Bombay and Its Public

RAVI S. VASUDEVAN

1

In this chapter I look at Mani Raman's much-debated film, Bombay, in its movement between cinematic address and public reception. As its structural features, its generic location and its intertextual animosity of key moments in public life. In terms of reception, my analysis is concerned with the response of the articulate strata of 'the public', as expressed in the outlook of mainstream politicians, journalists, and reviewers. Writers of liberal outlook, left-wing affiliation, and the varieties of majority and minority identities have been outspoken in their evaluation of Bombay. They have argued that the role of representation that ought to govern the exploitation of national crisis, in particular the place of the 'real' in the conception of communal identity. I also try to understand a practice which is both a form of production as well as a site of reception, that of government censorship. The prohibitions enforced by the censor board add up to a certain image of the state and its understanding of the impact of images on social perception and official authority.

I have argued that the narrative construction of this film has a tendency to discontinuity, with segments acquiring a certain autonomy from each other. However, a pattern emerges over the time of the narrative, one of forgetting the past within the text. These features are echoed in the way the narrative is constructed by segments of the audience. The injustice I draw upon make sense of the text through a selection of material, and by highlighting the logic of certain narrative phases. The last section of this chapter presents my own susceptibility to revisiting the film with coherent meaning. In seeking to go beyond the existing terms of the debate, I focus on a particular feature which has not attracted much attention, that of the masculinist male body. Through this figure, I try to suggest that the particular way the text seeks coherence generates contradictory elements which offer an ambivalent viewpoint on the narrative of communal relationships and sectarian violence.

Towards a Modern Identity: The Basic Narrative Structure

In Bombay we have one narrative logic running through the film: how can a family be constituted across the divisions that define Indian society? These are divided at once between families and communities, and the divisions, as figured in the larger frame of the title, dismember the family generationally. Although the children are separated from each other for a while, each generation finally retains its integrity. The film thereby sets out a symbolic temporality, a common enough past, present, future logic. The constitution of the family, its rupture with the past, and its drive to preserve its legacy for the future provide the overarching structural orientation, one which brings the nuclear family into dialogue with the representation of state and society. This dialogue is nowhere one which the 'innocents' of the film contest with those who wield power. 'Innocents' is a term regularly employed by the reporter Shukla in his discussions with Hindu and Muslim leaders, as well as with the police: 'Are they not disturbed by the death of innocents?' Ultimately, the innocents are condemned in the image of dead children, and the notion feeds back into the narrative structure which sees the parents struggling to recover their children and the social future, even from them by the upheavals. The discourse of the family meets with that of state and civil society when the protagonist moves beyond his own concerns into a wider frame of action and restitution. Thus from the logic of recovering his family the hero is thrust into the logic of protecting society. The achievement of the case enables the other, as the children suddenly emerge in the wake of Shukla's successful bid to diffuse an angry mob, and the nuclear family is reunited.

The constraining of spaces is a key device in the unravelling of this narrative logic. Bombay must replace the village in order for the marriage to take place under the signs of modernity, the film's ultimate goal and resource. Shukla Maha's house in Bombay now becomes the iconic space in which all the significant kinship relations can reaggregate on the basis of a twofold fantasy. The first is revealed in the names of the twin granddaughters, Kabir Narayan and Kamal Bashir. The mix in which they reconstitute their
grandfathers’ names is the idyll of reconciliation. In this fantasy Shekhar
and Shabnam give birth to their parents to reconcile their differences
with them, or more pertinently, to exercise authority over them and
relax them in terms of their ideals. The second fantasy is the wish expressed
by the newly arrived grandparents to recover the family unit from the
manipulation of the riots by reclaiming it for a reconstructed village. With this comes the
now ‘comic’ context over who will dominate the religious upbringing of
the children. That which was a source of tension earlier can now be come be¬
cause it is deferred to a future condition of acquisitional spasm. Simply put,
these are fantasies generated out of an opposition between modernity and
tradition, and the fantasy of modernity ultimately upholds that tradition.
That one fantasy is organized to deal with the other is indicated in a sig¬
nificant instance of narrative anamnesis. This is when the hero and heroine
are caught in the vortex of the riots and in the remnant of losing their children.
Not only are the children two, they are twins, so that Shekhar and Shabnam have in effect recreated,
in their children, their parents without difference, without conflict. This
therefore an ideal image generated by modernity, one which incorporates
the past generally. The full logic of this substitution emerges when the ioni¬
monic family space which has seen the dispersal of the family, the death of the
grandparents, the desperate search for parents for children, finally sees the
reunion of the twins. In a classical Hollywoood shot—verse-shot arrangement,
Khalid Bashir looks, and sees Habib Narayan, who returns to look (is it
the other way around?) there is no differences between their images. When
and found not only of the signs of religious difference but of any marks of dif¬
erence at all.

We can say that the film is a reflection on the transformation from one
structure of authority (a traditional patriarchy) into another which denies
that it is authority. It claims instead that it is an identity and a point of view
if we penetrate below the structure of sentiments we find that Shekhar gener¬
rates Shabnam through an expectancy (and therefore marked fantasy) point of view. As he is walking along the jerry he comes to a halt, distract¬
ed, it would appear, by something off-screen. The next shot shows the
woman in a burqa. but the burqa only lifts in the wind now, suggesting that
Shekhar’s look exposes Shabnam to his, and our, gaze. It is also Shekhar,

Cultural Difference

Apparent contrary to the orientation of the narrative to the modern, in this
and, the basic understanding of cultural difference the film lies squarely within the
and the privileged view of Shabnam at Victoria Terminus, the
A fairy, who generates the momentum for the romance, in terms of meetings,
and the blood bonding with Shabnam, denial of paren¬
ty, the mystery over movement by his sending of juttis to his
and the registered marriage. Perhaps most significant of all: it
which defines the non-identity of the children. Whatever
we may imagine of the practical problems posed by the marriage of the
existent differentiated couples for the identity of the children, in effect
the children follow the father in not practicing religion.
of encounters, the Muslim father,brandishing knife, but allowing himself to be held back by his womenfolk and community fellows. One is reminded here of Anuradha Kapur’s references to conventions of representation in which iconic figures rest in autonomous space, not quite engaging/refering to other iconic figures juxtaposed to them in the frame (Kapur 1993). It is in the city that we are given a representational mode for intercommunal relationships which is more goal oriented in its construction. The menacing features held in balance by the codes and emotions of social acquaintance in the village now surface in bloody conflict.

