

# ANKUR (THE SEEDLING) 1974

Shyam Benegal

(Dekhani Urdu dialect)

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## OVERVIEW

*Ankur (The Seedling)* is the first film in Benegal's trilogy dedicated to revealing feudal and gender inequities and promoting social justice. It tells the story (set in the 1940s) of a young man, the son of an absentee landlord (*zamindar*), who goes to the countryside to manage his father's estate. Although coming from the city with good intentions and liberal views, he ends up using his power to underpin the entrenched class-caste inequality, especially through his sexual relationship with a low-caste woman. The director's well-known leftist politics, including support for revolutionary peasant movements, is evident, but the film transcends propaganda by its subtle exploration of the characters' complex motives and contradictory desires.

## CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

As with many films, *Ankur's* significance derives in part, at least, from the historical context in which it was made. Although the story itself is set vaguely in the past (the 1940s, judging from the cars used), the film was made in 1974, just after a disastrously failed harvest of 1971-1972. That failed harvest highlighted the need for a peasant revolution, which was supported by the Communist Party Marxist (CPM). Not coincidentally, the CPM was strong in the region where the film was set and shot, and the dialogue contains several references to the party. In addition to this political context, the film is also significant for introducing, or perhaps popularising, a new style of realistic film-making. The director, who was born in the region, used mostly non-professional actors, who did not wear any make-up and dressed in ordinary clothes. The documentary feel to this feature film is also enhanced by the language used, which is a regional dialect of Urdu (Dekhani Urdu).

## STORY

*The village* The film opens in the countryside to the sound of drums. In the distance we see a long line of people winding their way toward a shrine far outside a village. Among the stoic faces is that of a young and pretty woman, who approaches the shrine and prays for the birth of a child. She is Lakshmi, who lives in the village with her husband, Kishtayya, who is a mute and an alcoholic. Her only desire in life is to have a child.

*Absentee landlord* This opening scene of a village religious festival is followed by a scene in which we meet the absentee landlord's family in the large city of Hyderabad. The son, Surya, has just finished college and has been forced into an arranged marriage with a very young girl, Saru. He is sexually frustrated because he cannot sleep with her until she is a few years older. He is sent to manage his father's estate in the village, where Lakshmi lives with her husband.

*Not settling in* Surya finds that the best house and land in the village are occupied by his father's mistress, Kausalya, and her illegitimate son, Pratap. Surya moves into an older, dilapidated house and lives by himself, although Lakshmi and Kishtayya are his servants. He is unused to village ways, having arrived with his gramophone, film magazines and private car, and makes a bad job of trying to introduce changes to the way the peasants work his land. He shows his liberal values by eating food prepared by Lakshmi even though she is a Dalit (Untouchable), but, again, this is contrary to village norms.

*Fatal attraction* Lakshmi and her husband live a short distance from Surya's house, in a hut across the fields. She comes to his house to serve his meals and tea. Soon the sexually frustrated Surya begins to find her attractive and arranges for her husband to be absent so that he can be alone to flirt

with her. Lakshmi not only rejects his advances but takes advantage of her position by stealing food from him.

*Gossip* Surya's obvious attraction to Lakshmi creates village gossip. The village priest is censorious, although his criticism is partly motivated by the fact that he used to supply the landlord's house with food (a role now taken by Lakshmi). Other villagers assume that Surya is already sleeping with Lakshmi and say it is merely a repetition of his father's relationship with Kausalya.

*Illicit sex* The drama begins to boil over when Kishtayya is caught stealing palm wine (toddy) from Surya's fields and is publicly humiliated by being shaved bald and paraded around the village. Unable to bear the shame, he leaves the village, and Surya invites Lakshmi to move in with him. This time, she does not refuse.

*Suicide* A few days after Kishtayya leaves, a woman (Rajamma) is dragged to the village council and accused of adultery. The woman defends herself by saying that she wants a child and that her husband is impotent. After condemning the woman's immorality, the judges reach a decision that she should go back to her husband, but that his brothers should compensate her if she does not get pregnant. All this is witnessed by Lakshmi and Surya, who are in the audience. The next day, the woman commits suicide, and Lakshmi wants to be reunited with her husband. But she knows this is not possible, and Surya reassures her that he will look after her.

*Saru arrives* Tension is ramped up when Saru, Surya's child bride, arrives and expresses her displeasure at Lakshmi's presence in the house. Saru does not approve of having a Dalit living in the house, plus she is aware of her father-in-law's illicit relationship and the village gossip. Saru succeeds in driving Lakshmi out when she comes down with morning-sickness and is unable to work. Lakshmi, with no income, asks Saru for a little money but is turned down. Penniless, she is caught stealing food from the house and is abused by both Saru and Surya. Later, Surya asks her to have an abortion, but she refuses.

