

Welcome to Sajjanpur: An Introduction with Opinions

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Welcome to Sajjanpur offers an outstanding perspective on the way in which life in contemporary India is changing – a change that is bringing with it a whole range of problems but also possibilities. Directed by Shyam Benegal, who has to his credit a bagful of national and international awards, *Sajjanpur* is a bit of departure for this director better known for his more ‘meaningful’ or serious cinema. In *Sajjanpur* too, Benegal takes on serious issues. Local politics, violence, caste, class, sexuality, rural unemployment, migrant labor, the global market in human organs – you will see how all of these things impact the people of Sajjanpur in this film. But, unlike the films that first brought Benegal national and international recognition in the 1970s – films such as *Ankur*, *Nishant*, *Manthan*, or *Bhumika* – in this 2008 film, Benegal is able to bring these issues to the attention of the audience by weaving them together with a lighthearted story line. Its satirical look at problems of contemporary India, rather than the gritty social realism characteristic of Benegal’s earlier cinema, is what makes this film an excellent portrait of rural or small town India.

The hero of the film is Mahadev, played by the up and coming actor Shreyas Talpade. After his BA, the unemployed Mahadev makes a living by writing letters for the non-literate people in his village (which, sometimes, extends to composing SMS messages on cell phones!) though he aspires to be a published novelist. His profession, though, makes him privy to a whole range of issues plaguing the village. It also leads him to try to, unsuccessfully as it turns out, steal his childhood sweetheart from her husband, who is working as a migrant dockyard laborer in far-away Bombay or Mumbai. He tries to support the efforts of the *hijra* (third sex),

Munni, who is the only one who has the bravado to fight against the upper-caste landlord whose thugs run the political machine in the village. He gets involved in trying to hook up his friend, the lovelorn medical assistant (called compounder) in his effort to woo the widowed daughter of an ex-army officer of a different caste. He discovers the problems confronting a mother trying to marry off her daughter who happens to have been born under an inauspicious planetary configuration. Through these stories, we discover what makes Sajjanpur tick, and through Sajjanpur's example, we do get to know quite a bit about change in contemporary India too.

Like any society, India too has seen change that has impacted all sections of society. The push to make India a "modern" and "developed" society was one of the objectives of the first generation of leaders. What Sajjanpur shows, if we care to read it in that fashion, is that modernization can never mean simply copying a model that has been developed elsewhere in the world. We see a uniquely Indian form of the modern in Sajjanpur, just as what we see around us is not a Universal form of the modern (however much we might like to think of it as such) but a peculiarly American modern. Sajjanpur reveals the Indian modern in some of its complexity. Economic modernization has not been particularly successful, we learn. There are few economic opportunities, whether for educated young men like Mahadev or the illiterate family of Kamala (Mahadev's childhood sweetheart) and Bansi Ram, who is forced to go to Mumbai to seek a living as a migrant laborer. Yet, the film is a great example of political modernization, of how deeply democratic politics has imbedded itself in Indian society, but also the unique forms it has taken. Finally, there is the more vexed issues of social modernization, that Benegal touches upon in various ways. Vindhya, the scooter riding daughter of a traditional mother who believes in horoscopes is one side of the picture. The tragedy that ultimately befalls Ram Kumar and Shobha Rani (the compounder and the daughter of the ex-army officer, respectively) reveals not

only that older caste prejudices are well and alive, but that the attempt to transgress them is often resisted, violently and tragically.

Sajjanpur literally means the abode of the good or respectable, people. As the film tells us at the very start, there are plenty of people living in the village who are far from the norms of respectability. But beyond its loveable and well-crafted characters, the film's significance also lies in its exploration of changing notions of respectability. Sometimes, the attempt to maintain the status quo – a certain outmoded form of respectability – by force leads to tragic consequences, for instance for the narrator's friend, the compounder and the widow he loves. They are lynched because members of her caste oppose widow remarriage. At other times the film highlights the inexorable forces that popular democracy has unleashed in contemporary India. Munni, the eunuch, not only defeats the upper caste landlord in the village elections, but goes on to a successful career in politics at the state level.

This is the film to see if you want to move beyond the stereotypical representations of an “unchanging” deeply spiritual India. It is as different as you can get from the celebrations of urban poverty that we saw in a much more commercially successful film made, interestingly enough, in the same year. Despite both of them being films set in India, with upbeat story lines, lots of good music, sharp camerawork and slick editing, *Welcome to Sajjanpur* is not *Slumdog Millionaire* and thank goodness for that.