The film covers its traces here. For the very structure of representation already has this conclusion built into its premises, the knife-wielding Muslim already given within the iconography of village life. Characteristically, these do not change or emerge within a community or scatcer amongst communities; they are already inscribed in the community, awaiting particular circumstances to bring them to the surface.

The Pattern of Public Events

The apparent evenhandedness in the representation of communal violence is then undercut at the outset, in terms of the basic eights of community presentation. What happens subsequently allows us both to be aware of that premise, but also to be forewarned, and even to become confused. I suggest now how this happens through the way the film represents the communal violence of that period as taking place in three phases:

(i) The Hindus assume the aggressive stance—the rashtrawadi, the collecting of funds; the destruction of the Babri Masjid on 6 December. The muslims in attacks against police and property; unidentified assailants threaten the life of the twins.

(ii) 5 January: two mabhad workers, load carriers, are killed; Bombay is burnt; the mabhad strikers and the nanae; Muslims threaten the Hindu granthi; Satyam Mishra, but move away on Basheer Ahmed’s intervention; the burning of the Hindu house; the parents’ death; the loss of the children.

(iii) Intercommunal rioting, intensifies with the search for the twin; the twins receive access from the hijra and the child Sheikkar; Sheikkar participates in the communalised friends. In the climax, Sheikkar, two Muslims, and the hijra, define the rioting; the twins are reunited with their parents.

One of the features of the public debate on the film has been the degree to which Muslim aggression has been visibly more evident, especially through the film’s tendency to fetishize their image in the white pillaged cop. I believe that this is largely correct, and indicates the premise of a reaction, and therefore necessarily Hindu secularistic narrative dealing with cultural difference as its central theme: in its reconstruction of events, and its bid for intercommunal reconciliation, the narrative cannot neutralize constructions of the Muslim as other. What is missed in this observation is the amnesic propensities of popular narrative, as it states certain premises only to skirt them, a process centered on more than one edition.

In this connection, we may consider the film’s introduction of a specifically Hindu aggression, both to the city and in the countryside, around the Gujarat at Ayodhya. This feature, the image of the Hindu in a most extraordinary way, a landmark perhaps in the history of popular film narrative in India. The image is shown to us through Shalabh’s point of view, in a context where her somewhat uneasy position in the Hindu locality has been established. Already vulnerable, she sees the emergence of the rashtrawadi as a fearsome sight, an ominous soundtrack coding the moment in this way for us as well. A raging of adorns conjures up an image of usually force, followed by the rash of a figure aheli who resembles the BJP leader Advani. Our attention from this vision of Hinduism is further solicited when members of the ‘Shahi Samaj’, standing in for the Shiv Sena, approach the couple for a donation to build the temple. In a lesser key is the village encounter in which Marayan Mishra in a calculated insult orders a truckload of bricks for the Ayodhya temple from Basheer Ahmed.

There is, as I have suggested, an extraordinary unprecedentedness to this accumulation of anxiety-inducing images of a Hindu communal consciousness as far as popular cinema is concerned. Following again upon the image of the anxious Shalabh, this segment concludes with the newspaper headline announcing the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The atmosphere of forbidding generated in the opening stages of communal mobilisation would have concluded with documentary footage of the demolition but the censor board had these images deleted. The representation of communal violence in the second phase focuses almost entirely on Muslim activity in the time of December 1992, though it depicts it as aimed at property and state rather than against civilians. It also allow for the representation of Muslim deaths under police firing. The overall logical device of the narrative continues into the depiction of another turn in the riots. Here the attack on the mabhad workers (leaders), the murderous advance on Narayan Mishra, and the burning of a Hindu household in a slam relentlessly focus our attention on anti-Hindu actions. Indeed, the only point of relief in the
representation up to this moment is one which remains ambiguous. When the children are attacked, the identity of their assailants is obscured by the scarves that swathe their faces.

However, in the last phase of the film, there is a noticeable shift in the treatment, as the film shows both communities involved in an alternating pattern of bloodletting. It is this impression that liberal and left-wing public opinion has taken away from the film, despite the fact that the earlier episodes contravene such a clear-cut picture. However, the reasons for this impression vary considerably with left-wing and civil rights activism on the one side and liberal humanist vertebrates on the other. The former argues that the apparent 'even-handedness' of the film is a terrible misrepresentation of the riots which were in reality an anti-Muslim pogrom.

Did someone say it's a balanced view because the director has shown the Muslim aris for every namaz? But what of the degree of harm by which what was an effective pogrom engineered by state forces against one community because a riot between sections of two communities? [Padmanabhan 1993]

Liberal opinion, on the other hand, does not recognize that there is a misrepresentation. One such writer concludes that the film did not draw out the complexities of the riots in terms of police and criminal involvement; thus 'the juxtaposition of street corner aris and congregations at mosque is powerful enough' (Sethi 1995). A particularly stringent version of this view becomes the Muslim lobby for not appreciating the enormity of the treatment. Offence was taken we are told, because a Hindu family was shown being burned alive. A Muslim family is also shown being similarly murdered, because this also happened in the terrible riots of 1992, but our Muslim objectives are selective in their opinion [Singh 1995].