*Kishtayya returns* After a long interval, Kishtayya returns, seemingly sober and with a little money. He is overjoyed to find his wife pregnant, while she is overcome by guilt at having been unfaithful to him. He goes to the goddess temple, shown in the opening shot, and gives thanks for having granted his wife's wish for a child. Full of optimism, he then sets out to ask Surya for work. Surya sees him coming across the field, carrying a stick, and thinks he is coming to beat him for sleeping with his wife. Terrified and guilt-stricken, Surya panics and orders three men to hold Kishtayya down while he whips him with a rope.

*Defending one's own* A crowd gathers, including Lakshmi who hurls a torrent of abuse at Surya and his family. In this concluding scene, the film-maker gives Lakshmi the voice her husband lacks in order to condemn the feudal system that grinds down the lower classes. In the final shots, she leads her injured husband away, in a poignant show of their mutual dependency. Then a little boy throws a stone through Surya's window, in a puerile display of rebellion

## THEMES

**Exploitation** The overriding theme of the film is the economic and sexual exploitation of the rural poor by a landowning class. The fundamental reality underlying the many different forms of exploitation is that one class (the *zamindars*) owns the land, while the other classes (peasant, servants, Dalits) work the land. Land, of course, means food as well as money gained from renting out some plots for others to work. Land, in other words, determines life's fortunes. It is noteworthy, for example, that there are three separate incidents of a landless person stealing in the film. Lakshmi steals small handfuls of rice from Surya, both before and after her husband leaves, and Kishtayya steals wine from Surya. Land also means power, the authority to punish those who steal and those who commit adultery in order to have a child. The only thing that Lakshmi owns is the seedling growing in her womb. No one can be unmoved by her final words in this two-hour film of brutal exploitation: 'The curse of the poor is upon you!'

**Maternal instinct** If there is hope in this sometimes bleak film, it is the strength of the women in the story. And central to their lives is the desire, even the economic necessity, of having a child. This is

why the film opens with a religious festival, in which hundreds of village women pray to the goddess to become pregnant. When Rajamma is summoned to a village court for her adultery, she defends her behaviour by saying that her husband is impotent and that 'hunger is not merely a call of the stomach.' That hunger is also deep in Lakshmi, which is one reason why she agrees to sleep with Surya and why she refuses to have an abortion when he demands it. In a different show of strength, another village woman refuses to accept that her husband has gambled her away at a drunken party. Although both Surya and his father keep mistresses, and although women are forced into child-marriages, women are not defeated in the film. Their strength, which is both a moral force and a force for social change, derives from an innate compassion for others and from a desire to bring children into the world.

## CHARACTERS

**Lakshmi** Lakshmi is the Dalit woman who serves Surya and becomes his lover. Lakshmi is a complex figure, beset by conflicting and unexpressed emotions and desires. She is a young and attractive wife who is unfulfilled because she is childless. She is a strong and vocal person, who berates her husband for his drunkenness and also sleeps with Surya when her husband leaves her. Despite that (somewhat understandable) adultery, she is a moral force in the film. Despised by many in the village as a Dalit woman, she has a deep compassion for her mute husband, whom she cares for as she would for an animal and defends him against anyone who mistreats him. She stands up when anyone tries to assert control over her or her family.

**Vulnerable** Among the myriad of emotions that Lakshmi experiences when her husband leaves (after his public humiliation) is vulnerability. This is illustrated in a sequence of two scenes. First, she is inside Surya's house and faces the mirror. As she puts a red dot (*bindu*) on her forehead, as the sign of a married woman, the image of Surya appears behind her. He puts a tentative hand on her shoulder, in a gesture that can only mean that he wishes to sleep with her. She sighs in what seems to be a combination of confusion and pleasure but then turns around and glares at him without a smile. She turns and crosses the field to her hut, where Surya visits her after dark. 'Come live in my house,' he says. 'I'll look after you, forever.' She listens but does not respond, and Surya goes back home. When he opens his eyes in the morning, she is standing there, offering him a cup of tea, as a wife would do for a husband. He accepts the tea with a big smile of satisfaction, but she only gives him a tiny movement of her lips, which could either be a sneer or a gesture of resignation, and then turns away. It is as ambiguous as it is brief, but whatever she means to convey, it is clear that she has succumbed to a situation of vulnerability and sought refuge in the house of man whom she knows she should not trust.

**Defiant** Born a servant, a woman and into the lowest caste in the village, Lakshmi has learned to be servile, but that does not disarm her defiance when faced with injustice. Her strong streak of pride and loyalty to her husband are manifest in one of the famous scenes in this famous movie. Near the end, Kishitayya is beaten mercilessly and without reason by a panic-stricken Surya. Seeing this, Lakshmi rushes to the scene and gives Surya a tongue-lashing of her own. Her cries are both a call for sympathy for her injured husband and a condemnation of Surya, his father and his whole family, who have caused her to suffer all her life. She lists all the evils of the feudal land system—economic inequality, sexual harassment, child marriage and caste hierarchy—that his family has directly or indirectly supported. It is a withering critique that sums up the unexpressed grievances of her mute husband and other poor people in the village.

