

Marketing films through Social Realities: Shyam Benegal's 'Welcome to Sajjanpur'- A Case Study

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Abstract- The success of a film in recent years has been largely dependent on the marketing of the film. Since cinema has always had a profound influence on the lives of people, being a larger than life media, film makers go the extra mile to woo the audience. Be it sci-fi, love stories, action dramas or family sagas, the marketing of the package is very important. Keeping this in mind, over the years the ways of presenting themes in films have been varied and innovative. Social realities have been presented by film makers often in a serious tone creating a niche audience for the same, distancing such films from a mass audience. In recent times film makers have tried to portray social realities differently. In a first of its kind, Shyam Benegal has attempted to portray social realities through the tool of humour and satire. The present paper will attempt to study this practice of using social realities as a marketing tool by film makers, with special emphasis to Shyam Benegal's 'Welcome to Sajjanpur'.

Index Terms- Marketing, Social Realities, Shyam Benegal, Welcome to Sajjanpur

I. INTRODUCTION

“As a film-maker pure and simple it can be said with some accuracy that no director since Satyajit Ray has done more for Indian films than Shyam Benegal...” “Benegal's films, whether cultural or political, are models of their kind, showing that his commitment is not confined to fiction but securely based on facts as well as imagination...” -Derek Malcolm

None could have put this better or stronger than Derek Malcolm, the famed film critic and self confessed lover of Indian cinema. It is a fact that Indian cinema, more specifically Hindi cinema in its hundred odd years of existence, has strived to present the case of this nation, her people and society time and time again- warts and all.

From the very first mythological *Raja Harishchandra* to the contemporary city centric *Wake-up Sid* Hindi cinema has explored different facets of Indian society. The 1950s had great stalwarts like Mehboob Khan, Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy and Guru Dutt dealing with a wide spectrum of themes such as nation-self conflict (*Bandini*), creative/commercial success (*Pyasa*), women power (*Mother India*) and small town values versus big city survival games (*Shree 420*, *Aawara*).

Be it class divide, peasant revolt, capitalist greed or the noble poor- all these themes have been remarkably presented through the film noir of the Hindi film industry through the ages.

Historians and academicians have often depended on films for studying the evolution of Indian society, so great has been the reflection of society through this medium. It is an accepted fact

that cinema much like literature and art reflected society in varying shades- either through popular cinematic mode or through alternate cinematic styles.

Unlike popular cinema of Raj Kapoor or Mehboob which largely used melodrama, music and money, Benegal's films have almost always been true to reality, much like his predecessor and mentor Satyajit Ray. In Benegal's films we get to see a strong influence of the Italian neo-realism that had been used in patches by Bimal Roy in his *Do Bigha Zameen* and a great deal of it in Ray's Bengali film *Pather Panchali*. Ray's films which were quintessentially Bengal centric enjoyed the full bodied public support and thereby continued to take the maker to great heights of recognition both in Bengal and outside of India as well. Benegal unfortunately has had to constantly keep the ghosts of the powerful Bombay film industry at bay in order to forge a path for himself that was distinct and different from all that had been done earlier. Benegal's first film *Ankur* was released at a time when the Bombay film industry unleashed mega blockbusters like *Zanjeer* and *Yadon ki Baraat*, yet went on to create a niche for the film maker and paved the way for more such films from his stable.

Benegal's films have always been close to reality, placing his stories in specific contexts, constantly making use of the marginalized voice unheard, using themes as varied as caste, gender and socio-economic divide. To give credit where it is due, Benegal has given shape to the parallel or alternative cinema movement in India having made nearly twenty odd films in this genre.

His film *Welcome to Sajjanpur* very nearly defines Shyam Benegal's genre of film making exhibiting little of his brand of film making, except perhaps in relation to the themes presented in the film. Here lies the researcher's curiosity and interest.

Welcome to Sajjanpur was perhaps the only saving grace of the year 2008 as a commercially successful film having made excellent business at the box office with the likes of *Jannat*, an unadulterated commercial venture from the production house of Mahesh Bhatt.

The researcher would like to explore the different facets of this film and find plausible answers to questions related to the film maker's oeuvre and his penchant for trying to reflect a slice of society.

It would add to the study if the researcher is able to discount the critics who have been vocal in criticizing Shyam Benegal for selling out to commercial interests by changing his sensibilities thereby helping to finally put the last nail in the coffin otherwise known as parallel cinema.

II. SOCIAL REALITIES AND FILMS

“I don’t know if cinema can actually bring about change in society. But cinema can certainly be a vehicle for creating social awareness. I believe in egalitarianism and every person’s awareness of human rights. Through my films I can say, ‘here is the world and here are the possibilities we have’. Eventually it is to offer an insight into life, into experience, into a certain kind of emotive/cerebral area”. – Shyam Benegal.

