

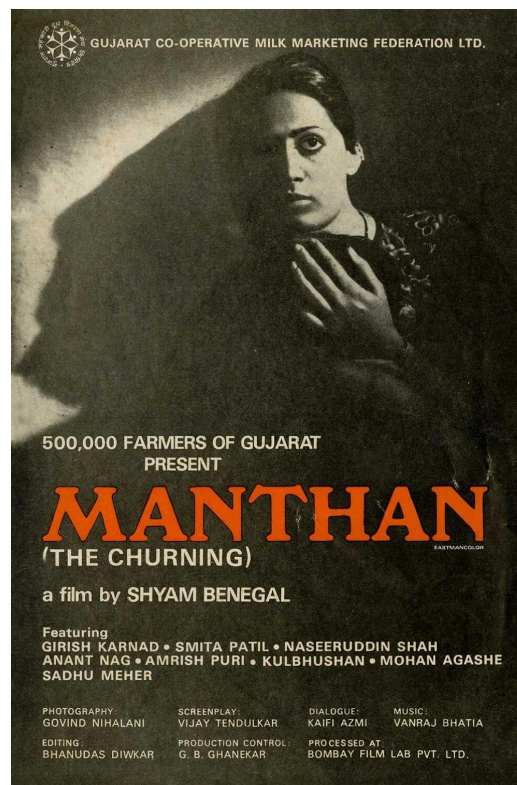
Veteran Filmmaker Shyam Benegal on Crowdfunding His 1976 Film 'Manthan' — A Pioneering Move in Indian Cinema

By Aditi Dharmadhikari

Commissioned by Ketto.org Blog in 2015

[With Jio MAMI 2015 just around the corner, we decided to dig a little deeper into the history of crowdfunding and filmmaking, to see just how far back they go.

Serendipitously, the person we traced it back to in India is veteran filmmaker Mr Shyam Benegal, Former Chairman of MAMI's Board of Trustees and director of the 1976 film on the Gujarat milk co-operatives, 'Manthan'.]



“I think there are many filmmakers who are turning to crowdfunding today, with good reason,” Mr. Benegal remarks. “It’s a question of whether people feel the film is worthwhile. Opportunities are much greater today, and there are many avenues today for filmmakers, especially because of the reach of the internet.”

His own 1976 film ‘Manthan’, on the White Revolution of India, was made thanks to the contribution of over half a million milk farmers in Gujarat in the mid-1970’s, a staggering show of solidarity that told the tale of their movement on the big screen.

The filmmaker is full of praises for Dr Kurien, the man behind Amul, and the pioneer of the movement which transformed India into the largest milk-producing country in the world. “I had made a couple of documentaries for Dr Verghese Kurien, who redefined the story of milk production in the country,” he shares. “His intervention was incredible; he pioneered the milk producers’ co-operative movement, the first time something like this was being done on such a large scale.” Dr. Kurien, Mr. Benegal relates, wanted very much for the story of how the milk co-operatives began, to be documented.

“I knew Dr Kurien well, he was the boss of the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation Ltd. or GCMMF, and I had made two documentaries for him in the late 60’s, while I was still working for an advertising agency,” he explains. “He said he was very happy with them, but I realised that I was not. I felt that they were really preaching to the converted, they were being shown to people who already had co-operatives. We needed to reach out to the public at large, so that they could come to know about the largest, most successful co-operative movement in the world.”



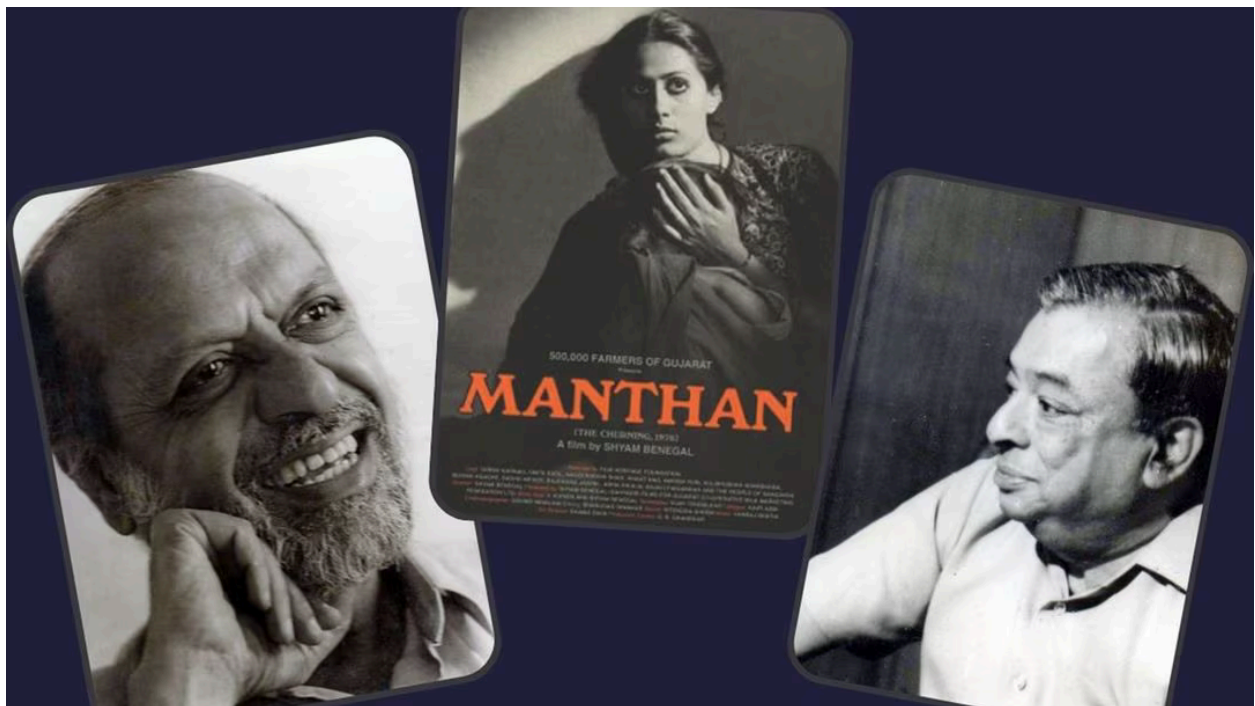
“I was travelling all over Gujarat to capture the movement when I was working on the ‘Operation Flood’ documentaries,” he recalls. “I told Dr Kurien that I wanted to make a