Here the 'equality' in the treatment of communities is understood as truthful because this happened. I think it is part of the liberal argument that instead of being critical, the Muslim lobby should be grateful for Bombay being one of the first films to portray the Muslim victims of the Bombay riots sympathetically. And yet it is somewhat typical of the pathetic leadership of the Muslim community that the objections should come from Muslins [Sunday, 20 April 1995: 84].

These liberal views are based on an acceptance of the film's misrepresentation of the riots as finally centering on the equal guilt of the two communities. More remarkable though is the fact that observers who are ideologically opposed are susceptible to a common misconception, that the film holds
If this is the conventional mode of representation, should we consider Bombay for reproducing it? As a mainstream film engaged in perpetuating myths for the nation, we need to look at the popular film in terms of what it can represent within the limits historically and institutionally set for this form. However, even within these limits, one may ask whether Bombay is not part of a larger regressive move. While the attributes of social backwardness, cultural conservatism, and deep religiosity are common enough to the stereotype of the pebble-foot Muslim in popular cinema, popular cinema does not usually cite aggressiveness as a defining quality. This characteristic may recur in popular cultural stereotypes of the Muslim (Pandey 1990), but cinema has been much more careful in this context. In the recent past, Bombay cinema has redefined these conventions by showing Muslims as villainous characters in films such as "Tezub" (N. Chandra 1988), "Gandish" (Pyarelal 1993) and "Angaar" (Shabibul Nayaz 1993) (Deoraswamy 1994). But Muslims in these narratives come from Bombay's criminal gang. Mani Ratnam's Bombay participates in this shift (as did his Poorna in a sense), but it also makes a distinct intervention by figuring aggression as residing within the community rather than as characterizing its criminal offshoots. In this sense, the film may have brought about an alignment between mainstream cinematic fiction and the popular Hindu imaginary of the communal other.

While Bombay has made these contributions to popular cinematic modes, it has other features which significantly distinguish it from mainstream convention: its proximity to the events it depicts, and the invocation of documentary methods, the use of dates, newspaper headlines, and place names to situate the violence. These features place the film in the arc of recent public memory and make it an intervention in the construction of the memory. Indeed, where reviews actually claim that the film is objective and balanced in its account of what took place in Bombay, it could be said to be a substitute for memory. 4 It is here, in the historical proximity and the truth claims of the fiction that we need to apply a different register of reception than that accorded to the mainstream consumptive form. In Bombay, the inscribed cultural politics of the mainstream, its constituent units of representation, are harnessed via documentary simulation to the politics of the immediate, the justification, condemnation, or disavowal of Hindu actions, depending upon the particular narrative segment highlighted. Thus it is remarkable that Thackeray, the Shiv Sena leader, concentrates on the fact which the film draws upon, and how it organizes these facts, not on the myth of equal culpability around which left and liberal critics center their positions.

We didn't start the violence. If you look carefully at the film, you will find that it is all there. The murder of the Muslim workers. The burning of the house in Jogeshwari. We had no choice but to retaliate (in Sanyal).

It is no coincidence that the 'Muslim lobby' also highlighted these references to identifiable incidents as 'giving the impression that the Muslims are the aggressors.' 5 While the liberal and left-wing critics dwelt only upon the narrative's process of equalizing responsibility, it is the communal lobby on either side which point to how significant documentary strategies construct a role of Muslim aggression at a central component of the riots. Of course, these constructions also exclude a great deal which goes on in the film in their own particular bids for narrative coherence.

The discourse around censorship and the bid to ban the film draws out the political implications of its representation of Bombay's communal violent for the state and a certain image of the Muslim community. It would seem that the censors operated through a mixture of considerations regarding the film's portrayal of the state and its impact on diplomatic relations and on the sentiments of the Muslim community. 6 Thus the cutting of references to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and 'Islamic state' must be related to diplomatic prohibitions. Sensitivity to reminding Muslims of the campaign against them appears to underlie the censor board's deletion of the following visuals of the rate spare along with dialogue 'Babi majid hudatn, ham mandir kapanenge', dialogue relating to a door-to-door collection of funds from Hindu households; visuals of the Babri Majid and its demolition; and, amongst other dialogue cues, '5000 years ago there was a temple here. Who destroyed it?'

