

**TWENTY SECOND T.A. PAI MEMORIAL LECTURE**



**SECULARISM IN INDIAN CINEMA**

**Delivered by**

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**AT MANIPAL**

**T.A. PAI MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE  
MANIPAL**

## SECULARISM IN INDIAN CINEMA

I remember that for me it is a great privilege to come here and deliver the memorial lecture in memory of Mr. T.A. Pai. Because I remember that I met him many years ago, when I had made a series of promotional films for the Life Insurance Corporation. He was then Chairman of LIC and my memory of him matches exactly what Mr. K K Pai said of him about that lift that was made only for the Chairman in that building. I remember he was so down to earth because the other Officers had said that we know that you are meeting the Chairman and the whole protocol was being set up for me so that I would go and not make any bloomers when I met him. But interestingly what happened was the moment I met him, he started to talk to me in 'Konkani'. As you know, everything was just simply vanished and perfect and after that everything started to work very well. The films I made of course he liked them and so on and then they became the series that went on for 17 (several) years after that.

Anyway, before I actually get into my talk, I would be reading the other day very interesting thing when Mr. M.S. Gill who was our Chief Election Commissioner sometime ago, he wrote a little article after that Tsunami. He was talking about Andaman and Nicobar and he remembered Campbell Bay which is the southernmost point of Nicobar

which is now got almost washed away. The Island also almost washed away and he remembered when he was the Development Commissioner and he was allocating funds for Nicobar and Andaman at that time. He has gone there and there was a small tribal community that was living there and their sole wealth used to be pigs and they were piggy rich and when the population of pigs grew, they became rich and when they became rich like that they always used to have a custom which was to celebrate their wealth with their ancestors which meant that they would dig up the bones and skulls of the ancestors and place them in front and did have all these live pictures of these pigs as they --offered to them. As this was a community that had been converted to Christianity by the missionaries when Andaman and Nicobar were taken over by the British towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and one of the interesting fact that they were all Christians and when Gill asked them "You people are Christians. Why you people are doing all these strange kind of practice?" so the headman said "Well, our religion is Christianity, but this is our culture". What he was and what they were trying to say is something that we as Indians understand perfectly well. Because you know when Nehru talked about 'unity in diversity' he was really talking about

this because we are extremely diverse people in this country with so many different languages, so many different customs where I come from micro-minority Saraswat community in Chitrapur District. I am told that the Chitrapur Saraswat Census that was taken a couple of years ago, they said they were no more than 22,000 people and I thought we know we ever doing for survives and it suggests small community but actually it was survived and I know because nothing in India which dies out and nothing at all dies out in India. It goes somewhere out crossing to the woodwork but when you feel it merges again. So, that was the kind of things that happen so here we have that level and extreme kind of diversity in languages, religions so many different kind of things, yet there is something that binds us together that brings us together and that is that quality which off course unfortunately in India has least in recent years taken on a somewhat ugly path because it has got politicized. We politicized the concept of this unified culture by giving it a name and there was just no need for that sort of thing because that really it does not bring people together and it separates people. Because I think the essential needs of India have to be inclusive to include, we don't reject people, we include them. We may be as communities and thrones and froth extremely that self involved and self absorbed. But when it comes to relating to other people we accept we are tolerant, we accept other people very easily amongst us in our midst. So either

situation like this you do not need to add any kind of political idea of a unifying concept, so that is why the reason I am giving this long time of appeal is because you see the world secularism has unfortunately in recent years become a matter of debate. Because of some of the political reasons the terminologies like pseudo secular, secular is also for, which I think is quite meaningless because ultimately what we mean by secular is we mean inclusive. In the context of India, it does not measure the mean that we should be functionally without our beliefs or our religions, it means that we will accept what other people for what they are. As long as that we accept that we are citizens of the same land, at that I think is the essence of what it is and this is what concerned to be when it comes to the cinema.

