

# bollywood

## Benegal's cocktail of comic and caustic

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

**S**hyam Benegal's latest Hindi film, *Well Done Abba*, is a fascinating example of what Indian cinema is really capable of. It can well be natural, it can well be realistic, it can well be innovative and it can well be witty — and yet say some of the grimmest stories.

This is where Benegal differs from the current crop of Indian directors like Anurag Kashyap, Dibakar Banerjee, Nishikant Kamat and some others. These men are awfully pessimistic and their movies uncomfortably dark, probably because of the times they now live in and the drawing-room television that bombards them with disquieting images of the world. Benegal and his contemporaries were — and still are — not as cynical or chary, scornful or sneering.

Benegal may have been one among the several who pioneered the New Indian Wave in the late 1960s and the 1970s that pushed cinema away from often meaningless melange of melody and mirth, but, in some ways, he was the first among these men.

While Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Patabhi Rama Reddy and others were as much part of the effort to create this wave, Benegal's contribution to this French La Nouvelle Vague-inspired movement had an added significance. His mostly Hindi films were made in Mumbai's heartland of commercial cinema, whereas Sen and his ilk worked outside this sphere, where competition and hostility (to alternative fare) was not as overpowering or debilitating.

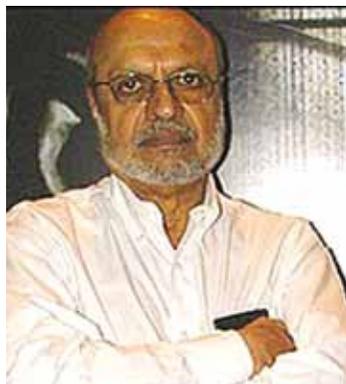
If Satyajit Ray was deeply influenced by Rabindranath Tagore, Benegal was Nehruvian. The ideals of secularism,

pluralism, equal opportunities and women's rights are ingrained in his oeuvre, and these can be seen clearly in his first movies. *Ankur* and *Nishant* are extraordinarily powerful denunciations of rural oppression by the rich landowning classes. On the other hand, *Bhumika*, *Mandi*, *Mammo*, *Sardari Begum* and *Zubeida* veer into a woman's dilemmas: her desire for freedom and security, her struggle to survive, and the peculiarities of being a Muslim. His forays into milkmen's community (*Manthan*) and handloom weavers' Pochampally (*Susman*) were fictionalised accounts of the factual.

Benegal's approach has now turned comic. His *Welcome to Sajjanpur*, which he made just before *Well Done Abba*, adopts a lighter style of narration. He takes us to Sajjanpur, a village that does not exist on the map and is far removed from the realm of reality in other ways. It has no e-mail or mobile phones, but yet, Sajjanpur is not a place from the deep crevices of history.

It exists now, and the story takes place in modern India. A motley group of characters helps Benegal spin his yarn that is sometimes sweet, sometimes sour, sometimes happy, sometimes heartbreaking. At the head of this is Mahadev (played by Shreyas Talpade), an aspiring novelist whose failures push him to take up letter writing both as a profession and as an artistic means to pen flowery prose on postcards for the village's largely unlettered inhabitants.

Their woes are as diverse as their pleas and lineage. The villagers pass by Mahadev's desk, precariously perched under a tree in the village square. He does not take too many liberties with the contents of the letters, but makes



\* Shyam Benegal

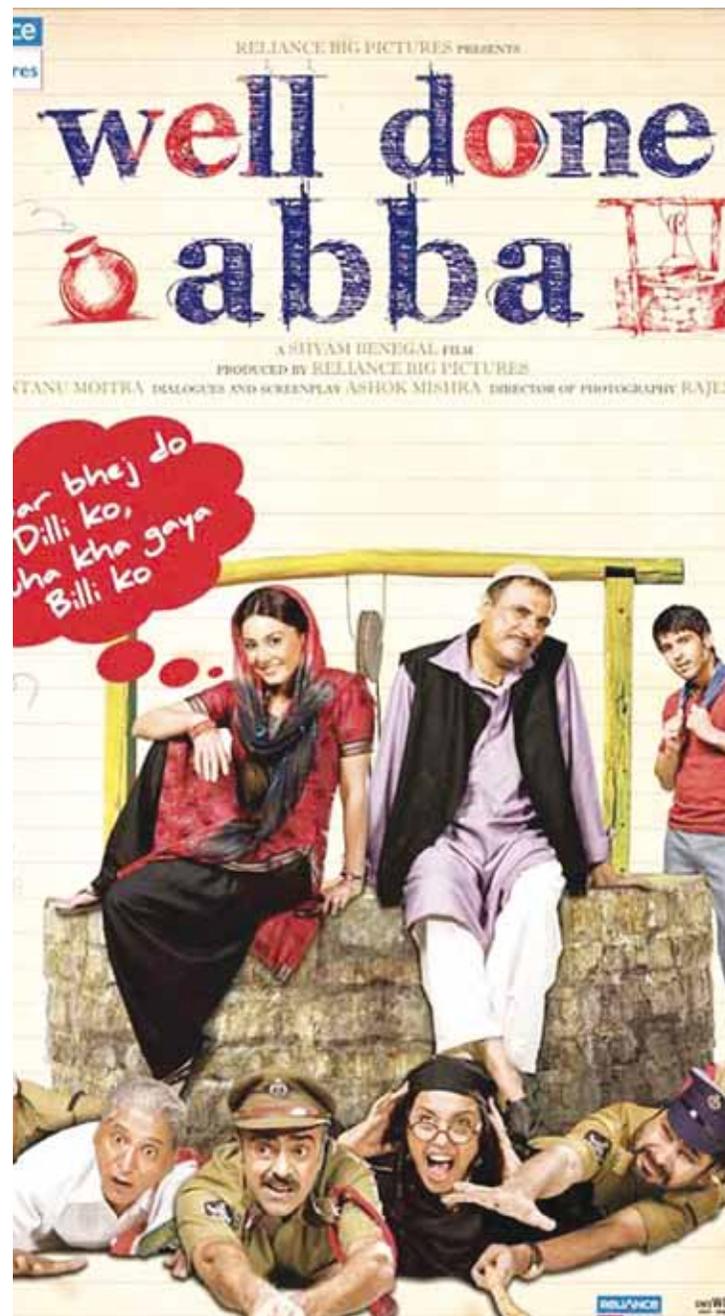
one exception when writing for a young bride, Kamala (Amrita Rao), whose husband is away in the city and whom he secretly covets. He drives a wedge between the two by maliciously twisting words.