The suggestion is that the depiction of certain incendiary anti-Muslim rhetoric and actions might inflame passions, presumably of the Muslims rather than of the Hindus. This means that these events are isolated from their treatment within the narrative process. The presumption is that even if a director employs a method which alienates the spectator from such scenes of anti-Muslim aggression, this would nevertheless involve the re-experiencing of the affront with possible political repercussions. What the censors particularly feared, I would think, was the rekindling of anti-government sentiment among the Muslims, on the assumption that the demolition of the mosque was a failure of the government to represent their interests. The censor board's cutting of references to the high incidence of Muslim deaths in the December violence, and of visuals showing police firing on Muslim crowds conforms to this imperative. There is also another anxiety: not only that the government should not be shown to be ineffective
or opposed to the community, but that it must not appear vulnerable to popular assault. Thus an episode showing the death of a policeman was also removed. Anxiety about the government image amongst Hindus, on the other hand, is hardly in evidence. Perhaps the excision of the dialogue, "Go and seek the government which is cheating you in the name of rectitude," is the salient instance, suggesting a concern for the impact of Hindu communist propaganda on public perceptions that the government was guilty of "minority appeasement." Despite such anxieties, the censor board still displayed a respect for realistic representation for it did not demand a complete excision of any reference to the demolition of the Babri Masjid. But, within this "reality orientation" they made a distinction: only newspaper clippings could be shown, implying that documentary footage had the capacity to stir passions in a way that the photograph did not. Indeed, we can say that the censors reflected a general concern to contain movements, whether of people's emotions, or of the image, in keeping with the restrictions of order. If the censor board allowed for a muted representation of reality, it made excisions which were significantly opposed to the clear articulation of a causal logic. This is especially indicated by two cuts. The first is in the response of a policeman to the Muslim actions of December: These people have started the riots against the demolition of the masjid in Ayodhya. The second is the deletion of visuals and dialogues spoken by Tamra Anand while distributing bangles. Apparently the Thackery stand-in was shown giving his fellows the bangles in the wake of the killing of the media workers. While these cuts follow the logic of blocking the recreation of injured sentiment and of the rhetoric used to justify violence, they contribute to critical gaps in narrative causality. To a large extent the film's organization of images around the demolition provides an explanation of the Muslim response despite the cut. But the particular location of Tamra Anand's dialogue suggests that the film offers an explanation for Hindu violence in the last phase which now stands obscured. At least one of the discontinuities of the film's present structure derives not from the peculiarities of its organization but from censorship cuts.

The official Muslim lobby, on the other hand, objected to representations of Hindu mobilization and the image of the demolition even after the censor's excisions. We must assume that the demand derived from the sensitivity of the spokesmen to the re-enactment of a humiliation. But, at another level, their outlook amounts to an ironic intensification of Chandra Das Gupta's thesis that, in the case of the Indian audience, seeing is believing (Das Gupta 1992). Das Gupta of course sought to conjure up a cognitive mindset here, the gullible spectator for whom the 'expression of reality' achieved by the cinema makes the unreal real. In this case of course the image refers to reality, and the lobby fears that to see it will make it, shall we say, more real or hyper-real. Whereas Eco uses this term to describe a quivering for reality effects by cultures lacking history (Eco 1987), such as America, here I would suggest that we are presented with a very distinct viewpoint. The images in contention suggest that the sacred is fallible and can be violated. I am not suggesting that the Babri Masjid had an uncomplicated sacred status. Rather, I think what is important here is a process of displacement, where politics causes the sacred to re-surface in particular locations which then come to stand not for the sacred but for the socio-political community constructed in its name. The hyper-reality effect then speaks of a particular imaginary public sphere in which images are impacted with affect, a cluster of emotive political intensities which become the object of psychic and public defense. Such an imaginary investment is not necessarily shared by the community as a whole. The reasons suffered by the state of Muslim people over the destruction of the masjid is not under question here, but by their hypostatization as a community in the representational claims of both government and Muslim spokesmen is. The government displayed an intention to contain images which conjured a reality in which it was culpable. And the drive of Muslim leaders to erase the trajectory of loss may reveal a need to maintain the imaginary of the socio-political community in which they as a limited interest group have a particular stake. Each of these components in the public response to Bombay is characterized by indifference to particular representations in favor of others. These investigations suggest that the mise en scene is a procedure more generally observable in the reception of popular narrative forms and goes against the grain of discontinuity which characterizes these forms. In the case of Bombay, we have seen how censorship has contributed to certain discontinuities, but this does not explain all of them. The explanations of communal violence implicit in various parts of the film can be considered as comprising both discontinuity, and as organized in such a way that earlier events are systematically contained by later ones. The description of cultural difference through popular stereotypes, the gesture to the documentary mode, the fictive reconstruction in its various beats, these modes of representation amount to a certain layering, iconically and temporally, of the narrative's construction of Indian identity. A deep structure of cultural difference provides the bedrock of perceptions, one coloured by Hindu, and more broadly modern, modes of 'Othering'. While this never actually undergoes any change in the film, the figuration of the dangerous Hindu must cause us to reflect that the
film's mode of address is a rather complicated one. These images tend to be held on to even as we consider the operation of ideological coherence at work in the film.

Community and Sexuality
The Hindu right has been relatively quiet in the discussion around censorship. It was given a privileged position over Muslim groups when Amithab Bachchan organized a meeting between Mani Ratnam and Bal Thackeray, providing the film's initial image with a slanted sense of political negotiation. Despite liberal discourses, the film has not been able to discount this image in terms of the emphasis of its own narrative structure. The discussion was a minimal but significant one. Apart from Thackeray's argument that the films should be renamed 'Mumbai', something he did not persist with, the Shiv Sena leader demanded the deletion of a scene showing his stand-in (Timir Anand) repenting the riots. This demand fed into the terms of which Thackeray would admit the film's narrative of the riots, as a Hindu retaliation against Muslim aggression. In other words, there was nothing to repent about (Sunday, 2-8 April 1995: 81). The Shiv Sena's relationship to the film has subsequently acquired the aura of a liberal defence of free speech; Thackeray ardently asserted that he would ensure the release of the film against the drive of Muslim groups to have it banned.13 This pattern of response indicates that the fiction does not, overall, directly assail the Hindu right or their understanding of what happened. In fact, Thackeray called it 'a damned good film'.14

The Hindu right also had no objection to the film's romantic scenario: the official Muslim position, on the other hand, argued that the implication of Muslim tradition and identity in the heroine's moving out of the community (the association of the Kuran with her flight to her lover, the throwing off of the dupatta) was anti-Islamic (Times of India, 9 April 1995). Characteristic to both positions, however, is the significance attributed to women in the definition of wider group identities. That communal spokesmen mirror each other in this premise is clear from the following statements:

Love knows no barriers and can blossom even under a rain of fire and brimstone. No one can therefore object to a Muslim man falling in love with a Hindu woman and vice versa [Sayed Shahabuddin in Hindustan Times, 7 May 1995].

