



MANTHAN

Shyam Benegal; India 1976; Second Run; region-free Blu-ray; Hindi with English subtitles; Certificate PG; 135 minutes; 1.37:1. Extras: documentary on the film's history and restoration; interview with Film Heritage Foundation founder Shivendra Singh Dungarpur and actor Naseeruddin Shah; booklet.

REVIEWED BY NICK BRADSHAW

“500,000 dairy farmers of Gujarat present...” may be the most glorious opening credit in the movies, and Shyam Benegal’s 1976 agrarian relations drama, crowdfunded (before the term existed) to the tune of two rupees a farmer, must have delighted the labourer-investors whose organisation it dramatised in miniature. It starts, classic western-style (or like John Sayles’s union drama *Matewan*, 1987), with strangers alighting from a train in a small town in Kheda district, then traces the upheavals brought by Girish Karnad’s high-principled Dr Rao and his team of veterinary scientists as they disrupt the settled injustices of the peasant milk economy with their modern gospel of a worker cooperative.

First to see the potential – and try to forestall it – is Amrish Puri’s smiling crocodile of a dairy boss, Mishraji; slower to take alarm is Kulbhushan Kharbanda’s idle upper-caste Sarpanch, or village headman. In contrast, two hardbitten characters among the dalit farmers, Naseeruddin Shah’s angry young radical Bhola and Smita Patil’s lovelorn Bindu, are moved by Rao’s idealistic efforts and apparent open-mindedness to start to dare to hope for change.

Co-written by Verghese Kurien, India’s ‘father of the White Revolution’, whose cooperatives made India the biggest milk producer in the world, *Manthan* is a gorgeously rich fable of social development, far from propaganda or triumphalism. There’s a schematic underpinning but the film is deeply rounded and ambivalent as drama, focused on the constraints and contradictions of its characters, especially across caste lines: it’s as clear-eyed about individual freedom as it is about group change. Preeti Sagar’s interstitial songs draw out the journey of Bindu’s heart. It’s also very beautiful; a few rare colour wobbles remain in this restoration by India’s Film Heritage Foundation, far outweighed by resplendence.

DISC: Extras include a short featurette about the film’s revival, and an extended conversation between Shah, FHF founder Shivendra Singh Dungarpur and the broadcaster Anupama Chopra at the restoration’s Cannes presentation in 2024. The booklet carries an illuminating essay on the film by Omar Ahmed.