of selling their milk to the government.

Rao also manages to tackle opposition from another influential member of the village – the Sarpanch. The Sarpanch, with greater economic and social clout, is unable to accept the idea of elections to a cooperative society, which would level the equation between Dalit lower castes and the upper castes in the village dynamics, leading to loss of face as well as prestige. He agrees to an election only after being confident of a sweeping win, on account of being unopposed. Moti's nomination by Bhola as their dalit candidate divides the society on casteist lines, thereby defeating the statist enterprise of casteless governance in cooperative societies. The Sarpanch of the village, heading the Panchayat, and thereby a politically elected figure, representing the village for its socio-political development is shown up by Bhola, to be self-serving and corrupt, Bhola warns the village of the same corruption and nepotism as practiced in village panchayat politics which would follow in the milk cooperative, if the Sarpanch were to be elected as an upper caste right that he misguidedly exercises and expects from the lower castes, too.

Eventually, the machinations of Mishra and the Sarpanch bring about the transfer of Rao and the Dairy Board team is disbanded. Nonetheless, Benegal ends the film on a positive note. Bhola, the low-caste firebrand leader is shown by Benegal to have agency despite his subaltern status in the village. It is Bhola who exhorts the villagers to believe that the removal of Rao will not dampen their spirit and that the cooperative will continue to function, now independent of Government support.

Benegal's *Manthan* shows the benefits of a socialist democratic nation's development surges, with Dr. Manohar Rao as its idealist mouthpiece. Based on the work of Dr. Varghese Kurien, India's 'Milk Revolutionary', the film is not just a documentary that applauds the Government's efforts in bringing economic progress and social change through a cooperative movement, as were many propagandist government documentaries of the day. Benegal acknowledges the difficulties in introducing the concept of a cooperative for an industry. The various characters that Benegal creates in order to imagine a village community are representative of the obstacles the government faced in launching and sustaining the cooperative movement in the country. The story develops the nature of the difficulties involved in yoking together, for mutual profit, the diverse segments of society, each with its own prejudices and inhibitions and understandings of power hierarchies. The feature film, therefore, represents the fractious politics of the postcolonial nation. It highlights the many ways in which the development agenda of the state often, despite its professed social welfare purposes, clash with the ground reality of a rural community in India. The deeply entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and gender continue to divide people and become insurmountable bottlenecks to the nation's development project. Films such as Benegal's *Manthan* creatively combine the narrative elements of good story-telling with the documentary realism of postcolonial modernity.

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