It was a fact that there were marriages between Hindu boys and Muslim girls, but no one ceased a film [Interview with Bal Thackeray in Poonam, 9 April 1995].15

We may observe that both spokesmen assume the masculine position for their community when they speculate about intercommunal marriages. While Bombay constitutes a departure in referring to such marriages, it does so within the rules of the Hindu nationalist hegemony that popular cinema has by and large reproduced. The hero must come from the majority community, thereby exercising a symbolic patriarchal-communal authority over the constitution of the nation. Once again, Thackeray obviously has no problem on this account.

I want to reflect on how this order of symbolic narrative is worked out in the domain of romance, sexuality and of domestic life, and what tensions surface within a narrative of the subordination or assimilation of community identity through marriage. As with the larger narrative of public events, amnestis is important here too, and centers on the codes of deportment of the woman, and the signs through which she is represented. The first half of the film clearly codes Shahabuddin as a Muslim, perhaps most emphatically in her springing free from her burqa to meet her beloved. From the time of her arrival in Bombay towards, her identity is marked not through clothes and the burqa, but by her name. Though she does not apply sindoor on the head, she now wears the sari. The subtle neutralization of her identity is only seriously disturbed in the fleeting but significant glimpse of her going through the nizamat, during a song montage. The persistent signs of her Muslim identity derive from a narrative strategy which cannot afford to forget it entirely. To recall secures a position not only for Shahabuddin the Muslim but also for a secular position which is provided with an assimilable rather than an intractable Other (the one who bears the sword). The power-laden terms of the assimilation are indicated in Shahabuddin's vulnerability, not only to larger public forces, but also, in her perception, to the whims of Hindu patriarchy. Thus Shahabuddin anxiously requires whether Narsayan Mohra seeks to take her children away from her. The particular sequences of this scene are one of subtle masquerade, the Muslim woman pleading her case by adopting the demeanour and submissive idiom of the dutiful Hindu khatam. But the fragments of her Muslim identity are not easily dismissed. The instance of her prayer is assimilable because it fits the film's sociological imagination: the jeans and T-shirt clad ex-Hindu wards stands discreetly in the background, overtaking her husband's immersion in prayer, the moment retaining a benediction (Hindu-derived) modernity inducing a private and unobtrusive Muslim religiosity. However, a more confrontational note is sounded when Shahabuddin first enters Shakunt's landlord's house in a film which obscures and hypothesizes the Muslim community, or frames it as otherwise assimilable, these circumstances force an assertion of identity.
from the heroine. Encircled by a shocked and pollution-fearing household, she finally announces that she is a Muslim.

However, beyond the fragment, which I take to be the transient surface of a silenced subjectivity, there is a mise-en-abîme effect which derives from the observation of a structure of taboo, the repetitive tracing of a ritualized code of difference. The bangle as veil, as material which conceals, separates, but also allows a constrained intimacy, resurfaces when Sheldar grapples with Shalabano through the saris on a washing line, and when Shalabano’s hands cover her face when Sheldar kisses her. The sign of the taboo weaves into the narrative of assimilation, tracking back over it by maintaining a symbolic division even at the moment of consummation.

The film’s complexity with community prohibition is woven into a larger narrative of the place of romance and sexuality in public and private spaces. Some of Bombay’s critics have suggested that, from the beginning, the romance between Sheldar and Shalabano is defined by a Hindu male gaze motivated by a curiosity to penetrate the enigma of the other (Menon 1999). This interpretation fails to note that this gaze is an infringement of a prohibition with a much wider currency. This is the public monitoring and containment of sexuality, and its corollary, the difficulty of carving out a private sphere for the registries of the intimate and the erotic.17 The infringement of public regulations is common to popular film romance. As Khalid Mohammad (1995) and Ishail Mansur (1995) have pointed out, Bombay draws upon the tradition of the romantic Muslim social whose narrative is generated by a fleeting glimpse of the woman Bombay inaugurates its romantic scenario around a fantasy of the look roaming in public space, unbound by public scrutiny. In the song sequence "Kabhi Hain, Kabhi" Sheldar’s free movement through the Muslim wedding yokes this fantasy to the rate of intercommunal love. Shalabano is constantly repositioned for Sheldar’s view as well as ours within the characteristic discontinuities of the song sequence. The swift pan affords an accelerated pace for recuperating the woman in different spaces and bodily dispositions. But its usage in the later riot scenes is anticipated here when Shalabano, in a kaleidoscopic sweep, turns her look in search of Sheldar, whose look she has hitherto longed. Centred on female performance for a male spectator, this narrated in the last stages may be said to set the scene for Shalabano’s own desiring look at Sheldar in his family house and the subsequent casting of the man as a vulnerable, emotional figure in the Tu hi re song sequence.

The larger problems of the representation of romance and sexuality emerge only after the couple is married. Here the film defies the consummation of the marriage by denying privacy to the couple, children of visiting relatives being quarantined in the woman’s dwelling. This amounts to the invocation of a public gaze within the fiction, mirroring the prohibitions of the census-ship code. Does this articulation of the symbolic then negotiate a second-level prohibition, with the imaginary, not only unfolding the privacy of patriarchal communal norms but their extended observation in the marking out of a space between communities?

