

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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MANTHAN (THE CHURNING) 1976

Shyam Benegal

(Hindi language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

This film fictionalises a true story of a visionary veterinary doctor (Dr V. Kurien) who came to rural Gujarat in the 1940s and set up a cooperative of dairy farmers, which eventually spread around India and made the country self-sufficient in the production of milk and butter. The movie dramatises this remarkable history by tracing the origins of this cooperative movement. Dr Rao (the fictional Kurien) and his team land up in a village, where they must contend with entrenched economic interests, vicious village politics, scurrilous accusations, caste violence and personal pride. Frustrated and hurt, Dr Rao leaves the village, but the farmers, inspired by the doctor's efforts, make sure that his experiment is successful. *The Churning* of the title refers not only to the making of milk but also to the stirring of people and the froth of change.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The film is all the more remarkable because its own production was also the result of cooperation among dairy farmers in the region. When Shyam Benegal spoke to Dr Kurien about making the film, Benegal knew that funding would be a problem. Kurien then suggested that they get contributions from the farmers in Gujarat. In the end, almost 500,000 farmers each contributed two rupees. This is probably the earliest example of a crowd-funded film in India, and is certainly a rare example of grassroots funding anywhere in the world. The cooperative founded in a single village was replicated in other villages and soon spread across the whole state of Gujarat, in what became known as the 'white revolution'. The 'green revolution', which had produced new strains of rice in the 1960s, was a government-led movement. By contrast, this dairy cooperative (which still exists today with 2.6 million members) was truly a people's movement.

STORY

Intrusion At the beginning of the film, Dr Rao and his two assistants (Chandavarkar and Deshmukh) travel to an isolated village in Gujarat. It is in the late 1940s, just after Independence. Most of the villagers are dairy farmers, and the 'city slickers' have come with plans to revolutionise the dairy industry by setting up a cooperative.

Local distrust The local political leader (Sarpanch) and the local businessman (Mishraji) laugh about these plans, saying that they know their village and that these young idealists have no experience. The dairy farmers themselves also distrust the newcomers and prefer to keep selling their milk to Mishraji, who buys their milk at low prices.

Bindu Dr Rao begins his campaign by knocking on doors and asking if he can test a sample of the family's milk. The drama kicks off when he happens to knock on Bindu's door. She tells him firmly to take his city ideas and leave, but she turns her back and Rao takes a small sample of her cow's milk. When she accuses him of stealing, a crowd forms and shouts at him. At that moment, a car arrives and Mishraji orders the crowd to disperse.

Mishraji Having rescued the doctor from the angry villagers (who he says are 'like children'), Mishraji gives Rao a little advice: 'Your cooperative will collapse six months after you leave. I know my people, their families, their individual situations. Why should you ruin my business?' Dr Rao then explains that because Mishraji buys milk by weight, the villagers add water to it with the result that is less nutritious and sometimes contaminated. Everyone loses, except Mishraji.

New ideas Dr Rao also speaks to the Sarpanch, the local village council leader, who has supported the idea of the cooperative but wants to become its chairman. Dr Rao explains that the cooperative will be democratic and will not recognise 'caste or creed.' Votes will decide who is leader, not caste. Dr Rao and team also hold meetings to explain the new science behind the cooperative, but

scepticism remains high. Then Bhola, one of the farmers, is thrown in jail. Dr Rao has him released, which forms a bond between them.

Shanta Dr Rao's wife, Shanta, arrives, but Rao appears too devoted to his campaign to give her much attention. Neglected, Shanta falls ill with typhoid fever.

Bindu's suffering Dr Rao begins to visit Bindu at her home, and it is obvious that they are attracted to each other. On one visit, her absent and violent husband comes in wielding a weapon and tells the doctor to mind his own business and 'stop coming after our women.' When Rao leaves, the husband tries to force Bindu to have sex, but she refuses. He beats her, in front of their child. Later, the husband poisons their buffalo, which is their only source of money. Bindu is now broken. She loses hope and hardly speaks for the rest of the film.

Bhola In her absence, Bhola emerges as a new leader. Up to this point, more than halfway through the film, Bhola has remained a brooding silent figure, but now he finds his voice (to replace Bindu's) and rallies the villagers in favour of the cooperative.

Scandal One of Dr Rao's team members has an affair with one of Dalit women and is beaten by her husband. Dr Rao throws him out of the team for this abuse of power and for interfering in the villagers' private lives

Deceit Mishraji takes advantage of Bindu's despair and her illiteracy to get her to put her thumbprint on a document in return for him giving her a new cow. Bindu 'signs' the paper not knowing that it is actually a (false) accusation of rape against Dr Rao. When Mishraji spread the news about the rape accusation, Dr Rao is discredited and leaves the village. Then someone sets fire to half the village and blame falls on Bhola and the Dalits, who are rounded up and put in jail. This time, Bhola is bailed out by Mishraji, who wants their votes in the coming election for the chairman of the cooperative. When the vote is held, Bhola's faction wins.

Departure A lawyer comes to Dr Rao and says that a 'third party' has persuaded Bindu to rescind her rape accusation and offers Dr Rao compensation. But when that third party is revealed as Mishraji, Dr Rao throws the money away. He then decides to leave the village.