**Surya** Surya is the young son of the absentee landlord at the heart of this story. Surya is an equally complicated character. He is the emblem of modernity, a young and educated man from a wealthy family, who claims he does not believe in the old injustices of caste. His liberal attitudes, however, mask an inbred arrogance and inchoate anger that gradually erode his initial moral high ground. Married to a child, he is sexually frustrated, but also capable of raw violence and cruelty.

**Arrogant** Seemingly mild-mannered, Surya is the product of a feudal system that breeds arrogance in the privileged class of landowners to which he belongs. That attitude of superiority appears as soon as he drives into the village, armed with his sunglasses, gramophone and movie magazines, ready to confront the old order. Sitting on the veranda smoking a cigarette, he has a conversation with Sheik Chand, who is the overseer of his father's estate. Sheik Chand is courteous, if a little sceptical, when he says that he hopes Surya will bring 'necessary improvements' to the village. Blowing out a lungful of smoke in the older man's face, Surya spits out his reply, 'Yeah, well, things better improve.' Sheikh Chand then pays him obeisance by the traditional gesture of bending down

several times as if to touch his feet. Surya merely glares at him and tosses away his cigarette.

*Disingenuous* Surya's flaws open up as the film unfolds, and we see that his arrogance is coupled with a streak of insincerity. His hypocrisy is vividly illustrated in a scene when he discovers that he has made Lakshmi pregnant. Prior to this, in order to coax her into his bed after her husband leaves her, he had promised to take care of her 'forever.' The scene takes place by a riverbank, where Surya has found Lakshmi all alone. She has been ill and he wants to know why. When she tells him it's morning sickness, that she is pregnant, his face registers first surprise, then shock and then fear. Before this, he had bravely told her, 'I don't care who sees us together.' Now, faced with the reality of having a child by her, he is no longer able to defy the social code that keeps low and high castes apart. In an angry exchange, he orders her to have an abortion, she refuses and he tells her to clear out of his house. He never wants to touch her again.

*Guilt-stricken* Although Surya is arrogant and hypocritical, he is not without remorse, at least for his fallen self. This moment of self-revelation occurs at the very end of the film, just after he has publicly beaten Lakshmi's innocent husband. When Lakshmi arrives at the scene, Surya realises that he has made a mistake (he thought the man was going to take revenge of him for sleeping with Lakshmi). Surya then flees inside his house and locks the door, where his wife, Saru, stares at him in disbelief. With tears streaming down his cheeks, he knows that he is now no better than his hated father. In fact, he is worse because at least his father accepted his mistress and their illegitimate son and gave them the best land in the village. Surya's realisation, however, comes too late, and we are left in no doubt that he is as incapable of change as is the society around him.

**Saru** Saru is Surya's child-bride. While Saru appears to be a stereotype of the innocent girl, she, too, has hidden depths. On the one hand, Saru is a child. She is perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old when she is married to Surya. She is something of cypher, a girl with no voice or defined character. After Surya goes off to manage the estate, she stays behind because she is not yet mature enough for sexual intercourse with her husband. However, two years later, when she comes to the village to stay with Surya, she is a person of firm ideas. She is a traditional young woman, submissive to her husband in public but not afraid to criticise him in private

*Assertive* The previously deferential Saru shows who is in control the minute she enters her husband's house in the village. She knows, from gossip, about his affair with Lakshmi and is determined to show that she will not tolerate such misbehaviour in *her* house. In a powerful scene, she arrives in a taxi, steps out and bows at her husband's feet just before Lakshmi welcomes her with a garland of flowers. Then, as soon as she crosses the threshold, she decorates the bare walls with three significant things. First, she hangs a framed embroidery with the message 'Good Luck' (in English). Then she puts the flower garland on a framed picture of two Hindu gods. And lastly, she hangs up a wedding picture of her and Surya. She has barely spoken a word, yet she has asserted her control over her husband.

*Traditional* Although educated and from the city, like Surya, Saru does not share his liberal view of caste. She (and her husband) are high caste, while Lakshmi is a Dalit (untouchable, the lowest caste possible). The traditional Hindu custom is that one should never accept food or drink from someone lower in the social hierarchy (which is why Brahmins are often cooks—everyone can eat their food). Saru's entrenched caste prejudice is illustrated on the morning after she arrives in the village. She and Surya are sitting on the veranda. Lakshmi approaches them glasses of tea. Surya takes a glass, as he has done for the past several months, but Saru refuses with a surly glance. Then she snaps at her husband, 'You shouldn't touch that [tea]. It's dirty.' Perhaps she is thinking the same thing when, that night, she refuses to let Surya touch her in bed.

**Kaushalya** Kaushalya is the mistress of Surya's father.

**Pratap** Pratap is Kaushalya's son.

**Kishtayya** Kishtayya is Lakshmi's mute husband.

**Rajamma** Rajamma is a village woman who commits suicide.

**Sheik Chand** Sheik Chand is the Muslim overseer of Surya's father's estate.



(Lakshmi carrying a pot to the shrine of the goddess)



(Lakshmi and Surya)



(Lakshmi curses Surya while comforting her injured husband)