We may turn to the position of the Hindu matriarch of the household for an elaboration of this problem of the public and the private. In opposition to the street mother who flirts with Sheldar, this one highlights in her person the repressiveness which Narayan Mishra and her own husband (incarnated [she also balances an absence: a Hindu matriarchal presence in the absence of Narayan Mishra’s wife]). This reading of a repressive attitude seems to point up the question of boundaries, the playing out of those everyday taboos through the vehicle of women as prime repository of the veils and rituals of the household. The Muslim woman has to be made acceptable in everyday Hindu life, so the Hindu family is the domestic image of a communal ethos to be humanized. She is shown to elevated at the sight of heady youthful love. When Sheldar mistakenly embraces her in his pursuit of Shalabano, she is taken aback and is said made to smile. Yet plainly, this is an instance of bad acting. A glitch in the performance of a minor character suggests a problem for representation: how to employ marginal characters in such a way that the transformation of attributes, their main function, does not appear imposed on the material. If such minor systems of representation fail, an interesting gap opens up in the relations between the pro-filmic and the filmic, where the former becomes a kind of unarticulated dead weight in the texture of the narration. Put into the structure of the film’s regime of affect, the failure of performance suggests a difficulty in superseding an earlier representation. The transformation of this character that follows is still inflected with anxiety: the young couple, walking through the proximate red-light area are shooed into the domestic interior by the matriarch, anxious that their emission is not the object of public scrutiny.

Why is this Hindu domestic space composed in such tight narrative proximity to the red-light area? Sheldar and Shalabano’s walk is cast against the backdrop of his partner exchange with the prostitute: perhaps the narrative invites us to speculate about a bachelor’s familiarity with these women. But the point is that the couple, on the threshold of sexual relations now that the children have left their apartments, communicate the sense of sexuality from one space into the other, eliding the matriarch’s
ancious plea that they go inside. The red-light area then becomes a metaphor for the sexuality of the couple, one which the mismatch must conceal in the household. We can see a phallic here between the general prohibitions operating around the companionate couple, and their particular reflexion through the prohibitions of a Hindu-Muslim romance.

In contrast to the amorous propensities of the narrative, whose problems and uncertainties are periodically suppressed, a performative rape is drawn upon to invest the surplus arising from the deference of the couple's sexuality. In the song sequence, "Hama Hama" identity is transformed subordinately, delayed now in the way the lovers are projected through their bodies and to the rhythms of disco-sexuality. Instead of a careful development of expressive attributes through narration, these are abruptly rendered through gesture and performance. Indeed, this is a performative coding of the access to sexuality, once displaced onto the "Hama Hama" performance, where the figure in white from the "Kalna Hi Kya" song sequence returns as a ramp artist (Soni [Dhir]). The problems of identity addressed in the narrative are frighteningly transcended. Skirting the requirement of character development, modernity defines itself here as composed of the pleasures of performative surfaces rather than 'authentically' evolved psychologies. And with disposition of the body now integral to the cultural reaffirming of the character, there is a foregrounding of the virality of the star personality, Koelra's impudence surfacing from the constraints of the shy and timid Shabbanu. However, there is still a trace of the problem that sexuality poses for the narrative in the strangely opaque and deary eminence of the performance; here couples are glimpsed in intimate poses as they take pleasure in the dance. While the sexuality of the couple is secured in the domestic interior, a peculiar undercurrent of the illicit and displeasure infuses the scene.

Reconciliation

Performance, contrived out of generic resources such as the romantic Muslim social and the fashion show, allows for a release from the constraints of social representation. As a result, the film generates a certain spectrum of personality traits rather than a tightly coded pattern of identity. Something of these effects of dispositional characterize the climactic sequence, in which a multi-communal agency (now forgotten in the more characteristic narrative of the mainstream cinema), an agency of aggression but now of repression becomes the configuration through which the nation can finally be imagined.

However, this configuration too is hierarchically coded, and finally clusters around the office of sacrifice from the position of a modern Hindu identity. This particular organization is clearly highlighted in the film's climax.

The actions are systematically developed along a particular axis, Shabbaz's defense of a Muslim family from a Hindu mob provides the centre to the others, and has the phenomenal form of an epicentre, the travelling caravan describing an arc around his space. A generation and repetition of the new spaces in which communal antagonism is neutralized takes place around this centre, segments getting shorter, with a greater frequency to the occurrence of the original scene, on which, of course, the sequence concludes.

If this master space generates the narrative rhythms of the sequence, it also provides rules for the reconstruction of deconventionalized space. Pacification is undertaken by figures who make appeals to aggressors of their own denomination. There is an important implication to this. As they are amongst the co-religionists, they can draw upon the safety of a common identity; they are not victims pleading for their lives, they are not the other, but an enabled figuration of the self. While these figures perform at the boundary of identity, an active claiming of the other as the self, as in the case of the Muslim woman who claims these she protects as her child and her sister, is not a common strategy.

It could be said then that the hero generates a model, an exemplary instance which is echoed in a number of actions of a similar kind. But this model of deconventionalization has a certain discreetness of community address built into it. There is a suggestion here that the film's vision of the belong to an end of antagonism nevertheless enacts the reproduction of difference. However, there are two, possibly three, instances in which the role of community self-address does not operate. The first instance is that of the policeman who intervenes between communities, gesturing here to the highly ideological image of a transcendent state. The second is the bijwa, whose self-image is that of a figure, one who stands in between. This ironical self-image alludes of course to gender identity as well as community identity, suggesting that there is a relationship between a cis-cast communal identity and a cis-cast sexual one. The idiom here would conjure up a certain distance from the gendered terms through which hierarchies of authority and submission, oppressor and victim, are played out across the masculinity-femininity opposition. But the bijwa is shown to be protecting a Muslim from a Hindu mob, rather than mediating 'in between' communities. The placement of this character therefore establishes a homology with others similarly placed, and pre-eminently with the hero. For the bijwa, like the
here, invites the mob to kill the diseased first. This 'doubling' mise en abyme obscures an earlier identity that the "hermaphrodite" conjures up, that of the mother who protects the lost child; after all, the first, fleeting image we have of the hijra is as a figure in a saree. . . . But perhaps we are doing a disservice to the figure by constraining him/her within this grid of parallelism; for the main parallel, the hero, proceeds through a process of negating identity to the asexual of an Indian identity, something the hijra never does.

