

Banning 'Bombayi': Nationalism, Communalism and Gender

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Banning 'Bombayi'

Nationalism, Communalism and Gender

Tejaswini Niranjana

Is the protest against Maniratnam's new film, on the ground that it offends Muslim sentiments, simply an expression of 'fundamentalism' of Muslim patriarchal attitudes? Could it not be that the liberal analysis and solution ('hatred' and 'love') are unacceptable as inaccurate, simplistic and patronising to those who comprise the overwhelming majority among the victims of communal violence?

MANIRATNAM'S film 'Bombayi' (the Telugu version of 'Bombay') was released all over Andhra Pradesh on March 10, 1995, playing to full houses in every theatre. On March 14, screening of the film was banned in the twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad as well as the adjoining district of Rangareddy. Newspaper reports indicated that stray incidents of audience violence and representations to the home minister from the Majlis-Ittehadul-Muslimeen and the Majlis Bachao Tehreek had resulted in the ban order. It was also reported that leftist organisations such as the Students' Federation of India and the Democratic Youth Federation of India as well as the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha had opposed the ban. A statement by the SFI and DYFI declared that "the film depicted nationalist feelings and had nothing communal about it".¹

The reaction to Maniratnam's films in Hyderabad may not be representative of a general south Indian response to them, nor of the response in Andhra Pradesh either. Due to its atypical demographic profile (a Muslim population that is over 50 per cent in the old city and over 20 per cent even in the new city), Hyderabad's political scenario and the space occupied in it by the agendas of specifically 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' parties may very well be unique in southern India. Maniratnam's earlier film 'Roja', first in its Telugu version and then in Hindi, elicited considerable applause in new Hyderabad for its unabashed patriotism and its categorical denunciation of Kashmiri militancy. A national(ist) commonsense about what constitutes the truly secular was articulated here in its convergence with Hindutva; in fact, as I have argued elsewhere, 'secularism' in 'Roja' was indistinguishable (as it is in other contemporary cultural formations) from the attitudes produced by the making invisible of a 'Hindu' ethnicity.² 'Bombayi'

is in many ways not very different from 'Roja' in its portrayal of the secular and the Indian. It is worth investigating, therefore, why the film seems to have evoked from the minority community which made no public protest about 'Roja' a very different kind of response. We must also remember that 'Bombayi' could have the effects it has precisely because it comes after 'Roja'.³ What could be the altered political landscape today that makes such a response to 'Bombayi' possible? To answer this question one would have to take into account multiple factors relating to the national and international scene, an undertaking I am not presently competent to embark upon. I proffer, however, some remarks about Maniratnam's film which in my view allows us to reflect anew on major questions of cultural politics today, my aim being not to produce a conclusive analysis but to help initiate a debate on the issues.

While the film follows 'Roja' in the framing of its central problem – the question of the nation and the question of communalism (community identity in 'Roja' – it is, to my mind, marked by a certain stuttering, not so evident in 'Roja', when it comes to the issue of gender. This might partly account for the hostile reception in certain quarters of a film that compared to a 'Roja' which depicted the Muslim almost entirely as terrorist and anti-Indian, represents in its syrupy secularism "nothing...that hurts Muslim sentiments",⁴ and indeed is framed as an attempt to "[balance] the viewpoints of the opposing communities".⁵ "How sad", exclaims a journalist writing in *The Hindu*, "...every time sincere efforts have been made towards national integration we end up in protests and riots".⁶ There appears to be a general consensus that Maniratnam is indeed a 'nationalist' film-maker, as evidenced by 'Roja' winning the 1993 award for National Integration. It is perhaps

then the very composition of mainstream nationalism – a composition which legitimises some identities and marginalises others – that is being contested by those who are demanding a ban on 'Bombayi'. And it is precisely around the question of gender, I would suggest, that the fracturing of this composition becomes visible.