Small victory The film ends with the setting up of the cooperative. Led by Bhola, the farmers take it in their own hands and begin to measure their own milk and set their own prices. It's not entirely clear, at that point, how successful the cooperative will be, but real change has been achieved in one small village.

THEMES

Resistance to change The dominant theme in this remarkable movie about change is the resistance to it. As soon as the 'experts from the city' arrive in the village, they are met with mistrust, scepticism, cynicism and vested interests. Idealists are regarded by those in power as 'stupid' and 'silly.' Beyond this fundamental conservatism in the countryside, the local authorities also consider any change as a potential threat to their control. Even the common people are highly suspicious of the outsiders, who don't look like them and don't talk like them. They've had experience before with other outsiders with new ideas, such as the family planning crusaders, and they are initially very resistant to even listening to Dr Rao and his team. The sense of distrust is evident in the 'you vs us' language they use. For example, one woman says, 'You come here; why should we give you our milk?' Such resistance is understandable when people you do not know come uninvited to your stable (if unequal) community and set about rearranging your lives. The unconscious arrogance of Dr Rao and the boorish behaviour of this team do not help the situation either. Indeed, it is a miracle that the cooperative got established at the end of the film, let alone that it went on to flourish and to be copied all over the state of Gujarat and then India.

Sexual politics Another theme, not entirely unrelated to the first, is sexual politics, especially the struggle of women. First, we have Bindu, an abandoned wife barely able to feed her sickly child, who is nevertheless a tower of strength. At least, at the beginning. She has no hesitation in telling Dr Rao to go back to the city and that his ideas are meddlesome. Later on, though, we see how she is manipulated by Mishraji and by her husband. There are gentle hints throughout the film that she is attracted to the outsider doctor and that he is not unaware of her beauty and sensuality. Nothing comes of it, although we feel that the battle to win over the villagers is layered with repressed sexuality within both parties. The only (known) example of sexual contact between the outsiders and

the villagers is a thoughtless case of one of Dr Rao's team taking advantage of a naïve local girl. Here, too, we see that the power dynamic between outsiders and villagers is played out in terms of sexual politics. Given that the film is set in the 1940s, and made in the 1970s, this focus on women's struggle may seem somewhat anachronistic. However, history teaches us that the battle for women's equality did not begin with the feminist movements in the west at the end of the twentieth century.

CHARACTERS

Dr Rao Dr Rao is the veterinarian who comes to the village to set up a dairy farmer cooperative. Dr Rao, played by famous dramatist Girish Karnad, is a complex figure. As an idealist, he is committed, ambitious, reckless and a touch arrogant. He is basically a good man, kind, considerate and honest, but his good intentions sometimes lead him into mistakes or indirectly cause harm to others. He wants passionately to change the village into a more equal and less authoritarian society, but he cannot do that without at the same time displaying his own arrogance and power. He is also less than an ideal husband and has a short temper.

Dedicated As veterinary doctor, Dr Rao is dedicated to his cooperative scheme, which includes better welfare for cows and buffaloes. We have a good illustration of his dedication in the opening scene. Dr Rao and his team arrive by train and alight at a station in the middle of nowhere. The welcoming committee try to put a garland of flowers around his neck, but the down-to-earth doctor waves away this ceremonial gesture. When the luggage is piled up in a cart, Dr Rao takes a long look at the worn-out pony and asks if it can manage such a load. The driver tells him that it can take twice as much weight, but Dr Rao then asks how far the village is. 'Very far,' is the answer. 'I'll walk,' the doctor says and sets off down the dusty track in front of the pony-cart. The driver and the other local people stare after him, half in amazement and half in admiration. They know, as we in the audience know, that Dr Rao is committed to his cause.

Reckless The dedicated doctor is so ambitious that he sometimes makes mistakes or, at the least, acts recklessly. A perfect example of how his commitment can tip over into rash behaviour comes in an early scene. Dr Rao is going through the village, asking for women to give him samples of their milk for testing. When Bindu says no, using much more colourful language, Dr Rao waits for her to turn around and go back inside her house before he sneaks a little sample of her milk from a vessel on the doorstep. He is caught out and is rescued from an angry crowd only by the evil Mishraji, but a shortcoming in his otherwise virtuous character has been revealed. In brief, he is an idealist who thinks he knows what's good for the ignorant villagers. In this respect, he is similar to Mishraji, who also believes that he has the welfare of the villagers at heart even while he pays them low prices for their milk. Dr Rao's action illustrates the truism that good intentions do not necessarily produce good results.

Idealist Dedicated and reckless, Dr Rao is, at the core an idealist. This idealism, in all its marvellous naivete, is displayed in an open-air meeting in which he and the villagers are debating the method of choosing a chairman for the cooperative. When the Sarpanch, the local leader of the traditional village council, announces that he will be the chairman (because he has the most animals), Dr Rao cuts him off and says that there is no place for that kind of inherited status in the cooperative. 'There is no caste or creed in the cooperative,' he says. 'It's democratic. All votes count equally.' These are fine words, as one man comments on the side, perfect for speechmaking, but they are meaningless in the day-to-day affairs of the village. Then Rao's idealism borders on arrogance when he angrily suggests that the villagers are incapable of change: 'When you get a thought in your brain, is that the *only* thought that you can understand?' Again, his good intentions are flawed, but it is also true that without the force of his idealism nothing would change.