Of all mass media systems cinema by far is considered the most potent and effective having been equipped with a larger than life capacity to present the message of the maker. Added to this film makers of Europe, US and India have used the true-to-reality style of presentation to capture society in all its starkness. For most part this was done to add a level of seriousness to societal themes which were previously ignored and diluted to gain popular support and mass appeal.

Be it popular cinema or alternate/parallel cinema, both have and continue to draw heavily from the immediate reality of the times, the only difference being the manner in which these themes of reality are represented. Where popular cinema chooses to explore the slice of reality with a heavy dose of hype and exaggeration, alternate/parallel cinema chooses to say it without much fan fare. The idea of cinema is to reflect the society for greater impact.

One of the most strongly supported proposition in communication research today is that content in mainstream media, especially cinema, reinforces existing social, economic and political institutions as well as dominant values and normative systems. Cinema is seen as a product of a complex interaction between media institutions and other social actors, including governmental agencies, businesses, political parties, social movements and social groups.

This act of reflecting society is by no means a recent phenomenon. From the earliest films in the world, film makers have been capturing the essence of society in all earnestness, helping cinema to truly be an act of social commentary.

Orson Wells wrote, directed and starred in *Citizen Kane* in the year 1941, which was loosely based on the life of newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst. He included condensed time sequences and unusual camera angles to represent the failed life of a megalomaniac newspaper baron. Though, a commercial failure the film is considered a classic to this day for its sheer experimentation and treatment.

Many films in the US during the 1960s reflected the nation’s conflict over the Vietnam War, youthful rebellion, Civil Rights movement and even militant Black Power efforts. In fact, it is said that social conflict and social statement films dominated this decade. Film makers also moved away from the structural narrative that had dominated earlier to more episodic narratives with less foreshadowed endings. Themes tried to break the standard format of earlier times with heroes portrayed as being amoral, sex often fused with violence rather than romance and politics and political corruption often depicted explicitly.

Cinema in India has followed a very similar trajectory like its American counterpart. By the early 1970s cinema was expected to be a medium of “Indian culture and society providing healthy entertainment, “according to a film finance corporation dictat”.

Cinema while providing the expected healthy entertainment also became an idiom of protest. There was a decided separation amongst the film makers of India into two recognizable groups. One that chose to work on fantastical and populist themes and the other group that stuck to authenticity and realism. There was a collective trend against escapist film content. To quote Benegal himself “until cinema in the 1960s... apart from Bengal and Kerala there was no split yet in Hindi cinema because of the many crises in the post independent India. But then the formula became too hard, marketable ingredients became specific, the director was left inexpressive if he was working with stereotypes...”

Twenty odd years after independence, issues such as caste, class, rural poverty and urban angst were rife. The dissolution of the people with the system, government, society had to be told-social realities became the strongest metaphor for film makers to do so.

There are two principle reasons why this form of cinema turned into a national aesthetic programme. It represented the culmination of a cultural movement and defined its critical parameters. These film makers were hailed as the pioneers of cinema offering a different aesthetic and ideological vision breaking away from the studio controlled, market driven, entertainment based cinema of Bombay. Often called parallel or art house they are a genre by themselves. Over time debate has resulted in the grouping of film makers into two camps- the populist (commercial) and the alternative (parallel/art house). This happened to be the second reason why this form of cinema began to be experimented upon- a question of identity. This bifurcation has proved damaging to the movement of parallel art cinema having been forced to constantly fight the accusation of being elitist. Sangeeta Dutta, film critic and writer says, “The new-cinema film makers turned away from the stereotyped representations of the hero and glamorous heroin, from the pleasures of spectacle as in song and dance, action and from mandatory happy endings. Adapting the realist aesthetic, they cast new actors with no glamour attached to play recognizable characters in a specific milieu. Following the European neo-realists they opted out of studio environments and set their narratives in realist settings- in most cases rural locales. The economics of taking small units out into remote areas also suitably matched the ideology of new cinema.”

The alternate film-makers experimented with form, technique and content much like their European and American counterparts of the 50’s and 60’s. To quote Dutta, “Achieving a clever balance between art and commerce it was Shyam Benegal who quickly appeared at the zenith of the new movement. Cloaked into the new cinema ideology Benegal offered independently financed, engaging character driven narratives set in specific socio-political contexts. Realism in his films was a product of new social forces and relationships, depicting action which was contemporary and ideology which was secular and at the same time universal.”