Unlike *Welcome to Sajjanpur*, which plays at a personal, intimate level, Benegal's latest work, *Well Done Abba*, gets onto the macro plane. It is a riveting socio-political satire set in Chikatpalli, a village close to Hyderabad. Humorous without being slapstick or juvenile, the film centres on the trials and tribulations of a Muslim car driver, Armaan Ali (brilliantly essayed by Boman Irani).

When he sees his literate daughter, Muskaan's (Minissha Lamba) daily water-fetching ordeal in drought savaged Chikatpalli, he decides to dig a well outside his house under a government-sponsored scheme. But little does he realise that a web of intrigue lies ahead.

A vicious cartel operates with impunity: the village chief, the junior engineer, the bloc development officer and the official photographer among others are hand-in-glove to claim their respective pounds of flesh.

However, one cannot miss Benegal's note of optimism here. In the midst of all this sleaze, he introduces a ray of hope in



the form of a police officer (Rajit Kapoor), who stays squeaky clean, despite a nagging wife and bullying minister.

Like *Welcome to Sajjanpur*, *Well Done Abba* uses authentic situations to examine one of India's most pressing problems, water shortage — a perennial provocation for communal and electoral clashes. But his style and form never let us feel for a moment that the auteur is talking about a profound issue.

More importantly, in a country

whose cinema has disgustingly passed off buffoonery as comedy (Chandrababu or Nagesh in Tamil and Mehmood or Rajendranath in Hindi), Benegal has used spoof and sensational wit with a touch of intelligence. He did this in his early *Mandi*. And, of course, in ... *Sajjanpur*. He goes a step ahead in ... *Abba*.

Well done, Mr Benegal. — (Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on national and international cinema for over three decades.)

### Maiden shot at megaphone

Prakash Raj, who playing an impoverished weaver in *Kanchivaram*, won the National Award for Best Actor in 2009, is directing his debut movie, *Naanu, Nanna Kanasu*, in Kannada. A remake of *Abhiyum Naanum* in Tamil, Prakash Raj's venture has provoked questions. Why in Kannada, and why a remake? The director quips: "It is always best to work in a language you have known all your life, and what is wrong with remakes... Are not Shakespeare and Wordsworth translated into Indian languages?" Absolutely. Satyajit Ray hardly stepped out of his native Bengal, Adoor Gopalakrishnan seldom left Kerala and Girish Kasaravalli stayed put in Karnataka. But, one hopes that Prakash Raj would not disappoint us with his maiden shot at the megaphone.

### A houseful of senselessness

Sajid Khan's latest, *Housefull*, will appeal to an audience out there in the cinema with a can of Coke and a plate of samosas, but minus their thinking caps. The film, which just opened worldwide, attracted full houses (much like its title, which is otherwise unconnected with the story!) across India over the weekend. To some, its slapstick humour, fuelled by the main lead, Akshay Kumar (playing a deadpan Aarush, who pairs with Deepika Padukone / Sandy on screen, after their 2008 *Chandni Chowk to China*), may appeal. But for the others, it can be a put-off. The story is skimpy (ably matched by costumes), that of Aarush, whose congenital bad luck can fetch him a job only at a casino,

where his mere shadow is enough to a turn a player's winning streak into a losing one.

However, when he dives into the sea to die after a marital disappointment, Sandy plays the damsel in deed and rescues him. This relationship is for keeps in spite of its journey being messed up by a motley group of co-travellers that indulges in crass stupidity. Imagine these: a head of the military intelligence goes about with a lie detector using it at the drop of a hat and; two bumbling engineers connect a cylinder of laughing gas to the main air-conditioning plant at the Buckingham Palace that pushes the stiff-lipped Queen herself into an uncontrollable fit. Wish Benegal would coach men like Khan.