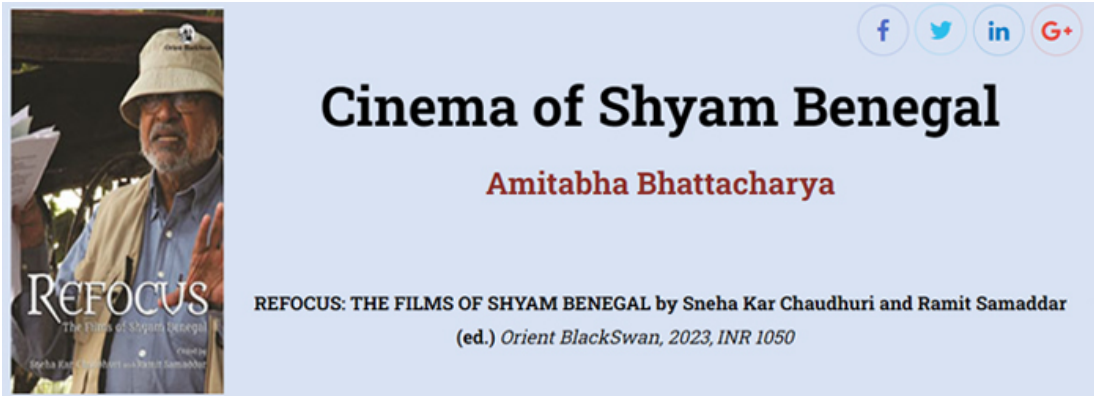


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The release of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955) is often regarded as having heralded a new era of Indian cinema. Its impact was perceptible, but not immediate in so far as film-making in Hindi was concerned. On account of various contributory factors, a crop of talented film-makers started emerging from the late sixties and early seventies. Inspired by the success of Ray in India and abroad, and often supported by state funding, these young directors took up the challenge of crafting meaningful and realistic films—at that time known as parallel cinema—and proved their mettle. Among those who could sustain their interest and churn out competent films, one after another, in the decades to follow, Shyam Benegal (born 1934) has been a force to reckon with.

In an influential essay titled *Four and a Quarter* (1974), Satyajit Ray analysed four feature films—*Garm Hava*, *Maya Darpan*, *Duvidha* and *Ankur*—the first three having been made under the Film Finance Corporation, and *Ankur* being privately financed. Although marked by very mild criticism and a piece of advice, Ray's response to Benegal's first feature was warm and appreciative. 'Story apart, *Ankur* has enough qualities to make one look forward to Benegal's future with keen anticipation. For one thing, he shows great confidence in the handling of two major elements of film making: acting and camera...' For a widely admired and feted director whose steady journey from *Ankur* (1974) continues even today (with India-Bangladesh co-produced biopic of Mujibur Rahman having been made), a scholarly exercise to explore various facets of his vision is never too late. After the earlier books in English such as Sangeeta Datta's *Shyam Benegal* (2002), Anuradha Dingwaney Needham's *New Indian Cinema in Post-independence India: The Cultural Work of Shyam Benegal's Films* (2013), Vivek Sachdeva's *Benegal's India—Alternative Images* (2020), Samir Chopra's *Shyam Benegal: Filmmaker and Philosopher* (2021) and two in Hindi, this book under review is a distinct addition. A collection of thirteen essays with a longish introduction, and ending with Benegal's conversation with Needham, is a veritable feast that includes 'fresh appraisals of Bengal's films from a range of diverse academic perspectives such as caste politics, labour studies, historiography, Marxism, gender criticism, adaptation studies and space theory'. Some essays may appear a little too pedantic, verbose and academic for public appreciation, but, on the whole, the book succeeds in bringing out the richness and diversity of Bengal's oeuvre. Somehow, one of his important films, *Susman* (1987) dealing with the plight of handloom weavers [and competition from powerloom weavers and others] remains unnoticed.

General appraisal of Benegal's films is easy to find. *Refocus*, as appropriately named, highlights certain trends and brings to our attention some of the less-discussed aspects of his creativity. While his films of the 1970s like *Nishant*, *Manthan* and *Bhumika*, of the 1980s such as *Junoon*, *Kalyug*, *Mandi* and *Trikal*, of the 1990s including *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda*, *Mammo*, *Sardari Begum* and *The Making of the Mahatma*, followed by biopics *Zubeidaa* (2001) and *Bose: The Forgotten Hero* (2005), the social satires *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008) and *Well Done Abba* (2009), besides his documentaries on Nehru (1983), Satyajit Ray (1984) and other TV-serials have been publicly well appreciated, this book looks, for

example, at *Mammo*, *Sardari Begum* and *Zubeidaa* as a trilogy that explores the nuances of Muslim identity 'in a post-secular India'. Vivek Sachdeva in his essay 'Adapting Gandhi/Kasturba in *The Making of the Mahatma*', examines the film as a narrative 'about the apparently docile yet firm and assertive presence of Gandhi's wife, Kasturba Gandhi, making this biopic a film about the contradictions of female empowerment and the assertion of the self'.

Benegal's work on Bose's leadership role in Indian nationalism seeks to dispel a few wrong notions and projects him as a *cosmopolitan nationalist*. He says, 'Yes, it is a *great adventure story*. But he is also a remarkable figure in the Indian nationalist movement because he found a way that would have prevented partition, if he had lived that long...'. This view is gaining increasing acceptance.

Benegal's evolution as a film-maker, early influences of his family and a film-auteur like Satyajit Ray and other masters, his views on his craft and his vision of India with all its complexities, have been diligently captured in his interview with Needham. Besides the definitive documentary on Ray, Benegal made four biographical films—on Hansa Wadkar (*Bhumika*), Nehru, Gandhi and Bose. One hopes that the film *Mujib: The Making of a Nation* would soon be released.

Serious students and researchers of Indian cinema will find this book of great value and relevance.

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