Now, in the late 1950, Satyajit Ray, on being interviewed, he was one of the greatest film makers of this country and producer, and he won the Il Leone d'Oro (English: The Golden Lion), the highest prize given to a film at the Biennale Venice Film Festival. it is the first film ever to win such a prize, a very prestigious film in the festival and where in an interview when he was asked he said that he was a Bengali film maker and the same year Raj Kapoor won an award at Karlo Evaluative, another international film festival at Czechoslovakia and he got very upset he said why does Ray call himself as a Bengali film maker? Is not he an Indian film maker? Why should he make that funny kind of mistakes for himself? So

the matter of course eventually got disclosed because Ray had qualified his statement what he meant what he did not make films in Hindi that he was not a Hindi film maker and he was a Bengali film maker in the sense that he makes film in Bengali which of course did not satisfy anybody at all. Certainly not Raj Kapoor I know that. But the important thing here off course is that people in India because most of us automatically assume that film makers who make films in Hindi are somehow more representative of India than who make films in other languages. This is a continuing problem particularly for film makers of South India. Because the film makers in Kerala, we never say Indian film much of the time we mean Hindi film and film makers in Kerala get very bugged and they will get very upset and they say what you mean the other people who make films in India and same thing goes for Bengali film makers, the Kannada film makers, Telugu film makers, Tamil film makers and all. Anyway because the idea that largely Hindi being considered the National Language of the country who make Hindi films the concept of representational for the whole country is natural and normal. There is no real insult to any of other film makers or other languages and therefore as far as I am concerned even today when I talk about Indian films I will actually largely mean film makers who make films in Hindi. Because they travel beyond the areas, they travel all over the country while a film say made in Kannada is seen largely in Karnataka, a film made in

Tamil is largely shown only in Tamilnadu and similarly Telugu films and Bengali films etc. Hindi films tend to travel much wider and go beyond all these different areas. Anyway, couple of years ago, actually now five years ago, Outlook invited a number of social thinkers on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Indian republic, invited a number of social thinkers as well as public personalities to answer the question what is an Indian? Vinod Mehta, the editor chose to quote from a Hollywood film 'the party', an American film, in which there is a British comedy actor called Peterson, who played the character of an Indian and when he is asked in the film that 'Sir, Who would you think you are?'. So he replied "In India we don't think who we are, we know who we are"

Now I believe this statement was actually meant as a joke but actually seriously speaking the express on what most Indians know about themselves and a quite secured in the knowledge about we know who we are. You know this security is an extraordinary thing because this is what gives us in many ways a great deal of strength. That we have a civilizational identity as Indians never been questioned and the sort of extent has been a probability to accommodate diverse and often of the contradictory element in it. At any given time we chose one or another of our many identities that we have depending on the needs of the situation. Simple example, In Manipal it is very easy for me to invoke my 'konkani' identity, you know the moment I go to Bombay, its

very easy for me to have my 'mumbaikar' identity, when I go to Hyderabad I do the same because where I was born and grew up. So its easy for me to do that. So we have the multiple identities which are wonderful. I mean how many people in the world in countries have so many identities as we as Indians do. It is an intra-ordinary situation as we know if we are examined, each one of us, how many identities we have? Each one of us has so many identities, not to forget that the relational identities also, because we are somebody's son, child, grandchild and whatever, nephew, grand-nephew. Because, cousin of my father would be spoken about Mr. K K Pai and of course I am related to that, so that's my another identity too. I have been one of my uncle's Narasimha Kamath who wrote 'Indian Constitution' also Dr. Bekal and that sort of thing. All these multiple identities, which is what makes us such an interesting community of people in the world.

