THE ILLUSION OF SECULARISM:
Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* and
The Consolidation of Hindu Hegemony

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2005 CAPI Essay Competition Winner

expression to the two divergent perspectives outlined at the beginning of this paper—the first because there are numerous moments that promote communal harmony and religious tolerance, the most obvious example being the representation of an inter-religious marriage; the second

is in the midst of the city when this happens, and the twin boys are lost in the mayhem and confusion. They are encircled by a group of unidentified men who douse them in kerosene and

THE SHIV SENA AND 'HINDUTVA'

Before I discuss why *Bombay* is a promotion of Hindu hegemony rather than of secularism, I should like to return to Javed Akhtar's statement that, "if you make a film about Germans and Jews, and the Nazi party says it is a good film, then there must be something wrong." Herein, Akhtar equates Germans with Hindus, Jews with Muslims, and the Nazi Party with the Shiv Sena. In this way, he is also suggesting that the leader of the Shiv Sena, Bal Thackeray, is in no way different from Hitler.

The Shiv Sena is a right-wing Hindu party established by Thackeray in 1966, and gaining political hegemony particularly in the 1980s and 1990s.[14] With close ties to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the national Hindu right-wing party, the Shiv Sena "promotes regional chauvinism…and Hindutva, or Hindu supremacism (in which Bombay is part of the sacred geography of a Hindu nation and Muslims are 'outsiders')."[15] The link between the two parties is thus their shared belief in the doctrine of Hindutva, "the eventual de-secularisation of Indian society and the establishment of an ethnoreligious state."[16] According to this ideology, then, Muslims have no place either in Mahararashtra or in India.

With this anti-Muslim stance in mind, Akhtar's remark gains greater resonance when we consider the fact that Bal Thackeray described *Bombay* as " 'a damned good film'."[17] In this light, Akhtar's contention that there "must be something wrong" with the film if Thackeray supported it rings true. Consequently, it is my project here to reveal why Thackeray would have approved of *Bombay*, reasons which must necessarily be viewed in relation to the establishment/

used to promote a specific type of secularism, ultimately meant to serve the vision of an ethnoreligious Hindu state. By employing Rustom Bharucha's definition of secular - the "*coexistence through a respect for differences within and beyond religion*" (Bharucha's italics)[19] - I shall demonstrate how Shekar's and Shaila Bano's relationship upholds Hindu hegemony by using the position of the secular patriarch, Shekar, to assimilate the Muslim body into Hindu society. What is important here is not the fact that Shekar is a non-practising Hindu, but that, even as a secular patriarch, he participates in the perpetuation of Hindutva values through the integration of Muslims into a predominately Hindu society. This is yet another example of what Bharucha identifies as soft-Hindutva values disguised in secularist terms, illustrating why Bal Thackeray voiced no objections to this aspect of the narrative.

Before Shaila Bano's assimilation into Hindu society takes place, the film establishes Shekar's dominance over her body through certain patriarchal codes. I agree with Ravi Vasudevan's contention that while it is presented as a relationship based on mutuality and freedom of choice, it is actually based on patriarchy: it is Shekar who "generates the momentum for the romance, in terms of meetings, ultimata to parents, the blood bonding with Shailabano, denial of parental authority, the mastery over movement by his sending of rail tickets to his beloved, the privileged view of Shailabano at Victoria Terminus, the setting-up of the registered marriage....Perhaps most significant of all: it is his non-religiosity which defines the non-identity of the children."[20] Shaila Bano's passivity in this process is determined from the opening scenes, when Shekar pursues her. He attempts to talk to her several times, to which she reacts by simply running away, never actually voicing an objection to his advances. In this way she is constructed as submissive, thereby setting up her subsequent subjugation to the male protagonist.