Benegal says this of his films and style, “A passive acceptance of life is of no interest to anyone let alone a creative man. A dynamic society is always changing and the duty of every creative film maker is to locate and identify those catalytic elements which cause a change in society.”

Benegal too is highly critical about the modern day trends in film making. "Hindi films have created this pan-Indian industry which relates not to any specific culture. They have created their own culture, the Indian family and its traditions which define the film- and you can take this and set it down anywhere."

Many in the industry however feel that Benegal's criticism is exaggerated and in fact unwarranted. There are still those who continue to make films that they believe have something for the society, who have successfully blended the seriousness of alternate cinema without compromising on the commercial elements- using a perfect blend of both the genres. Often called multiplex movies such films are mostly directed towards an urban audience and make use of the closer to reality concept to the maximum. Presently with the healthy economic offering plenty of opportunities in India there are many talented film makers who are technically trained and come to this field with knowledge, know how and keenness to do things differently.

This kind of cinema meant for an educated, urban middleclass audience often relies on the everyday accounts of life from the very society it exists in. The concept of social reality in cinema has truly found its medium and groove. In recent years film makers have drawn heavily from newspaper accounts and actual events in society to depict their stories. Madhur Bhandarkar's *Chandini Bar* tackled the issue of trafficking in women in the big cities of India. It also bemoaned the problems of the young who take to the profession of bar dancing and the negative fallout thereof, of such a life style. His *Corporate* was a scathing commentary on the corruption and connivance that exists in the world of business. Bhandarkar's *Fashion* showed the seamy and the dirtier side of the fashion industry. Then there have been *Traffic Signal* and *Page 3* which exposed the sorry state of affairs in the state law and order machinery and in the field of print journalism respectively.

Of late many young film makers have been concentrating on probing the issues related to living in big cities, urban angst and frustration, problems of the young in a new India. Themes as varied as love at sixty, living together, teen pregnancies, nucleus families, problems of urban upwardly mobile couples, job stress, infidelity, and crime are represented repeatedly giving one the feeling that city-centered themes are almost formulaic. In fact of late most film makers have this tendency to make use of social realities as a replacement to literary themes since the general feeling is that there is greater identification with such realities on the part of the audience. Rather than being far removed from reality this slice of life instances seen in cinema are able to bridge the distance between the audience and the film maker. Such themes do not take time or effort to convince the cine goers.

Movies such as *Life in a Metro*, *Dil Chahata Hai*, *Phir Milenge*, *Bus Ek Pal* and *Wake up Sid* deal with city centric themes that are contemporary and realistic. Even movies that make political statements seem to use slice of lifestyle and social realities to explore the storyline of the film. *Rang De Basanti* was a commentary on the MIG controversy and the fall out thereof, while touching upon other issues such as vigilantism among the youth. To a large extent one can state that the urban audience in India almost expects cinema to be a true reflection of society these days. With exposure to cinema of the world urban India is

more exacting and critical and thereby more demanding of the film industry leading to more realistic cinema than ever before. With an NRI audience outside of India ever burgeoning the demand for such realistic yet stylishly made urban oriented films are great. Though such city centric themes were dealt with earlier as well- Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Satyajit Ray's *Jane Aranya*- to name a few, the sensibilities that were brought in were totally parallel cinematic rather than commercial as they are now.

"Indian modernity is cultivated in the work of Tamil film maker Mani Ratnam whose *Bombay* along with its scenes of violence and communalist mobilization presents images of an urban world of globalized affluence and smoothness. This is a world which points the strife and the misery of the streets and revolves around values of individualism and personalized relationships while at the same time showing these as not irreconcilable with other values of family loyalty and respect, thereby reconciling conflict and naturalizing life style of globalized modernity in their Indian setting".- Preben Kaarsholm, film critic.

Thus the socio-realistic themes of this new kind of cinema - referred to as multiplex, mid-order, and cross-over cinema- have been used in a reworked, changed fashion in contemporary cinema today. So we have Madhur Bhandarkar's *Chandini Bar*, Raj Kumar Santhoshi's *Lajja* and Mahesh Manjrekar's *Astitva*, three highly women centric films doing the rounds with a big dose of social realism.

The researcher's interest lies in this particular trend in contemporary cinema. Academically speaking this is a recent phenomena and much research or study has not been done on this particular issue. Further the research aims at studying the aspect of social realism through a content analysis of the film *Welcome to Sajjanpur* since this one film stands as an example amidst the multitude of films of this genre. It would make practical sense if only in a limited manner if this research could establish *Welcome to Sajjanpur* as a trend setter for film makers who are hard pressed to access great pieces of literature. This film may provide a formula for others in the usage of real life events and cases as a replacement of fictional stories.

