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The Hustler

Sonal Nerurkar

Dev Benegal is a busy man. With just about 30 minutes to spare before he leaves for film festivals in Toronto and Venice, as well as London, where he premieres *Split Wide Open*, his long drawn-out, much-discussed, second feature film.



He is in the midst of a meeting when we walk in. Tea, coffee, sofa or the chair? We wait and watch the production schedules on the wall. There's a sense of *deja vu*. A sense of having been there, done that and written the story as well. But that's because we have -- written it, that is.

February 1997, was when we first met Benegal, fresh from the success of his critically-acclaimed, commercially-successful directorial debut *English, August*, to discuss his upcoming project, *Split Wide Open*.

Relaxing on a swivel chair in his quaint little office, he had explained the film, then in its pre-production stages, would "explore the myth of Indian sexuality."

Split Wide Open suggests transformation, things coming out. "Victorian sexual values are not intrinsic to our culture, we have been turning a blind eye to everything around us. The film stresses individual preferences and choices; we're saying that we are cool about anything as long as it is by consent," he had said.

Co-written by Upamanyu Chatterjee, author of *English August*, *Split Wide Open* was to have four stories with the protagonist, Rohan, linking them together. "Rohan, a theatre activist, meets an old friend who gives him a job -- and that's how he comes into contact with the four narratives. Ira, who was to be the other main character, was a psychotherapist with a troubled past. She's part of the dark, twisted world that Rohan stumbles into." The film was slated to release in December, 1997.

Cutting back to his office, August 1999, we know a lot has changed since that first meeting. To talk, Benegal opts for a straight-backed chair over the swivel. He looks like he hasn't got much sleep. And considering that he's overshot his predicted release date by almost 24 months, we can see why he's looking so stressed out.

"Do you really think it's taken too much time?" he counters our query, looking as thoughtful as he can through his bloodshot eyes. "I guess I take my time to work things out. Saif (*Ali Khan*) once said to me, 'Dev, you've taken six months to write your script', and I said to him, 'Is that too little?' He said, 'No way. A Hindi film takes just a couple of days.' But I don't just watch a couple of LDs, copy ideas and push them as being mine. I can't work like that."

Right. To get on with the original script idea that's finally bent into shape, he'd like to make one thing clear at the outset: "The film is not about sex. It's about gender," he says. So, did about half-a-dozen writers get it all wrong? "Every script evolves," is his evasive answer.

But since we've got about 20 minutes left, we plod on. "*Split Wide Open* is looking at how sex, sexuality and gender are being redefined in India at the turn of the century. We have a population of over 1 billion. What happens when they start talking about sex?" asks Benegal.



Since interrupting him to point out that 'sex' still seems to be part of the core focus would be rude, especially considering how emphatically he's spelling out 'g-e-n-d-e-r', we switch tracks.

What inspired *Split Wide Open*? "When I moved to Bombay in the '80s, one of the first images to strike me was a bunch of women queuing up in front of a tap to collect water, while behind them was the staggering expanse of the sea. The irony stayed with me," he states.

Thus, sex and water form the basis to the story that is "about search -- a genre that's always fascinated me, ever since I saw John Ford's *The Search*." The plot (which has changed drastically over the years) revolves around a young street hustler (Rahul Bose) who is searching for his little sister, a flower girl (Ayesha Dharker), who disappears.

His quest brings him up against "the extremes of the city, including the fantastic world of television where he meets a talk show hostess (Laila Rouass), a London-returned girl of Indian origin, who's also on a search -- for her roots, her identity." What you get is "the outcome when two worlds -- the street and television -- come together. And what happens to morality when sex and poverty collide." The element of water is brought in by "Bose's character, who buys and sells it for a profit."

And speaking of Bose, though one can imagine him as the hustler, the street element definitely doesn't go with him. Was he the first choice? "I wouldn't like to go on record on that," answers Benegal.

Okay, we'll make it easy. Wasn't Saif Ali Khan his first choice? "Not for this character. Earlier, the script demanded a different protagonist (an NRI) for which I had considered Saif," he explains.

With Bose, Benegal is "trying to define the new Indian on the streets, because I don't agree with the hustler image Hindi films give us -- the *tapori* -- I think it's too romanticised."

He and Bose spent a lot of time on the streets, meeting, interviewing, taping people. "The guy we're talking about wears fake brands, speaks a little English and wants to be as cool and hip as his American counterpart." Once you probe a little deeper, the gloss wears off. "They may be struggling for survival, but they also have tremendous energy," the director elaborates.

Though Bose, as a "man on the streets," may have come as a surprise, Rouass and Dharker in their respective roles didn't. The screenplay, written by novelist Farrukh Dhondy (who came in later), includes "three to four stories that unfold and, eventually, tie-in to each other."

The stories cut across socio-economic divides, giving you a diversity of existence that is quintessential Bombay, one that "slaps you in the face when you walk out on the street."

While *English, August* explores small town Madna through Agastya's distinctly urban, elite consciousness, *Split Wide Open* takes on a different perspective -- that of a small-towner's view of the big, bad city.

The shift in focus wasn't deliberate, claims Benegal. "Two things that Satyajit Ray taught me were that a film must have density and, secondly, it must ring true. While you could call *Split Wide Open* the inverse of *English, August*, it wouldn't have been reason enough for me to make the film," he adds.



The international trade's response to *Split Wide Open*, a bilingual film -- "both English and Hindi, the way India speaks" -- has been encouraging. Says Benegal, "Most screening committees are reluctant to see Indian films. But they were amazed at our international quality."

While a year-end release is being planned for India, Benegal doesn't foresee any censor trouble coming his way. "I prefer to take things as they come. The board is so arbitrary in its judgment that I feel it's best to be detached from it," he claims.

He's not too worried about the audience response either. While he doesn't do much to mask his disdain towards mainstream Hindi cinema, he's clear that "the ultimate test for a film is how it works with the audience."

Unlike *English, August*, which was more of an "experimental film," *Split Wide Open* uses two elements from popular cinema -- "narrative and melodrama. But they're explored within the parameters of a distinctly modern sensibility," he explains.

As the man who spearheaded the revival of the genre of alternative films, how does he feel with the current spate of successes like *Hyderabad Blues*? "I think it's great. But the real change that I predict will be in mainstream cinema. The challenges they're going to face from the margins will force them to rethink their genre," believes Benegal.

While he agrees that cinema must entertain, he also believes that it must make you think. Originality, he says, is the key. "But, for many years, mainstream cinema has ignored its importance. The new cinema," as he likes to describe this movement he's part of, "lacks the ideological baggage of the films of the '70s. We've found a voice that recognises that film is a commercial form. We're not hallowed pillars, detached from reality. We recognise that you have to be artiste/writer/hustler/seller in order to survive."

For this film school graduate from New York University, who almost canned *English, August* because he found it "too boring," intolerance towards artistic eccentricities seem a bit far-fetched.

But since our 30 minutes are almost up, and he has a film to sell, it's obviously not the right time to split such things wide open.

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