One of the most explicit ways in which this subjugation is established is through Shekar's physical control over Shailabano's body. After the hero and heroine's love becomes mutual, Shekar goes to Shailabano's house to inform her parents of their wish to marry. Her father reacts violently, threatening Shekar with a sword for even daring to make such a proposition. In reaction to her father's assertion that even their blood is different, Shekar cuts his hand with the sword and proceeds to make a cut in the arm of his beloved, who is both shocked and fearful, joining the two wounds together to emphasize the bonding of their blood. Here the cooptation of the Muslim woman's body is done in an aggressively violent manner, and serves to physically mark the Hindu male's possession of it. While there are moments when Shaila Bano is depicted as an active agent - she meets Shekar at the fort in order to profess her love for him and subsequently elopes to Bombay - these acts more accurately represent "the transformation from one structure of authority (a traditional patriarchy) into another which denies that it is authority," since it is based on the illusion of freedom of choice and mutuality.[21] Thus, the overall effect is the establishment of Shekar's dominance over Shaila Bano's body, for it is only then that the assimilation of it into Hindu society can take place.

This process of assimilation is signified by the obliteration of the codes that mark Shaila Bano's body as Muslim. The first example of this physical erasure of religious difference occurs in the second song of the film, 'Tu Hi Re', which is when Shaila Bano meets Shekar at the fort. While she is running towards him, apparently to prevent him from committing suicide, her veil gets caught in a hook, so she actively discards it and runs towards her lover. While most people have focused on this one scene, what is interesting is that the song actually depicts the gradual

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[19] Bharucha, p. 113.
Vasudevan, p. 189.
Ibid., p. 188.

removal of her *burqa*, in a way mirroring/ foreshadowing her gradual assimilation into Hindu society. The compiled effect is the physical erasure of religious difference. While the other public scenes up to this point clearly code Shaila Bano as Muslim because of her *burqa*, this scene is symbolic of the film's promotion of secularism through the obliteration of that very sign of difference.

This theme continues when Shaila Bano arrives in Bombay. She is in her *burqa* upon arriving at the railway station, but in the next scene at the marriage registry she is in a *sari*. While it is made clear that Shekar and Shaila Bano go to the marriage registry immediately after he picks her up from the railway station, for she still has her suitcase with her, at what point between Victoria Terminus and the marriage registry she removes her *burqa* is unclear. Would it not have made more narrative sense if she had remained in the *burqa*, or if there had been some indication of when and why she removed it? This silence presents the transition to be seamless and innocent, when in fact it is indicative of the beginning of her assimilation. As a matter of fact, in all but one of the subsequent scenes, Shaila Bano is dressed in a *sari*, even when she is in public. While *saris* are worn all over India, they are commonly identified as Hindu dress. This transition thus acts as a "subtle neutralization of her identity" and represents "the subordination or assimilation of community identity through marriage."[22]

In this light, the erasure of religious difference points to the secularism espoused by *Bombay*: the assimilation of Muslims into Hindu society, rather than an acceptance of their difference. Again, this message is emphasized through the body of the Muslim female, which is appropriated by the secular male protagonist to promote a vision of a secular nation that actually works to uphold Hindu society and culture as the norm. This again points to why Thackeray and the Shiv Sena would have had no problem with this narrative of Hindu-Muslim love.

THE OVERLY RELIGIOUS AND VIOLENT MUSLIM: THE CONSOLIDATION OF STEREOTYPES IN *BOMBAY*

Another reason for Thackeray's acceptance of *Bombay* is that it consolidates stereotypes about Muslims, which are in turn used to suggest that the community is an obstacle in the process of building a secular nation. For instance, one critic notes how the scenes showing the women in *burqas* going to school together constructs Muslims as "not being modern, of backwardness, of being exclusive, of not being integrative, which constitute the popular beliefs about the community."[23] It therefore suggests that the way Muslims live poses a problem, that they are in fact the obstacle for attaining communal harmony. The most destructive stereotypes are consolidated through a series of contrasts and confrontations between the two fathers, Bashir Ahmed and Narayan Mishra, where the dichotomy between Hindu and Muslim, 'us' and 'them', is used to underscore the Muslim threat to 'Hindustan'.