These and other similar questions regarding social realism in Hindi cinema and the sensibilities of Shyam Benegal as a film maker will be probed in the course of the research.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Christopher Williams, "Discussion of film (then) takes place in the confused but exciting arena ... in which historical, technological, aesthetic and sociological factors constantly jostle with each other... As yet we have no overarching theory which deals convincingly with all the factors and their relations with each other, though the attempt to construct one must remain a concern of serious interest in film. Realism is one of the partial theories we have instead...."

Looking through the film instead of at a constructed imaginary world, viewers take apart a scene to appreciate fragments which they constantly relate to everyday life. A woman who had been to see the blockbuster hit *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, which featured the story of a joint family wedding,

remarked that ‘it was like going to a family wedding’ (Srinivas 2002).

Inasmuch as the cinema is a highly valuable cultural institution for the elaboration of social reality through popular narrative; and narrative allows the creation of a symbolic universe which is marked by coherence and meaningfulness. Cinematic heroes and the narrative world in which they are developed fulfill a mythic function for they help to create a world which is meaningful and purposeful for us. In this sense, myth is a primary form of communication which facilitates our ability to understand the world around us and our place in it. It helps us to establish a map of our world, a compass for safe passage through unknown, uncharted seas. Through the mythic process, the world is seemingly punctuated with familiar landmarks although the terrain may be new and unfamiliar. The forms of popular media are indeed contemporary vehicles or carriers of myth. Writing particularly of the television medium but with implications as well for the cinema, Roger Silverstone observes that “the medium as a powerful cultural institution preserves, in form and function, much that we had previously granted only to oral or pre-literate societies, and secondly that it is through its forms... that this continuity can be established.”

Storytelling and mythmaking are universal characteristics of cultural expression. As mythic expression, the filmic narrative involves the ‘writing’ of history or the telling of a people’s story in their own images embodying their unique perspectives. Fundamentally, narrative is a cultural artefact which accounts for or provides legitimacy for a people and the (selectable-selected) options they take in order to define their existence.

Instead of diversion and escape, it is possible that the cinema can present a critique of existing society and its social relations; as well as help in understanding the problems we face and the pressing difficulties of our independence. A film can glorify the romance of tradition or it can help a society to understand and cope with cultural change allowing us to see our world in new ways. Witness the work of Ousmane Sembene, Africa’s most important filmmaker who understands the power of film. Sembene believes that, “The artist must live within his community and denounce its weaknesses. The artist should assume such a role because he is more sensitive than others. He knows the magic of words, sounds and colours. He uses these elements to express what he and other people think and feel. The artist must not live in an ivory tower. He has social functions and responsibilities to fulfill” (Yearwood 1987).

Many media activists, especially alternative media producers, seem content to create their own media spaces, an activity with its own inherent satisfactions. Habermasian theory seems to offer the most insight, in part because of its own democratic normative commitments. If new social movements engage in defensive and offensive struggles for more democratic worlds, including vibrant public spheres, media activism is a sterling example of these politics. Its success will not likely bring it a collective identity or a well defined niche within the polity or social movement sector. This form of activism may be fated to remain a ‘movement in itself’, not (consciously) for itself (Caroll and Hackett 2006).

In his book *Communicating Unreality*, Gabriel Weimann explores the shaping of our perception of reality by mass media. He begins with the notion of a mediated world, then moves into

debates over effects, cultivation theory and the psychology of cultivation (2000).

Trinh T. Minh-ha, says “Reality is more fabulous, more maddening, more strangely manipulative than fiction.” Now that documentary and fiction film modes are no longer thought of as separate and distinct, it is appropriate to reconsider documentary’s ‘special indexical bond’ with the pro-filmic event” (Gaines and Renov 1999).

Benegal’s films connect with real contexts in India. He roots his stories in credible places and times to address social themes. In contrast, the traditional Hindi movie offered an escape from reality. One of Benegal’s films *Manthan*, for example, showed oppression and empowerment among dairy farmers. It was funded by over 500,000 rural farmers donating two rupees each.

Benegal’s first four films were so realistic that they led critics to coin a new genre: India’s “parallel cinema”, or “middle cinema”. Benegal himself dislikes these terms as much as the word “Bollywood”, but they attest to the innovation he brought to Indian films. In the interview, Benegal criticized the cinema of the previous generations for being disconnected from real life. He likewise expressed concern that the new generation of films in India focus almost completely on the wealthy urban context.