Bindu Bindu is a female leader of the Dalit (Untouchable) community. Bindu is the Dalit woman, who is cast opposite Dr Rao. If he represents modernity, she personifies tradition. And, like him, she is a strong person, honest, bold and proud. She has a confrontational streak and a sharp tongue. She is also sensual. Still young, she attracts the attention of men in the village and, it seems, also of the outsider doctor. Although strong, she is controlled by her no-good husband and by the end of the film has been beaten into silent submission.

Distrustful Bindu is the embodiment of the villagers' distrust of outsiders. This world-weary attitude is demonstrated in the scene when Dr Rao first comes to her house asking for a milk sample. He

asks if her husband is in and she shoots back, 'Who are you?' Her first thought is that he is another one of the government people who try to tell her not to have children (the family planning campaign was guilty of thoughtlessly interfering in village affairs). Her wording is interesting when she shouts, 'The "have-fewer-children" people already came and gone!' And then she adds that she doesn't 'have any fucks left to give when it comes to the government.' Dr Rao tries to persuade her by saying, 'I just need a little milk,' and she shouts back, 'Little by little? That's how it's done. Little by little you take it all!' Although her reaction may be more extreme than some of the others in the village, her distrust is not surprising. How else could we expect a woman to react when an outsider materialises outside her door and asks for a sample of her milk?

Proud The verbal onslaught hurled at Dr Rao is in part a manifestation of Bindu's pride. Even in this isolated and poor village, she is way down in the social hierarchy as a Dalit (Untouchable), a woman and an abandoned wife. Her pride is illustrated well in a moment toward the end of the film, after her only buffalo has been poisoned (by her absent but recently-returned husband). Without any other source of money or food, she goes with Bhola (a male leader of the Dalits) to Dr Rao. Bhola explains that Bindu needs a loan from the cooperative, but Dr Rao explains that no loans are possible because the cooperative hasn't yet been established. Then Dr Rao opens his own wallet and gives Bhola some money. Seeing this smug act of charity, Bindu turns on her heel and rushes away. Bhola catches up with her and tries to persuade her to take the money, saying 'Don't be stupid. You need it.' Her eyes blazing, Bindu throws the rupee notes to the ground and shouts, 'I didn't go there to beg! He's [Dr Rao] like everyone else.' Poverty has not destroyed her dignity.

Bhola Bhola is a male leader of the Dalit (Untouchable) community. Bhola is a young and strong Dalit man, who begins the story as an underling beholden (like many others in the village) to Mishraji for his livelihood. After Bindu's demise and Dr Rao's departure, however, he becomes the voice of change and leads the villages to support the fledgling cooperative that he opposed at first. Bhola's transformation from a passive underling to an assertive man is at the heart of the film's story. He is the personification of the cooperative movement: someone who is initially resistant but later discovers the advantages of such a radical new organisation of power and authority.

Servile Bhola's servility is illustrated in an early scene. A crowd has gathered around Dr Rao after Bindu accuses him of stealing milk from her house. Bhola is there in the background as a tall, hulking presence, but he doesn't say anything. Suddenly, Mishraji appears and tells the crowd to calm down, that Dr Rao is an honest man. Then, he casually orders Bhola to make the crowd disperse. Bhola nods his head and carries out the instructions. In this brief moment, we understand that he is, in effect, a servant of Mishraji. He stands to attention and waits to be told what to do. That is what he has done all his life because that is what his father and grandfather did.

Assertive Bhola, who is silent throughout much of the film, comes into his own following the downfall of Bindu and the departure of Dr Rao. The once-servile outcaste is now an assertive man of action, inspired by the ideals of the cooperative. This change is nowhere more clear than in the next-to-last scene. We see Bhola running as fast as he can toward the train station. Too late, he arrives just as the train carrying Dr Rao is puffing away in the distance. Coming back to the village, he sees a queue of people selling milk to Mishraji's agent. 'Move away from there!' he shouts to them. 'This isn't the Cooperative office.' When they stare dumbly at him, he goes on, 'Ok, stay here. Mishraji gives you clothes. You're happy. But one day, you'll understand.' Then he sees the man elected as chairman of the cooperative. 'You, too?' he cries. 'C'mon, let's go to the cooperative.' 'But will we be able to run it?' the man asks. 'Why not?' replies Bhola. 'Together we can make it work.' Dr Rao is no longer needed. His place has been taken by an assertive local man.

Sarpanch The Sarpanch is the local political leader in the village.

Deshmukh Deshmukh is a trainee doctor on Dr Rao's team.

Chandavarkar Chandavarkar is another member of Dr Rao's team.

Mishraji Mishraji is the local businessman who buys the villagers' milk

Shanta Shanta is Dr Rao's wife.



(Bindu and Dr Rao)



(Mishraji in his office)



(Bhola at home)