Now, the structure of Indian society, let us look at that is a complex mosaic of various other communities, religions, castes, sexes that constitute our country, and very well known sociologist Andre Beteille says, all these communities are in fact the building blocks of Indian society, in the past that diverse ways of life when either these challenge, no challenge but not all of them where held in equal esteem that we know because we Indian communities have never gain egalitarian we will be hierarchical in our conscience and since the traditional order of Indian

lives are based on the hierarchies of caste, religion the tolerance of diversity meant tolerating a whole sort of inequity, in social behavior such as you are precious of your caste system, untouchability, for petrol subligation of women. Accommodation of a multitude of beliefs and faiths did not automatically mean that the individuals are free to choose from among these according to their personal inclinations. On the contrary each individual is bound to more or less to the customs and traditions of the community that she or he was born in. Now, this was the problem I mean there was acceptance. But the acceptance was also of the whole social hierarchies which had many inequities within it. So, when we talk again about secularism, inclusiveness etc. we always see that it has swung like a pendulum favouring the rights of communities sometimes and the rights of individuals at other times. While accommodating the tolerance and qualities that often quoted as necessary for a quality to be secular and un-equivalent hierarchical traditional order does not easily lend itself to a secular state of society, not to our democracy that entertain fundamental human rights. Now this is essentially the contradiction of Indian society. The basic contradiction is swing constantly in tradition and fundamental human rights individual rights because that between these two you have tradition and you have modality change automatically assumes that you moved from this traditional framework to individualism and rights of the

individual. So, in this movement we are constantly functioning like a pendulum and this can be frequently very confusing. It is politically confusing, socially confusing, it is confusing within the family in terms of the attitude between parents and children. And so here is something which we constantly have to work out. Because our ability to accept we tend to accept tradition wholesale and to accept tradition wholesale automatically assume the proportion that you will never be able to accept modernity. Yes, we want to be modern and you know in present day cinema, you will find that very interesting that how does it happens. Take, for instance, you have films like, whether I don't know you have seen this films like 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai', 'Kal Ho Na Ho'.

Now, these are films that are supposed to show you modern Indians, that is Indians today who are forward-looking not backward looking. Now, what does this modernism actually represents in the cinema? It simply represents that you have put a whole heart of Indians not in India, but somewhere else like you would have this film in which you have this house is populated by this particular family but that house is actually in Scotland, not in India. And there you have a great story about Indians and you have this people who are supposed to be extremely modern and you have this girl who studies in some institution abroad but when she comes back she instantly submits herself to the most not traditional but most retro-gent attitude

of the parents who force her to marry who is somebody in India and she accepts and gets married to that person. Now, these kinds of things we are constantly trying and reconciling. This reconciliation, which is an aspect of Indian personality I am not always sure that it is the best thing for us. May be it is, may be it is not; but one thing is certain. Because it is the way we are with one foot here and one foot there is the manner which we are balanced ourselves. We have kept ourselves growing without this country splitting into many pieces. That of course is absolutely clear.

Anyway, to go back to the little bit of history about the Indian cinema, when the tolerance in a community-an important component of our national movement. We would never have become free if we were not tolerant and accommodative. And this happened when Gandhi took over the national movement. When Gandhi took over the independent movement of the country, everybody was welcoming it. It wasn't meant for one or another group. He did not stand and say that Hindus are the original people of this country and they have a greater right than anybody else; he did not say that. He got everybody whoever lived in this country as the part of the movement. Now that was what gave us a kind of trust, and that was it is only because that we became free, because all Indians were welcomed without regard to creed, caste or gender and modeling itself on this feudalistic philosophy Indian nationalism came to represent

everyone in the country. This comprehensive nationalism was taken to be synonymous with secularism thus to define oneself as an Indian was in fact to be secular at that time. While the national movement was forged on the basis of anti-colonist and anti-imperialist guide the nationalist leadership was equally concerned for the needs and reforms in traditional society. Although these related primarily to Hindu society that is why gaining independence from British rule was a primary concerned programs and agitations were temporarily untouchable, general equality were also very much part of the movement. To legitimate that claims to represent the entire country has boosted credentials, Indian nationalism and sought the clearance of various groups including those that were marginalized along the lines of caste, religion, language, region, gender and caste. Yet there was excess of quality particularly among the Muslim community that remained unconvinced about the Congress led movement in the country is truly representing their interest which ultimately lead to the demand for Pakistan.