Much like literature, art and music – films are also an important tool used by historians to study the evolution of contemporary society. A film is largely similar to a time capsule that can capture the essence and the mindset of the society at the time in which the film was made. Today, there are scholars who specialize in the study of contexts within films and there are even museums, libraries and entire universities that aim at understanding the pulse of a society through its Cinema. After gaining independence, cinema was an important tool used by the Indian intelligentsia for the purpose of setting an ideal and a goal. Films of the ‘50s portrayed exactly what the society of the time wanted India to become. However, upon recognizing the flaws inherent in Indian culture, films such as *Neecha Nagar* and *Do Bigha Zameen* were made. These films aimed to address the various societal handicaps of India and convey the message that the path towards progress lay in overcoming these obstacles and working together (irrespective of caste and creed) to build a strong nation. The next significant era that must be understood while studying the Indian Film Industry is that of the ‘70s. While it is easy to typecast the films of this era into the categories of ‘Zeenat Aman’, ‘RD Burman’ and ‘Flower Power’ – in truth, there is a lot more to the films of this decade; contexts and subtexts are safely buried between very fine lines. Having started out (right after independence) with great hopes and dreams to build a strong nation, the generation of the 70’s was disheartened to realize that their dreams had gone unfulfilled. The avoidance of social issues in the films of this era also reflects its pessimism. And then, we come to our decade, the decade that has probably made the least amount of impact on Indian movie history. The rise of consumerism is evident in the films of our time – especially with the aggressive marketing and advertising that is done through films. Who can forget the scene in *Taal* when the hero dares the heroine to drink out of his bottle of Coca Cola. And who sponsored this film? Surprise, surprise, it was Coca Cola (Rayman Gill 2008)!

The dramatic story of an army man's 'widow' being re-married and pregnant with her second husband's child when the first husband returns from a Pakistan jail is ready to be filmed by ad-maker Prabhakar Shukla. "Even social reality has to be presented in an entertaining manner. There'll be no songs or anything in my film. But the issue has to be entertaining. Otherwise who would want to sit through it? What really inspired me about Gudiya's story was the truth about gender discrimination underlining her plight. A man can marry four times but a woman can't ask for a divorce even once. Does human emotion have no value for the law? I've studied the law and respect it. My father is a lawyer," says Shukla (IANS 2009).

Richard Dyer (1993) has argued that the entertainment industry expresses (and satisfies) its audiences' need for utopian desires. He believes this is done by 'non-representational means' through the affect of music and colour amongst other techniques. Many viewers report that they watch Bombay cinema with a 'suspension of disbelief' (as Shahid, a film viewer, claimed) due to its lack of realism and its melodramatic mode of address. This was in contrast with others who felt that they did not want realism. When this predictable utopian ending is challenged, as in some art and experimental films, it is either applauded for its realistic sensibility or condemned for producing affects of hopelessness for those who are caught in dystopian realities. Naseema, who is a British Pakistani woman of 26 from Oldham, expressed intense anger when describing a film called *Chandni Bar* (Madhur Bhandarkar 2002) that had a sad ending. The realistic representation of the failed romance of the woman protagonist who had struggled all her life left Naseema feeling trapped while watching *Chandni Bar*- "It was such a nice film but the ending was so... she never escaped from it! I think that is the sort of thing that is a bit degrading for women. If someone in a difficult position was watching that what would they think? I am going to end up like that, there is no way I am getting out of that?"

Welcome To Sajjanpur is a comic satire on the lives of people living in a village and their issues. It is directed by National Award winning director, Shyam Benegal and stars Shreyas Talpade and Amrita Rao in lead roles. Supporting them are a host of talented actors—Ila Arun, Divya Dutta and Ravi Kishen, to name a few. The plot of the movie is well knit and neatly executed in the form of a story which keeps you engaged till the end.

The story is about a B.A graduate, who is unable to get a job and thus is forced to make a living out of writing letters for his fellow villagers. His real ambition, however, is to become a novelist and he is in search of a subject. Though, a villager, Mahadev (Shreyas Talpade) has the potential to change the lives of people around him through his letters. How he does this is shown through a satirical take on an Indian village. Mahadev's childhood love interest Kamla (Amrita Rao) is desperate for a word from her husband, who is employed in a construction site in the city of Mumbai. The couple are linked through the letters written by Mahadev the letter writer. A jealous Mahadev creates confusion and complexities between the couple by indulging in falsehood and opportunism. Other plots include a harried mother (Ila Arun) who wants to marry off her manglik daughter; Munni Bai, an eunuch, who is contesting the village elections and is threatened by an opposing candidate; and a love-sick

compounder who is head over heels in love with the widowed daughter-in-law of an army man. Mahadev manages to get the compounder married, provide police protection for Munni Bai and nearly kisses Kamla. All is good till he learns a shocking truth about Kamla's husband and Munni Bai is nearly killed. The story takes a new turn from here revealing a lot of truths not just in the movie but also about the society that we live in. The beliefs we follow. The corruption and the politics, even at the village level.

