

FILM

## Welcome To Sajjanpur Abhijit Ghosh-Dastidar

Serious and comic, "Welcome to Sajjanpur" (Hindi, colour, 135 mins) directed by Shyam Benegal, provokes laughter on profound topics and situations. Overhead track of hutments, introduces the viewer to Sajjanpur, earlier called 'Durjanpur', which is a full-fledged developed village. Letter writer, Mahadev Khushwa (Shreyas Talpade) wants to be a writer of prose. The protagonist introduces himself and his environment, one morning while brushing his teeth. Sajjanpur is not far from Sharada Mata Mandir and the river bank, Chitrakoot Ghat. Those who can read the alphabets in the village, read only religious novels.

Mahadev cycles through the village. He helps his mother in running a grocery shop, on the outer verandah of their modest cottage. The village has electricity. As a letter writer, Mahadev has a table and a chair, placed below a banyan tree, close to the local post office and a tailoring shop. All the villagers have great reliance on his letters. The village sarpanch elections are imminent, and Ram Singh (Yashpal Sharma), the local landlord is promoting his sister-in-law, 'bhabi' Jamuna as the next sarpanch leader. Jamuna has a criminal record. Ram Singh orders Mahadev to draft a letter addressed to the local collector, bringing false allegations against a villager Salim, raising charges of terrorism and ISI connections. Two snake charmers request Mahadev to write a letter to their father, who has been away from the village, for a long time. The snake charmers pay by a vial of herbal potents for virility. One day, a young girl, Kamala (Amrita Rao) arrives and reminds Mahadev that they were in school together in Satri. A flash-back insepia recalls times past, with Kamala and Mahadev in the same school class room. Kamala's ears are pulled for the wrong answers, and Mahadev gets slapped by the teacher, who has caught Mahadev kissing Kamala on the cheeks, under a tree. The flicker of romance returns after sixteen years.

While Mahadev is unmarried, Kamala has been married for four years, but with no children. Her husband is away in Mumbai for a long time, but occasionally sends money. Kamala wants Mahadev to write a letter to her husband, Banshi when Mahadev's dipping writing ink expires, the village shop keeper, offers him ball point pens. Ram Singh drives around the village on a motor bike, with a ganster holding a gun, sitting on the pillion. Mahadev has become famous, after a letter from an aunt to her son, resulted in the son remitting Rs. 500/- to the mother. Villagers queue up at Mahadev's table for writing letters. Even though four diwali celebrations have passed, Kamala's husband has not returned to the village. As Mahadev drafts Kamala's letter in poetic terms, under candle light at home, he drifts into a romantic reverse with Kamala. A sound pun of the school slap on the cheeks, synchronized with Mahadev's mother baking and flattening chapattis (wheat bread) with her hands, wakes up Mahadev.

Villagers gather and watch a street play, "Kranti", performed by urban idealists. The play depicts farmers protesting over land acquisition for industry. There is a clash with the developers, and police fire. The play within the film, presents TV crew, filming the mayhem. A villager enquires whether Mahadev had

written the play, under dictation from one Mr Ghosh. Mahadev is warned that there are Naxals in the village, and arrests and encounters are taking place. Postman Karim informs that there was no letter for Kamala. Aunt Kali (Ila Arun) demands of Mahadev that he write to her brother to arrange for the marriage of her daughter, Brinda (Divya Dutta), who was born premature after eight months under ominous signs. Brinda's marriage has to be arranged with a dog. Ram Kumar (Ravi Kissen) chases Shobha (Rajeswari Sachdev) on a cycle. Shobha is the widowed daughter-in-law of a retired army subedar. In nervousness, Shobha drops a water vessel inside a well. Ram Kumar jumps into the well, and retrieves the vessel.