Now let me go into the problem that once India became free and got divided between Pakistan and India, the biggest problem for us was how do you represent a Muslim in Indian cinema? Because before independence there were something like 28 to 29% Muslims in the country, Hindus were not such a brute majority. But by creation of Pakistan, Hindus became a brute

majority. You had no more than 12% Muslims in the country and because these Muslims decided that India was their country and not Pakistan and they had decided that this is where they were born and this is where they were going to be die and they are the citizen of this country. They had a position and right to be here. But in the minds particularly in the establishment at that time in spite of fact that we had a series of Congress Government, we had the Nehru era, model in front of us. Muslims were always seen certain amount of special interest. There was always saying that why do those have a choice. Why can't be they just be like us? We are here, this is our country, we remain here. Why should Muslims have this choice? that they have Pakistan, they have India. If they are of Pakistan, they should have gone there. But this was impractical and this was complete nonsense and never had happened. But the interesting part is that the people who lived here had to live constantly cloaked with suspicion. This was a great misfortune. Now, but in the Indian cinema wherever the film was made, particularly now the difference comes between north i.e. the Hindi film and south Indian films. When it comes to films made in Kerala and Andhra never got any problem, where the Muslims were not under any circumstances. You could deal with them like you dealt with anybody with a straightforwardness and honesty and which was very easy to do. The same thing went to Tamil cinema. But when it came to films made in Hindi, there was always this problem. So if you

are dealing with the Muslim you always dealt with kid-loves. Kid loves always patronizing and Muslims in films at that time say some post 1947, always had to be represented has been extremely good people, they had to be honest like nobody else is honest. They were the best people you could meet. They were true to their word, extremely honest all these kind of things. This kind of overcompensation to their personalities, they could not be like normal people normally good, bad or different kinds not a Muslim. Muslim, he wouldn't dreamt, he would be very honest and he was an employee, he would be the most honest employee. This kind of representation continued in the Indian cinema until it became ridiculous but unfortunately went into other minorities as well like if you had Christians, you always found that Christians had to be always you know all of them regarding, always went to mass. When you are showing a Hindu, you always show him as going to the temples, but the Christians are always going to mass, always wears his very large cross, filmic representations. But this became a problem because you know you could not deal with minorities. Otherwise you will face that it would be a concept rejecting the minorities. The idea is you do not want to reject the minorities but by creating the special image for them you have already rejected them. That's why they are not part of you. That they are some special people that you have to deal with their personalities are very fragile, so you have to be very careful while

talking about them, these observed no sense.

Fortunately, by the time the second war with Pakistan took place in 1971, and then Bangladesh was formed and then suddenly the concept of two nation theory was collapsed. At that moment, suddenly, you could look at Muslims in a normal fashion like you look at each other. Without having to worry because there is no question of now any extra territorial loyalty except in the minds of some political parties in the country. Unfortunately but were nobody else. For the general populous, there is no such problem. And particularly in Maharashtra we have a problem with one political formation is there, who always consider that the Muslims to be extra-territorially loyal which is an absurd thing when the fact that it is there. So you have in 1971, when the formation of Bangladesh you realized that there is no question of two nations, because Bangladesh was not formed on the basis of the identity of Muslims, it was on the basis of the culture that they have which was Bengali. It was a Muslim state but because it was culturally it was very different from what West Pakistan was at that time and for Pakistan was just one and then you have Bangladesh is separate. And in Indian cinema for the first time in post 1971, that absolutely a realistic way of the Indians and Muslims were started and that was the film called "Garm Hava". It was an absolutely landmark film and for the first time you could also deal in the Indian cinema with the realities of partition. With the



truth of partition, the suffering that took place on the both sides of the border where you can when you could look at it objectively with the great deal of passion still be very honest about it. You did not need to be patricide and only take one or another side. So that of constantly making overcompensating for Muslims, for Christians and all these kind of things disappeared. And I think that was also the time when film makers like myself came into the film industry. We started to make films. As when the new cinema started in early 70, I would say that Garm Hava—was the first kind of film that was made by also from the person from Karnataka M.S. Satyu. So when that film was made and then after that you will find that the situation changed until we could look at each other with the sense of reality and with the degree of honesty without having quite a patronized or be suspicious or any of these things.