There are several incidents in the movie where one can see the dogmas prevalent in the society. The language and dialogues add to the rustic charm. The street play in the movie is one of the most direct attacks on the land purchase policies of big entrepreneurs at a meager price from innocent farmers. The message is loud and clear, however for that particular duration one feels a disconnection with the film. The movie in itself takes a mocking shot at various social issues, then the insertion of this street play seems forceful and needless. Apart from this the movie runs flawlessly till the end revealing certain surprises and shocks. The performance of the actors adds to the credit of the movie.

The music in the movie is given by Shantanu Moitra of *Parineeta* fame. Songs, though not much of a hit, are quite light and hummable. The song 'Sitaram' is played throughout the movie in the background and is in a way the theme song. Apart from that all songs have a social message behind them. Cinematography is praiseworthy. The sets give you the feel of a real village and transport you to the pastoral or rather rustic life of the village. Cameras and lights are used very well to bring out a bright and colourful look in the movie. There is not a dark moment in the movie. If at all there is, it does not stay for long. The movie, though not inspired by any real life incident, does, however describe life as it really is. Indiatimes terms it as Shyam Benegal's "most entertaining attempt, by far" and entertaining, it is (Viewpaper 2009).

IV. METHODOLOGY

Content analysis is a reality check in which the portrayal of a certain group, phenomenon, trait, or characteristic is assessed against a standard taken from real life. The congruence of the media presentation and the actual situation is then discussed. Gerbner (1969) compared the world of TV violence with real-life violence. Dixon and Liz (2000) compared the TV depictions of African-Americans and Latinos as law-breakers to real-life data. Content analysis also focuses on exploring the media image of certain minority or otherwise notable groups. In many instances, these studies are conducted to assess changes in media policy towards these groups, to make inferences about the media: responsiveness to demands for better coverage, or to document social trends.

Stern and Taylor (1997) found the portrayals of Asian-Americans in TV ads during the mid-1990s and reported that only 10% of the ads featured an Asian-American model.

Media studies effects is a relatively new field as regards content analysis. One method is cultivation analysis, in which the dominant message and themes in media content are documented, to see whether these messages foster similar attitudes among heavy media users.

Content analysis is also used in a study of agenda setting. An analysis of relevant media content is necessary in order to determine the importance of news topics. Subsequent audience research looks at the correspondence between the media's agenda and the audiences' agenda setting. Content analysis as a method of collecting data has been extensively used in film analysis. Film is an art form that offers a practical, environmental, pictorial, dramatic, narrative, and musical medium to convey a story. Although it can be viewed as a type of generic video, complex film editing techniques, such as the selecting, ordering, and timing of shots; the rate of cutting; and the editing of soundtracks, is required to produce a successful movie. Consequently, all of these special features need to be taken into account for better content analysis, understanding, and management.

A thematic analysis is a form of qualitative content analysis that has been used extensively in film analysis. The researcher views the film and notes similarities and differences appearing across the storylines and main characters. All information from the film is then incorporated in the assessment, including narration, story text, plot, soundtrack, and all main, supporting, and background characters.

The present paper draws heavily from thematic content analysis representing the primary data. The various themes will be contextualized and perceived from the parameters of language, settings and treatment. Secondary data will be culled from books, journals, research articles and newspaper content.

V. DATA ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

1. **Of Names and Nomenclatures:** the film begins with the protagonist Mahadev Khuswa commenting on the practice in India of changing established/historical names of villages, towns and big cities. Shyam Benegal's displeasure and sarcasm is seen very clearly, albeit voiced through Mahadev.

Political parties have always gained mileage out of gimmicky rituals in India. In the name of one's village/town/city pride they have often resorted to garner public support. Thus, over the past few years, Madras has become Chennai; Bombay has become Mumbai; Calcutta has turned into Kolkata and closer home, Bangalore is now Bengaluru, with many more cities awaiting change. Intellectuals have often questioned the logic behind these changes, but to no avail. Most political parties in India are highly regional, keen to play identity politics. There are controversies every day regarding language, caste, region, and religious status. Maharashtra has been in the eye of the storm due to regional parties like Shiv Sena and of late Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), who are bent on staking the claim as the 'sole custodian of Maharashtrian values'! Towards this goal these parties resort to a strong pro-Marathi stance. The recent shameful act of violence perpetrated by the MNS during the oath-taking ceremony of the non-Marathi MLAs in the state legislature is a case in point.