But first, an outline of the narrative. Shekhar, a young brahmin from Bheemunipatnam, has just finished his studies in Bombay and started working as a proof-reader in a newspaper, with a view to becoming a journalist. On a visit to his village, he sees Shaila Banu, the daughter of the Muslim brickmaker Basheer, and instantly falls in love with her. After a brief courtship, and after encountering the hostility of his family and Basheer's, to the possibility of his marriage with Shaila Banu, Shekhar returns to Bombay, to be joined there by the girl. They commence wedded life in a chawl; Shekhar gets a promotion, Shaila Banu gives birth to twins; the boy's father Narayanamurthy (who has tried to send bricks marked 'Sri Ram' to Ayodhya as penance for his son's act) comes to visit, and is overwhelmed to learn that the twins are named Kabeer Narayan and Kamal Basheer. Shaila Banu's parents also come on a visit at the same time. The Babri masjid falls; the Bombay riots take place; the parents of both hero and heroine die in a fire; the children are lost; amidst scenes of rioting the chief protagonists search for the twins. In the concluding scenes, Shekhar makes impassioned speeches to the rioters to stop killing each other, and the children are found, even as Hindus and Muslims drop their weapons and hold hands. This bare narrative cannot possibly account for the many ingenious ways in which Maniratnam achieves his cinematic effects, some of which I shall have occasion to refer to.

What I earlier called the stuttering of 'Bombayi' has to do, it seems to me, with the portrayal of the Muslim woman. Some members of the audience have asked why the protagonists could not have been a Muslim man and a Hindu woman. Given the logic of gender and nation in Maniratnam, this equation would have been clearly impossible. The (Hindu) female in 'Roja', for instance, is shown as imperfectly secular, imperfectly nationalist, because her concern is not for the security of the nation but for her husband. It is the Hindu male, therefore, who must take on the task of making the Muslim 'human' (as well as secular and nationalist, as I have suggested elsewhere).⁷ Whereas in 'Roja' it is the

male militant Liaquat who is portrayed as being made human, his silent sister who helps the hero escape is shown implicitly as already human by virtue of her femininity. By aiding the hero, she transcends her community-identity and in the process stands revealed as both human and 'Indian' (rather than Kashmiri or militant separatist).

'Bombayi' is more subtle: Shaila Banu marries the brahmin Hindu hero (who is never shown as marked by caste or community) but does not give up her religion: neither does she dress like a south Indian Hindu woman, especially since she does not wear a bindi except in two song sequences. The secular hero is obviously tolerant about all this, is in a sense attracted by the very 'difference' of the heroine. While male Muslim ethnic markers in the film (prayer caps, or scenes of mass praying, for example) are menacing portents of rioting to follow, female Muslim markers of ethnicity – the burqa, primarily – are glamorised and eroticised. Shekhar's first glimpse of Shaila Banu is when the wind accidentally lifts up her veil, and many of his subsequent encounters with her, including on the night when they consummate their marriage, thematise this visibility/invisibility as tantalising.

The 'secular' attempt to *understand* the ethnic other, and one need not doubt Maniratnam's endeavour in this regard, is portrayed in 'Bombayi' as accomplished through the erotic gaze. It is the feminine other who is embodiment of the erotically mysterious and unapproachable, and who therefore compels an unveiling in the act of making intimate, while the relationship of the secular nationalist with the ethnicised male can only be contentious and combative. This ethnicised male in the logic of these films, and indeed in the dominant cultural logic of our times, cannot possibly be the hero of a narrative about the need for national integration. The only acceptable hero is the urbanised, westernised Shekhar who, like Rishi Kumar in 'Roja', does not need to draw attention to his caste or religion because in espousing nationalism he has transcended such identities.⁸ If one examines the composition of the Indian citizen-subject of the 1990s, the Hindu female appears as the necessary bearer of ethnicity. Thus, the initiator of the integration process, or the initiator of the romantic relationship in the film, cannot but be a man from the majority community. One does not need to belabour the point that this kind of agency is gendered male. 'Bombayi', then, could not have had a Muslim hero and a Hindu heroine.

This inevitability is also related to the sharp demarcation of gendered 'secular'

spaces in 'Bombayi'. While the hero's secularism (read, tolerance) does have a domestic aspect to it, it is manifested in this sphere only as playfulness, as in the scene where a relay of little children convey to his bride his question – 'Shall I change my religion?', or the song sequence ('halla gulla') in which he briefly dons Muslim headgear. His publicly secular acts, on the other hand, are shown as acts of consequence, when during the riots he berates his two colleagues for claiming to be Hindu and Muslim instead of saying they are Indian, or in the climactic scenes when he splashes petrol on his body and urges the rioters to burn him in order to shame them into throwing down their arms. In contrast, when Shaila Banu makes a rare appearance outside the home, it is most visibly when she and Shekhar are looking for the children during the riots, and she is called upon only to express distress and horror.