When Shobha develops stomach pains, the subedar takes her to the government dispensary and family welfare centre. Under closed doors, Ram Kumar, the medical compounder examines Shobha's forehead, throat, neck, chest and stomach. Meanwhile, Salim withdraws from village elections, after accusations of being a Pak agent are raised. He is curious to know whether Mahadev had written letters to the collector. A local trader wants 100 letters to be written in adoration of 'Santoshi Mata'. During the medical examination, Shobha keeps giggling. Ram Kumar requests for letters addressed to Shobha. Mahadev writes love letters in candle light. There are dream sequences, with songs and dance jigs, featuring Mahadev– Kamala and Ram Kumar–Shobha. Ram Kumar pitches the litters over Shobha's boundary walls. The subedar father-in-law catches Sobha with the bulging envelope. She is made to read aloud the love letters. The subedar chases Ram Kumar through the village, and scampers on to a bus, which Ram Kumar has boarded. But subedar is offering proposal for a marriage of child widow Shobha with Ram Kumar. Soon the wedding takes place, as the first widow marriage in the village.

A villager requests Mahadev to type a SMS message on the cell phone, seeking a loan for a tractor purchase. Munni bai (Ravi Jhankal), the hijra eunuch is standing for village elections. The hijras take out a lively procession in the village market. Kamala receives a letter from her husband, asking her to look after his mother, and feed the dog. Banshi Ram, the husband, would return only when there was money. Mahadev gives Kamala a ride on his cycle. A duct song rings a reverie with the pair on a scooter, in a car, and travelling in a two-seater aircraft. Next day Kamala visits Mahadev's house, and Mahadev drafts a strongly worded letter to Banshi, telling him not to return. Sarpanch election campaigns continue. Munni-bai, hijra brings out song and dance processions. There is a clash with the opponents, led by Ram Singh, who demand "No hijra raj". Munni-bai sends a letter to the district collector (Rajit Kapoor), stating that he was being threatened. Police protection is given to Munni-bai. On 'Karwa-chowk' day, the married women of the village, perform puja rituals for Sita under moon light.

Munni-bai drops in at Mahadev's house at night. Ram Singh has smashed up the hijra slums. Mahadev drafts a letter of Ram Singh's atrocities, addressed to the collector. When Kamala arrives at Mahadev's house with cash enclosed in a letter from her husband, Banshi, Mahadev is suspicious about the source of the money. He warns Kamala of smuggling and terrorist connections. Bombs are hurled at the election procession, led by the subedar. There is false voting at the voting booths. Even then Munni-bai wins, and brings out a victory procession.

Munni-bai is attacked in an isolated field, and villagers gather and cry. The goon Ram Singh drives away on his bike. When Mahadev visits Kamala's house, she cries and flings herself on him. Mahadev tells her to forget her husband, and he would look after her. The two snake charmers arrive with their father, who confirms receipt of a letter.

While Mahadev writes letters for others, his familiarity with the villagers, makes him read letters written by the addressees as replies. A subsequent letter from Banshi to Kamala, discloses that he has been selling his own blood to earn money, and soon he would be selling his kidneys. Mahadev pawns his fields for Rs 50,000, rushes to Mumbai, and traces out Banshi. He hands over the money and a letter from Kamala, to Banshi, instructing Banshi not to perform any operation. Banshi invites Kamala to Mumbai, after organizing a residence with the cash. Soon Kamala joins her husband in Mumbai. With time Mahadev's novel is published, and he is in conversation with the publisher. The novel is auto biographical, with Mahadev's personal experiences of letter writing. Goon Ram Singh and bhabi Jamuna were hanged by the villagers. Munni-bai became an MLA. After a year, Kamala and her husband return to the village, and Banshi seems to recognize Mahadev. At a wedding organized for Brinda with a dog, scooter driving Brinda protests and walks off, from the rituals, while villagers chase her. After an exchange of forty letters, Brinda agrees to marry Mahadev. The hero is transformed from letter writer to novel writer.

Shyam Benegal in his script highlights the physical joys of rural life and the met a physical anguish of backwardness and lack of education. The comedy is funny and melancholic, with the pervading poverty, illiteracy, superstitions and under-currents of violence. Shantanu Moitra's music is full of rustic charms. Rajen Kothari's camera is mobile, and the close-ups lighten the burdens of everyday life. "Welcome to Sajjanpur" maintains a sociological symmetry, demonstrating village life, packed with information. The numerous song-dance sequences can be pardoned as allegories for dreams of a better life. □□□