The Shiv Sena in Maharashtra has a huge vote bank and presence in the state because of its 'Marathi' agenda. Right from the sixties when scores of south Indians were driven away to make way for the Marathi Manoos. This linguistic chauvinism has helped it project a pro-Marathi stance winning it political

mileage. In 2008, so intense was Shiv Sena in milking the situation, using the Marathi fervour that it started a 'learn Marathi campaign' for the non-Maharashtrians. Ironically, the MNS have hijacked the campaign from the Shiv Sena and have been successfully using it for currying favour from the Maharashtrian electorate.

Benegal sends a strong message voiced through the protagonist regarding the futility of such an exercise. The locale of the story is set in Sajjanpur (a place for the gentle folk) a quintessential Indian village. Mahadev hints at the original name of the village Durjjanpur (meaning a place for the ill-repute) at the very outset of the film. He bemoans the fact that despite the name change the village is infested with vice and sin- there lies the irony. Though Benegal couches this entire point in a humorous satire, it never-the-less finds its mark on the average cine watcher. The approach is effective without being preachy.

2. **Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram:** the politics of opportunism gets a strong mention in *Welcome to Sajjanpur*. The fact that politics makes for strange bedfellows is amply represented in this film. Mahadev, the protagonist, is a village letter writer/reader having ambitions of becoming a novelist. He is inadvertently privy to many strange political moves and shenanigans that result in friends turning foes and blood enemies miraculously becoming friends, all in the name of power and politics. India is a bedrock of political opportunism, where the policy of adapting actions and decisions for expediency and convenience by sacrificing ethical principles is a common enough sight.

Gaya Lal, an MLA in the Harayana state legislature, with his frequent defections to and from various political parties led to the creation of the phrase 'Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram', a pun or word play on the name Gaya. Ironically, his son Uday Bhan, in his capacity as an MLA in Harayana was charged under the anti-defection law in the year 2007 for having changed party affiliations once too often. There is a reference to this Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram practice in the film, once again indicating Benegal's political preoccupations.

3. **Of Scholarly Pursuits and Education:** In a recently published on-line article (Thirsting for 'Pyasa') noted director Sudhir Mishra was extremely condescending about the story-line and theme of most contemporary Hindi cinema. "The fare on offer in cinema halls around the country includes a lot of films that, though slickly produced, are superficial, unimaginative and even down-right stupid. They cannot be really called cinema- they are more like lifestyle ad films or worse promos for Bollywood stars. Though strongly worded there is a ring of truth to Sudhir Mishra's categorical statement. Hindi cinema no longer boasts of a Bimal Roy or a Guru Dutt who valiantly represented a young India's angst in the 50s and 60s. It is felt that contemporary Hindi cinema somehow lacks the depth and grounding that was seen in earlier films. Film makers no longer feel obliged to tackle subjects of social importance, and even if they do it is disguised in the styles of a commercial/popular film narrative which many feel detract from the seriousness of the theme and hence self-defeating in its goal.

According to film critic Anil Saari in his book 'Hindi cinema- An insider's View', "The need for a comprehensive world view imposes a highly stylized and formal format that in its broad outlines is symbolic, suggestive and allegorical of the total world view of life on the Indian scene. The Indian film makers, most of whom have quickly shed any pretensions to art that they might have started with and who work like hard-boiled businessmen dealing in an entertainment medium with heavy allegorical references, have evolved a list of ingredients that they consider acceptable to the mass audience. These elements can be seen in film after film, thereby provoking the label of the 'formula film'. Yet, because life is in a constant state of flux the formulas are shuffled and recast from time to time."

4. **Alternative sexual orientations and identities:** The film maker draws audience attention to the sensitive issue of alternative sexual identities. In a country like India, where the outlook of people towards such topics are suspect and laden this comes as a welcome move. It is said a film maker ought to probe the minds of the viewing public, this Benegal does by pitching the character of Munni Bai, an eunuch against the village strong man in the course of the local elections. We get to see the world from the eyes of people who are generally marginalized in Indian society and have no voice for themselves. The film maker draws sympathy as well as our concern through the portrayal of the transgender in the film.
5. **Big business and rights of the labour class:** The problems of the working class is not new in Hindi films. The treatment certainly is. In the films of the past portrayal has always been between the two extremes of commercial cinema such as Manoj Kumar's *Roti Kapda Aur Makan*, Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Namak Haraam* which are decidedly commercial in their presentation and films like Mani Kaul's *Siddheshwari* and Govind Hihalini's *Aakrosh*. The present film is different in the sense that it presents the theme of labour upheaval in a realistic mode devoid of the starkness of the art house films that were dark and depressing and thus avoided by mass audience, and neither too frivolous and frothy like the commercial films often looked down upon by the intellectual class for making things trivial. The film *Welcome to Sajjanpur* looks at the theme of labour problems in India with a good balance of reality and tongue-in-cheek humour.
6. **Environment degradation:** The film maker handles the topic of environmental degradation in a humorous manner giving it the right amount of levity with seriousness thereby attracting viewer attention to the sensitive and contentious issue of environment protection. Through the eyes of the local snake charmer the audience get to see the environment in a totally different perspective.
7. **Blind beliefs, practices and rituals:** Mahadev the protagonist often meets the only emancipated young woman of the village of Sajjanpur Vindhya, who is seen driving a *Scooty* (two wheeler) like any city bred woman, is gainfully employed and for all purpose has no care in the world. However this is not the only truth

