



DIRECTOR SHYAM BENEGAL WITH SHABANA AZMI on location in a village near Hyderabad. Shyam Benegal has made documentaries. Ankur is his first feature film.



SADHU MEHER AND SHABANA AZMI in Ankur. Both are graduates of the Film Institute, Poona. Sadhu Meher played the ticket collector in Bhuvan Shome. Ankur is Shabana's maiden film.

FILM REVIEW

"ANKUR" Is First Rate

SHYAM BENEGAL'S *Ankur* was India's entry at the recent Berlin Film Festival.

Ankur ("The Seedling") is an important film, featuring Shabana Azmi, Sadhu Meher and Anant Nag. Locale: Andhra. Time: early fifties—just before the abolition of the jagirdari system. The story is simple: Surya (Anant Nag) is the son of an average zamindar (Qadir Ali Beg). His child bride has not yet come to live with him. Against his will, his father sends him to the village to manage the estates. He is insensitive, arrogant. His days are filled with boredom. He flies kites and eyes Laxmi (Shabana Azmi), the low-caste girl who looks after the farmhouse.

Laxmi is devoted to her deaf-mute husband, Kishtya (Sadhu Meher). Kishtya is an unemployed potter. ("After the Union Government took over, villagers stopped buying clay pots and took to metalware," she tells Surya.)

Kishtya drinks. He steals toddy from the Master's palm-trees. Sheikh Chand, the police *patel* (who is also a toady of the zamindar), has Kishtya beaten up. His head is shaved, he is sat upon a donkey and paraded through the village. Kishtya runs away from his home.

Laxmi is left alone. Surya seduces her and makes her pregnant. Nothing unusual. His father's mistress and bastard son are settled on adjoining lands. Laxmi accepts her situation with resignation. Surya's bride (Priya Tendulkar) arrives on the scene and dismisses the servant girl. Laxmi starves, is caught stealing rice from her Master's kitchen.

Her deaf-mute husband returns home and offers her the few rupees he has earned. He is happy in the mistaken belief that Laxmi is carrying his child. He picks up his staff and makes for the farmhouse to ask his Master to give him a job. Thinking that Kishtya has come to kill him, Surya flogs the deaf-mute to unconsciousness. Laxmi suddenly becomes defiant and rebellious and lashes out at the Master.

The last shot is memorable. Surya goes inside the house, the servants gathered around the deaf-mute scatter. A hysterical Laxmi helps the husband get up and walks him back to their hut. And then a village urchin, who helped the Master fly kites, picks up a stone and hurls it at the window of the farmhouse. The glass is smashed. The boy runs for his life. The film ends.

"*Ankur*" is dominated by Shabana Azmi and Sadhu Meher. Shabana is the daughter of the famous Urdu poet, Kaifi Azmi. She lives her role as a peasant girl of Andhra (her mother, Shaikat Kaifi, herself a talented actress, is from Hyderabad). "*Ankur*" is Shabana's maiden film but she acts like a seasoned dramatic actress.

Like Shabana, Sadhu Meher is from the Film Institute, Poona. He belongs to Orissa. It is sad that after "*Bhuvan Shome*" this fine actor could not find work in Hindi films. He makes short films for his living.

Anant Nag, the Kannada actor, is effective as Surya.

Priya Tendulkar, daughter of the well-known Marathi playwright Vijay Tendulkar, shows promise in her small role as Surya's wife.

Agha Mohammed Hussain is a major discovery. He is a painter. By his portrayal

of Sheikh Chand, the police *patel*, he has proved himself to be a gifted actor.

All other characters are true to life. The film, shot in Andhra, brings out the melancholy beauty of the landscape as well as the boredom and stagnation of an Indian village. There is no romanticising of the "rural idyll". The languorous pace of the film, the pauses between conversation, the mannerisms, the imperceptible gestures of the characters, the silences, the sounds, the authenticity of the Andhra accent, all build up an epic in a minor key.

Shyam Benegal knows his medium. Few directors would dare show their heroine vomiting, which Shyam has done. And he knows what he has to say with the minimum of frills.

Ankur's dialogue was written by Satya Dev Dubey. It was rendered into Hyderabad Urdu by Aziz Qaisi. For this, perhaps, Aziz Qaisi could have been given proper credit.

At times Shabana looks too glamorous and exotic; in some sequences the tempo could have been a little faster.

However, more power to Shyam Benegal and his tribe!

QURRATULAIN HYDER



PRIYA TENDULKAR as Surya's bride.



ANANT NAG as the sulking, brooding son of the zamindar.