One of the recurring images in the film is that of Muslims praying, which serves to mark the community as overly religious, and as such, a hindrance in efforts for attaining secularity. Bashir's daily prayer sessions are continually emphasized: he is shown praying three times, while Narayan is only shown praying once, and even this is at a public *arti* ("act of worship

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[22] Ibid., p. 199.

[23] A.L. Georgekutty, "The Sacred, the Secular and the Nation in *Bombay*," *Deep Focus: A Film Quarterly* (1996), Vol. VI (pp. 77-81), p. 80. On the other hand, the fact that these women are getting an education and moving

establishes the Muslim as violent, suggesting that these characteristics are "already inscribed in the community, awaiting particular circumstances to bring them to the surface."[27] Surely, the Shiv Sena would have had no objections to the representation of the Muslim as inherently violent, for it serves to construct the Hindu as more rational and in control, an idea that justifies Hindu supremacy. It also foreshadows Muslim aggression depicted in the film during the riots in the city. Collectively, the consolidation of these stereotypes constructs Muslims as obstacles in the formation of a secular nation.

'INSTITUTIONALIZED COMMUNALISM'[28]: BAL THACKERAY AND CENSORSHIP

Thus far I have challenged the idea that *Bombay* is a promotion of secularism by discussing the relationships between the main characters in the film. I should now like to continue with this idea of the farce of secularism with a more overt example of how it is actually an example of Hindu hegemony: the politics of censorship.

One of the most well- known facts about the release of *Bombay* is that Amitabh Bachchan, the distributor of the film, set up a meeting between Bal Thackeray and Mani Ratnam prior to its release. In accordance with the discussion, certain cuts were made based on objections raised by Bal Thackeray, which I will discuss shortly.[29] Because of the Shiv Sena stronghold in Bombay at this time, the film most likely would not have been released had Ratnam not conceded to Thackeray's demands.[30] This points to the impossibility of the freedom of expression in India, particularly as it pertains to the questioning of Hindu dominance, for expression is controlled by the very structures of Indian society that think India is only for Hindus. As such, to label the film secular would be a gross exaggeration, for it is in reality an example of 'institutionalized communalism'. As Rustom Bharucha puts it, the fact that the worst instance of violence between Hindus and Muslims since Independence had to be cleared by the Hindu fundamentalist politician who was most active in actually manufacturing the violence, is surely "one of the worst insidious affirmations of how violence can be legitimized by its own political agency."[31]

Thackeray specifically wanted two scenes from the film deleted. The first was a 4½ minute speech in which Tinnu Anand, the actor who plays Thackeray, "spoke of 'ethnic cleansing' in Bombay and preserving that city only for the Hindus whose ancestry is Maharashtrian," dialogue apparently taken directly from actual speeches made by the Shiv Sena leader.[32]   The second scene depicted Anand repenting the riots. These were clearly problematic

the drive of Muslim groups to have it banned."[34] Thus, after his own intervention in the film's release, Thackeray used Muslim opposition to the film as an example of the hindrance of free

used to question the notion of a 'balanced', or factually based, portrayal of the violence.

The reality is that the January 1993 riots were an orchestrated massacre of Bombay's Muslim community led by Bal Thackeray and the Shiv Sena, and assisted by the Maharashtra police.[39] I shall return specifically to police involvement in the massacres and their depiction in

misconduct during the riots was made known by journalists, social activists and eye-witnesses, who unanimously reported police involvement in the deaths of innocent people, which Shekar also refers to in the film. However, what is left out is that many of the victims were unarmed women, children, and old men, shot at close range, primarily within their own homes.[50] *Bombay* instead depicts police presence in the streets as one of establishing control over riotous Muslims.

Furthermore, when the riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims in December 1992,

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