In fact, the domestic space is constantly defined in the film as a counterpoint to communalism: the increasing familial harmony (the birth of the twins, the reconciliation of the grandparents, Shekhar's desire for more children) is matched against increasing communal tension in the city. Integration, the film seems to suggest, can be accomplished *within* the family.⁹ In the domestic space, Shekhar does not have to undergo any sort of transformation to prove his secularism. In any case, his 'religion' is not central to his identity. Also, by virtue of being the bread-winner, there are other conventional asymmetries in relation to male and female roles that he need never challenge. It is crucial to the narrative that the couple have children, for the film's logic suggests that it is the urbanised nuclear family which can solve the problem of communalism. This problem, indicates the film, is one of senseless hatred. Communalism is imaged here, as in some analytical accounts of recent events in India, as the resurgence of ancient hates, primordial hostilities. Communalism thus becomes a *residue*, a mark of the non-modern, of backwardness.¹⁰ Secularism or nationalism, therefore, as Gyanendra Pandey has shown, appears as the 'other' of communalism;¹¹ however, in the 1990s, in a historical space where the privatisation of secularism seems to be taking place, this nationalism need not be part of a political agenda.¹² If the problem is one of hatred, the solution has to be located in the possibility of love. Humanism, too, becomes a question of good individuals, happy families. And love in its modern form, as 'Bombayi' shows, achieves its most exalted and exemplary expression in romantic love, the love

between individuals. It might, then, be worth asking whether the demand for the banning of 'Bombayi' (on the basis that it offends Muslim sentiments) is simply an expression of 'fundamentalism' or of Muslim patriarchal attitudes. Is it perhaps an indication that the liberal analysis and solution ('hatred' and 'love') are unacceptable – as inaccurate, simplistic and patronising – to those who comprise the majority amongst the victims of communal violence? Could it point to the need to rethink whose tolerance the dominant notion of secularism embodies, and whether 'love' and 'tolerance' can be recommended in equal measure to both the majority and minority communities?

Notes

- 1 Report in *Newstime*, March 15, 1995.
- 2 Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Integrating Whose Nation? Tourists and Terrorists in *Roja*', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXIX:3: January 15, 1994, pp. 79-82.
- 3 I would like to comment here only on the film's reception in Hyderabad. The controversy surrounding the film in Bombay even before its release has to do not with audience perceptions but with the then-imminent election victory of the Shiv Sena and Sena leader Bal Thackeray's objections to the way in which the Thackeray-character is portrayed in the film. If we seek to equate Thackeray's objections with those of the Muslim leaders, we would be making the kind of analytical (and political) mistake that is evidenced in naming as 'casteist' violence by both dalits and upper castes.
- 4 Nasreen Sultana, 'Lift Ban on "Bombay"', letter to the editor, *Newstime*, March 20, 1995.
- 5 Interviewer (Lens Eye) in 'Truth or Dare', interview with Maniratnam, *The Times of India*, April 2, 1995.
- 6 Bhawna Somaya, 'The "Bombay" Problem', *The Hindu*, March 31, 1995.
- 7 Niranjana, *op cit*.
- 8 It is not entirely fortuitous that the actor Arvind Swamy plays both Rishi Kumar in *Roja* and Shekhar in 'Bombayi'.
- 9 In an interview, Maniratnam says: "The family is the most invincible institution of our country. We lead our entire lives in the family's folds." *The Times of India*, April 2, 1995.
- 10 This depiction makes invisible the large-scale participation of the 'modern' middle class in the Bombay riots.
- 11 Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990). See especially Chapter 7, 'Nationalism versus Communalism'.
- 12 The new nationalism is of necessity detached from anti-imperialism, the differences between the BJP and the RSS over the *swadeshi* campaign notwithstanding. Nationalism, then, becomes a purely internal question, to be asserted against non-Hindus.