The most important point that I wish to make here is that as we come closer to the present day, one of the things that started to happen once again in minority representations in our films was the effect of the political transformations that were taking place in the country. The rise of a party based on a concept of 'Hindutwa' which was the BJP, when it came up, there was a kind of sense of division between communities and that was exasperated with the Babri Masjid demolition. And with the Babri Masjid demolition, you certainly had again a very serious problem of a minority feeling which extremely answer to itself within the

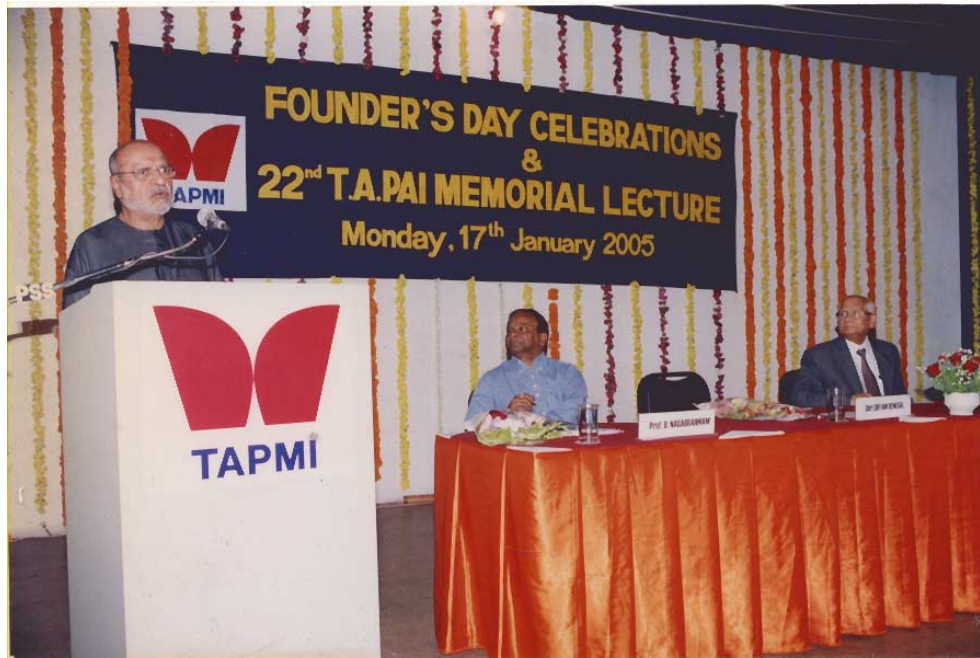
country. And this caused many problems because when you look up at Maharashtra, where the terrible riot that took place in December – January in that particular year and then in March we had the bomb blasts in Mumbai, and the process of healing has taken a very long period of time and the process of healing is not always easy unless there is justice. So it is a similar problem for an instance when it comes to what happened in Gujarat or what happened in 1984 in Delhi, the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi, massacre of Muslims in Gujarat a couple of years ago. Now, unless there is justice healing processes will not take place and if there has to be justice there has to be in people's consciousness the need for this justice. I think this is where cinema has started to play an important role. Now recently young people. There is a girl called Sonali Bose who made a film called "Amu". 'Amu' is a film that takes you back to the massacre of the Sikhs in 1984. Because to this day 20 years have passed there is not one person who has been either sent to jail or convicted to that then everybody knows and knew who those people were. Tragically and similarly the problem when it comes to Gujarat has been the same. And there is another film like 'Amu', has been a film about that what happened in 1984, there is a film called 'Final Solution' which is a detailed, shortlisted documentary about the Gujarat killings that took place. Now this particular film took the Censors two years and they were not given the censor certificate. And finally there was so much flirt or