Identification

Let me go back now to the set of problems which have emerged in the course of this analysis. How does the film's project of a transcendent secular modernity and national identity square with its reproduction of the minority as other? At one level it can do this because it figures modernity as evolving from the trajectory of Hindu subalternity. To that extent it remains within the conventions of the popular Indian cinema. It is this authoritative structure which generates a number of apparently dissonant elements: from the invocation of popular stereotypes of the Muslim and the film's skewed rendering of their role in the riots, to the position of assimilation (through marriage) and multi-community integration on the model of the Hijra. We are to see that the apex Hindu position identifies the particular position the minority is to occupy in various situations. However, against the drive to coherence in the text and its various public constructions, I suggest that we need to locate the sources of discontinuity, and to capture its timbre. The key issue here is how the narrative places the spectator; how does it seek to persuade us of its particular project of subalternity? Is this, I suggest, by inviting us to assume a melodramatic subjection, where notions of victimhood and powerless bind us to the film's vision. It is clear enough that in the case of the Muslim woman, the terrified children and ultimately even the grandparents, we are immersed in a melodramatic subbed role, the situation of the disempowered. But how does the film work out a relationship between the hero's authoritative position and such a melodramatic subjection? Is a position of narrative authorship defined by a culturally confident voicing of a rational-human viewpoint automatically a position with which we can identify? Or does some other process, or repositioning, have to take place? For there is no automatic process by which we should empathize with the hero's sentiments. Indeed, Shekhar's passion for Shalabahu is attractive not because it is controlled but because it is out of control, tumultuous, culminating in the remarkable song of the song. To be re, where the hero's face crumples in a helpless weeping. There are notations here of hysteria, of an outpouring that will not be contained by the confidence of his oppositional rhetoric. It is such at the expense of melodramatic excess that the film uses to structure an identity, a strategy through which the rational modern both creates affect by focusing on the powerless and then increasingly naturalizes itself as ultimate locus of the marginal and the dispossessed (a patriarch without his children). This is an unusual narrative strategy, for it is much more common that innocence and victimization, and in terms of narrative trope, silence, are favoured to all feelings of pathos (Brooks 1985). Here it is the clearly articulated voice of rationality that is put on the margins, bearing a truth CLAIMING character, but a powerless one.

This rationality on the margins ironically displaces the feminine figure who would be the conventional locus of such a disempowerment, appropriating to itself those 'feminine' features of emotionality and most unexpectedly, a making vulnerable of the body. There is a working out here of a logic stated early in the film where Shekhar turns his hand to indicate the peak of his passion for Shalabahu. The culmination of this repositioning of the body as object of a self-inflicted wound occurs when Shekhar destroys himself with petrol and invites the rampaging Hindu mob to burn him alive.

This invitation to harm the body follows upon two premises: the hero's rejection of his given identity and his making that negation visible. In negating his given religious identity in the first instance he embraces sheer sensuality; bhum hai nai nishan hai; but then he claims a name; bhum ish Indian hai. In the second move, the hero, safe from aggression, desires, demands, as he be like the other, and that the threat of the self he denies be visited upon him. The hero's invitation that the mob exact his is a direct and rhetorical throwback to Rohit Kumar's throwing himself on the burning Indian flag in Raja, except that act was not preceded by a step of negation; there was a repulsiwfulness to the protagonist's affirmation of identity. In contrast, it is the negativity of Bombay which purports nationalistic rhetoric into perspective as predicated not on a fulness but on an absence of identity. The rhetoric distinguishes the hero and makes him visible amongst a body of other Hindus, the distinction of marginality proving to be the yardstick of difference. The narrative effects a displacement of authority where the hero's confidence, his control over his destiny at the socioeconomic level, at the level of decisions concerning family and career, is matched ineffectually when the wider universe conspires to negate that logic.
of freedom. Melaistic subjection here enforces an evacuation of positions of power and authority in a nightmare articulation of the desire to negate oneself publicly, to exorcise oneself of the taint of identity.

The hero's offer of sacrifice requires us to reflect on certain practices of male self-immolation. The Tamil instance—and after all, this is also a Tamil film—has been associated with the cult of MGR and also with Tamil separatism in Sri Lanka. The Tamil experience offers a negation/supplantation of the self into the large image of the leader, an image which is indeed confirmed and constituted by such acts. The second instance is that of the anti-Mandal agitation which dramatized the despair of an identity grounded in perceptions of fallen states, but also reflected the sense of closure amongst isolated lower middle-class youth. The Mandal context did not provide the act with a positive or purposive name such as leader or nation. However, the image of the immolation was appropriated to a discourse of merit generated by the privileged and mobile sections of the middle class who linked it to a dynamic of rational reconstruction. One could speculate that these acts emerge out of a sense of marginality, an experience obscured by the discourses surrounding them. Rashi Kumar's act in *Raja* reproduces the discourse of appropriation by sublimating individual class, and in this case, regional identity, into that of the nation, Bombay, on the other hand, echoes much more strongly the negativity which underlies discourse of sacrifice. While speaking in the name of humanity and nationalism, Shekhar Mishra simultaneously speaks the language of alienation, indeed, of revelation.