about her, being a manglik (born under questionable zodiac signs according to Indian society), she is considered unlucky by the villagers with the possible death of a husband if she were to marry. Her mother arranges for her wedding with a dog in order to get rid of the bad luck surrounding her. This is a common enough practice in India. This was the time when Indian media was abuzz with actress Aishwarya's marriage to a tree to get rid of the bad luck seemingly natural for a manglik.

8. **Superstition, God men and exploitation:** The film maker has strong opinions on god men and men of cloth. A scene where the women are shown doing rituals to propitiate the gods for blessings on the event of the festival *Karva Chauth* (a ritual done in north India by womenfolk for the welfare of their husbands) is a case in point. The scene has the women offering money to the *pundit* or village priest for conducting the grand ritual or *pooja* as they call it. The pundit demands a great deal of money and is shown exploiting the simple women folk of the village. Through the eyes of the women we get to see their plight and those of millions of similar women in India.
9. **Efficacy of new technology:** The coming of mobile telephones is seen as an end of an era of old world charm and the coming of new technology and new thinking. Mahadev is often seen cursing the new technology because this technology makes his letter writing profession defunct and un-necessary with people switching to cell messages rather than letters making his presence in the village un-important and un-wanted. This is a common refrain in real life as well where the lack of communication amidst people today is often blamed on the excessive use of technology such as new media, leading to greater distance between people. The film maker comments on this with the clever use of imagery and dialogue.
10. **Village politics:** The film takes us through the entire gamut of village politics with the local henchmen fighting the panchayat elections. The local people are torn between their sympathies for the capable candidate and their fear of the local hoodlums who terrorize the locals. The problem is compounded with the fact that the competing candidate includes a transgender who wants to try her hand in politics as well. Facing death threat and public ignominy she contacts Mahadev for help which he gives under great duress. The problem though not new is given a new complexion and understanding with the portrayal of the transgender as the political aspirant.

Other topics that are dealt with in the film are migration to cities and alienation, kidney racket and medical fraud, caste and communal conflict, widow remarriage and re-habilitation, women's education and empowerment and many other issues that find contemporary relevance.

VI. CONCLUSION

Shyam Benegal has used social realities to the exclusion of everything else in this film. The Village of Sajjanpur is a representation of the country, India, where all the issues pertinent to the entire country are played out clearly in the form of village matters. In truth they are showing us a slice of India. This approach to the portrayal of social realities is very new.

A second fact is the manner in which social realities are presented – through humour instead of sobriety and pathos. Humour takes away the sting while at the same time making it more meaningful and close to us.

The film is likened to a newspaper in that the topics presented are extremely current almost like opening a daily newspaper and getting to know the day's news, this approach to contemporary issues is very new. Shyam Benegal has always prided himself in dealing with one issue at a time but through this film he has touched base with several crucial issues of our times.

We see a change in Shyam Benegal's style as well. Where he would be stark and bleak in his presentation he has used a pleasanter style to bond with his audience, ensuring greater financial success in this film than in his earlier films. He has thus created a new formula for presenting social realities in cinema. This approach is effective without being preachy.

Shyam Benegal has also used commercially viable actors rather than art house actors.

Lastly, on the question of whether films can bring in social change, they can, provided the films are seen by the mass audience, are made understandable for the common man and are less dark and preachy. This is seen from the reviews on *Welcome to Sajjanpur* and the box office collection of the film as well. Both factors exhibit the fact that people have welcomed the film since it was a commercial success and further critics and reviewers have given it a green signal. With time if there are many other attempts made on similar lines the impact of cinema can be judged clearly.

The need of the hour is for films to portray social realities in a manner that can be acceptable to the man in the street in order to bring about social change. There are strong possibilities of this happening with films such as *Welcome to Sajjanpur*.

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