news in the media that the government was forced to invite outside people and people like me to come and look at that film and to see if it goes worthy of being given censor certificate largely because whether it contravened any of the guidelines or the rules that are there to that central film and the basic thing about censorship is that as long as whatever you are doing is constitutionally valid, the government

has no right to censor it or expunge it. And so we found nothing that was constitutionally invalid in it and therefore it was given the censor certificate, universal censor certificate to see by everyone. Now, the areas like this that cinemas in India have played a part will continue to play a part and important part in keeping this country together.

Thank you very much.....

### About the Speaker: Shri Shyam Benegal



Shyam Benegal (born 14 December 1934, in Andhra Pradesh) is a prolific Indian director and screenwriter. With his first four feature films *Ankur* (1973), *Nishant* (1975) *Manthan* (1976) and *Bhumika* (1977) he created a new genre, which has now come to be called the "middle cinema" in India.

He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1976 and the Padma Bhushan in 1991. On 8 August 2007, he was awarded the highest award in Indian cinema for lifetime achievement, the Dadasaheb Phalke Award for the year 2005. He has won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Hindi seven times. Shyam Benegal, was born on 14 December, 1934 in Trimulgherry, Secunderabad then a British Cantonment, and now a

twin city of the state capital, Hyderabad. It was here, at age twelve that he made his first film, on a camera given to him by his photographer father Sridhar B. Benegal. He received an M.A. in Economics, from Nizam College, Osmania University, Hyderabad. It was here that he formed the Hyderabad Film Society.

#### **Early career**

He started his career working in 1959, as an advertising copywriter, at a Bombay-based advertising agency, Lintas Advertising, where he steadily rose to become a creative head. Meanwhile, he made his first documentary in Gujarati, *Gher Betha Ganga* (Ganges at Doorsteps) in 1962.

His first feature film though, had to wait another decade, while he worked on the script.

In 1963 he started a brief stint with another advertising agency called ASP (Advertising, Sales and Promotion). During his advertising years, he directed over 900 sponsored documentaries and advertising films.

Between 1966 and 1973, Shyam also taught at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, and twice served as the institute's chairman, (1980-83) and (1989-92). By this time he already started making documentaries. One of his early documentaries *A Child of the Streets* (1967) garnered him wide acclaim, in all he has made over 70 documentary and short films. Soon, he was awarded the Homi Bhabha Fellowship (1970-72), which allowed him to work at the Children Television Workshop, New York, and later at Boston's WGBH-TV.

#### **National Film Awards**

Several films of Shyam Benegal won Best Feature Film Awards: some of them are *Ankur* (1975); *Nishant*(1976); *Manthan*(1976); *Bhumika* (1978); *Junoon* (1979); *Arohan* (1982); *Nehru*(1984) ; *Satyajit Ray, Filmmaker* (1985) ; *Trikaal* (1986); *Suraj Ka Satvan*

*Ghoda* (1993); *Mammo* (1995); *The Making of the Mahatma* (1996); *Sardari Begum* (1997); *Samar* (1999); *Zubeidaa* (2001) and in 2005 Nargis Dutt Award for Best Feature Film on National Integration for *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero*

#### **Film Fare Awards and International Awards**

- 1980 Best Director for *Junoon* and 1982 Best Director for *Kalyug*: Nominated
- 1976: Golden Palm: *Nishant*: Nominated for Cannes Film Festival
- 1974 Golden Berlin Bear for *Ankur*: Nominated for Berlin International Film Festival
- Moscow International Film Festival : 1981 Golden Prize: *Kalyug* ; 1997 Golden St. George: *Sardari Begum*: Nominated

#### **Honours**

1970 Homi Bhabha Fellowship (1970-72)  
1976 Padma Shri  
1989 Sovietland Nehru Award  
1991 Padma Bhushan  
2006 Dadasaheb Phalke Award