Although *Raja* and *Bombay* solicit quite different sentiments, both arise from a similar subjectivity, that of a modern nationalist view, with the modern hero bearing the characteristic attributes of professional identity, cosmopolitanism, ideological humanism, rationalism, and the marginalization of religion. In *Raja*, the hero's religion is at best a desire for a lifestyle which is simple, unadorned, and therefore gradually fulfills that need of the modern to secure its roots, to specify an identity. Otherwise, the significance of Hindu identity derives not from its reference to religiosity, but its capacity to adapt to modern social and cultural processes, and is cast as opposition to the intractable Muslim fanaticism of the Kashmiri separatists. In contrast, in *Bombay*, the hero finds himself stranded on the margins of a social space drowned with genocidal identity conflicts in which he is ultimately pitted against Hindus. Alienation from the Muslim other is here subordinated to self-alienation.

The desired identity is always above other identities, and this transcendent identity has a name: 'Indian.' It is against this resolution that Subhash Menon expresses his unease, indeed, abhorrence, urging that a resolution
NOTES


2. A classic instance of such a narrative move is when Guru Dutt's look graces Mala Sinha in Pyaasa (Guru Dutt 1957).

3. The first show of the riot is a Muslim picking up the sword in aggression. The number of white caps is always foregrounded and framed well, in neutral colours, while the Hindu mobs are more indistinct; it is difficult to make out faces (Padmanabhan 1995).

4. Cf. also Joshi (1995). 'Mani Ramani has virtually re-invented the Bombay "riot" in a grotesque expression of what is "right" to have been—undeniably played out, ultimately amenable to cessation in the face of sentimental, moralistic rhetoric. A version even Bal Thackeray approves... His "reality" is a communal "riot"—not much in the style of a clanging dholak, aakashichi, etc... it is a content between equals, with points being scored by either side with a pendulum like regularity—and fairness... Though the theme of communal conflict engrosses the film for nearly three fourths of its duration, there is no hint of the possibility of the entire episode in Bombay in 1993, having been organized and planned against a minority, the scars of which are yet to heal.'

5. In Tavleen Singh's writing, there is a slippage between official Muslim spokesmen, on the one hand, and the Muslim leadership, and Muslims as a whole, e.g., "insulted" by their success in stopping Bombay, Maharashtra's Muslims needed up another little fundamentalist vanity in the week.

6. The film maker has taken great pains to structure his objective and impartial documentation of the communal riots in Bombay two years ago. "Bombay, editorial, Screen, 14 April 1995.


9. Thus, too, the much publicized induction of Bombay police officers to evaluate the impact of the film on public emotions.

10. According to the Muslim League corporator, Yusuf Ahmadi, 'who has emerged as a spokesman in the present', the following scenes are anti-Islamic: "In a shot showing a procession of Hindus, a placard demands "Fikho Khodho",... This is an obvious reference to the removal of locks on the Babri Masjid... The hero's father who is a Hindu flings money at the heroine's father, who is a brick manufacturer, and asks him to make bricks with Ram inscribed on them... There is a shot of the Babri Masjid. Even though the demolition is not shown, newspaper clippings carrying news about the demolition are shown while the sound track makes it clear that the structure is being demolished.' Times of India, 9 April 1995.


12. He said efforts to give a communal touch to the film's release would not be toleratecd. 'Thackeray wants Muslims on Bombay', Pioneer, 9 April 1995.

13. 'I have never called Muslims traitors, says Bal Thackeray', Times of India, 31 March 1995.

14. Thackeray also noted that actors like Nana Pansare, Amol Palekar, and Madhavani were Muslims and no one had objected when they took Hindu names. This again fits the rules of a Hindu nationalist hegemony, in which is it perfectly acceptable that minorities negate their identities and assume the majority one.

15. Cf. Javed Akhtar's quixotic elaboration of the problem of popular cinema's inability to represent Hindu-Muslim romance: 'This is actually part of a larger taboo area in popular cinema... The real taboo is that a high-caste Hindu girl will never be shown marrying an outside boy. Never. If at all the great cause divide has to be bridged, it will be done through a heroines boy falling in love with an outcaste girl in an Arjun Rampal, Sushmita, or Parveen. Similarly, the one who rebels against the Hindu-Muslim divide will never be the Hindu woman, it will be the Hindu man. Ramani's Bombay bears this out.' (Akhtar 1995).

16. The other side of this indulgence is the hero's offer to give up his religion to compensate for his father's attitude. This offer is a gesture rather than a belief, and so does not compromise the modern transcendence of religious identity.

17. For a suggestive consideration of the problems surrounding the distinction between public and private in the construction of the Indian cinema, see the work of Madhura Prasad, e.g., 'Cinema and the Desire for Modernity', Journal of Art and Ideas, nos. 23–26, 1994.

18. Manual castigates Mani Ramani for not being able to understand and represent
Muslim culture, one wonders if this is not to misjudge the project of the film. Strangely, he advise viewers to see Naga Pattraka in Kannada (1994) for a better representation of the riots. To my mind this is a film which underscores Hindu male authority much more brutally than Bombay.

19. This is of course followed by the much more ambiguous and far more repugnant act of Shakti curting Shakti’s arm for a blood-bonding.

20. But, unlike Raja, it is not primarily a Tamil film. In its conception from the outset as a multiple version film, it is a new type of film which is also an old one, harking back to the 1930s practitioners. A more considered analysis of this feature is necessary to situate the film in some kind of continuing component in Mani Ratnam’s ‘nation’.


22. Significantly, the Muslim is a modern too, one who has denied rationality but can be recovered into; the hero and the exterior leader can speak the same language, not only Tamil, but intellectually, too.

REFERENCES


