Shyam Benegal: Trailblazing Filmmaker Still Going Strong

By ASHOK DE PASSAN

BERKELEY, Calif. — In the final years of Shyam Benegal’s debis, feature film "Odh"dha, "Injustice appears to triumph. The frontal assault of this docu-drama’s gaze is a call to public debate at a time when it was needed. The result: a bold, powerful statement that resonates even today.

Then a young kid throws a stone that breaks a window — a symbolic warning to the future generation.

This is probably a symbol for what Benegal himself did for Indian cinema. His "Aakashe" (1977) broke new ground, bringing in a fresh dose of realism into what was — and essentially still remains — a stylized cinema where reality still tends to rule the roost.

Recently, Benegal was invited by the Pacific Film Archive at the University of California at Berkeley as it screened three of his films: "Aakashe," "Bhumika" and "Zubeida." UC Berkeley’s Center for South Asia Studies helped in organizing the visit, which was followed by a visit to UC Santa Cruz.

"We were very excited that Berkeley Film Festival had the great sense to bring Shyam Benegal to this year’s festival for a three-film tribute," Steve Seid, PFA video curator, told India-West. "It paid off wonders for us at PFA. Not only were we able to screen the films on large, powerful sound systems, but Mr. Benegal’s generous and warmth with the audience was something to behold. Like his groundbreaking films, Benegal is truly engaged with the world around him, adding another dimension to it. I feel we’ve made a special effort to provide a meaningful link to the past and present, a link that is very much alive and active." "Aakashe." "Bhumika" and "Zubeida." Were never made for screening, they were made for a larger purpose: the expression of ideas, emotions, and feelings. The films were not only about the story, but more about the experience of the audience. They were about the impact the films had on the viewers, and the impact the viewers had on the films.

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