feature on the movement, based on what I'd witnessed over the course of my travels. He was all for it, and when it came to the matter of money to produce the film, he came up with a suggestion that was so simple and marvellous, it was perfect.”

Dr. Kurien asked him how much money he would need, and when Mr. Benegal answered with a quote of Rs 10-12 lakhs (“Of course, it’s impossible to do that in today’s day and age,” he chuckles.), Dr Kurien reportedly said, “I have, at the moment, more than half a million farmers in Gujarat alone who are members of Amul Co-operative Societies.

“The milk farmers gather every morning and evening to sell their milk, and they are paid for the morning’s sales in the evening, and the evening’s sales, the next morning. Let me send a message to all the co-operative unions of Gujarat and ask them if the milk farmers would be willing, for just one morning, to accept Rs 2 less. They can then become producers of a feature film which tells their story. Why would they say no?”

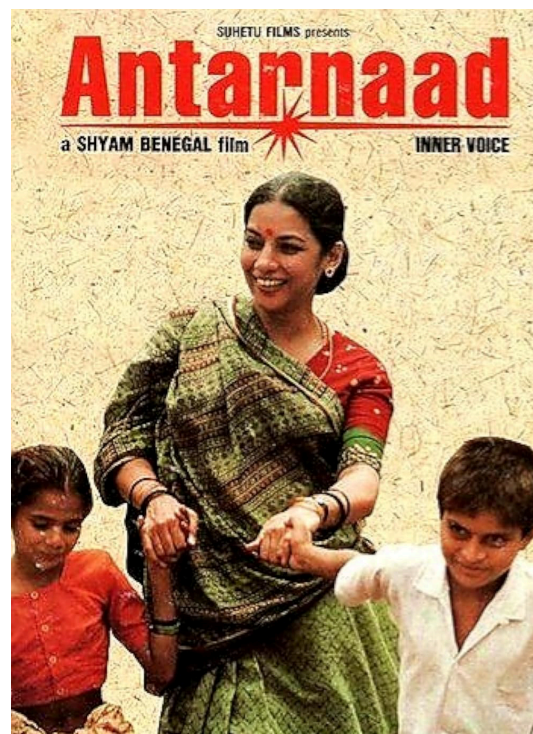
Dr. Kurien’s proposal got a vote of approval from each and every one of those farmers, thanks to which the production of Manthan was made possible. Mr. Benegal pauses at this point to remark that while it’s all very well to make the film, there were a lot of other elements that required money as well – to make several prints, for distribution, publicity and for a theatrical release. There also needed to be an audience willing to pay money to see the film, in order to recover expenses.



“Dr Kurien made a call to a distributor and assured him that if he would release the film in theatres, he would personally see to it that he would have a full house at most shows,” Mr Benegal shares. “All the farmers came from their villages to see their own story on the big screen. It was incredible, the Times of India, Ahmedabad Edition, carried a whole story on this unique phenomenon – trucks and trucks of farmers with their families coming into cities such as Baroda, Ahmedabad, Mehsana... they were the first audiences of the film they’d helped produce.”

The film successfully covered its costs and made a small profit as well, telling their story far beyond their time. ‘Manthan’ was one of the few Indian films made which got distribution in different countries in South Africa, South America, Central America, as well as in China. Former PM Morarji Desai presented a copy of the film to the Soviet Union President at the time, and it was shown all over their country too. “These were the regions of the world which were curious about, and would benefit from, the creation of co-operatives,” Mr. Benegal explains. To cap it all, Dr Kurien was asked to present this film at the United Nations in New York at the General Assembly. “He took me along, and I introduced the film and screened it in New York,” Mr Benegal smiles. “That’s the story of Manthan.”

It isn’t his only tryst with crowdfunding though. His second crowdfunding venture, Susman, was about handloom weavers. Funds were gathered for this, too, in a similar manner, by the different handloom co-operative unions all over the country.



“Finally, in 1991, I made a film called Antarnaad, based on the Swadhyay movement, spearheaded by Pandurang Shastri Athavale,” Mr. Benegal explains. “Crowdfunding is a very important means for Independent filmmakers, but a film cannot be self-indulgent,” he concludes. “There must be artistic work, or an attempt to create this, at any rate... and some social work, as well. Why else would people put money into it? Filmmakers have an obligation to return the money that they have been given, one way or another.”