

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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BOMBAY 1995

Mani Ratnam

(Tamil language)

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OVERVIEW

Bombay is a bold and highly controversial film set in the context of true events: the demolition of a mosque by Hindus in 1992 and the subsequent riots that engulfed Bombay (and other cities). While it is not a 'political' film, in any overt sense, it deliberately sets out to make a point about communal (Muslim-Hindu) harmony. The story focuses on Sekhar, a young Hindu man, who falls in love with Shaila, a young Muslim woman. Both of them are Tamils, and both their families are traditional in their religious faith. When their budding love is squashed by the two fathers, they elope to Bombay and get married in a civil ceremony. They settle down, have twins and are reunited with their families, who also come to live in Bombay. Their happiness is shattered by the riots that rock the city after the destruction of the mosque. Both sets of parents are killed, and the couple are separated from their children. They eventually do find their two sons, but their loss is still immense.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The controversy generated by this film cannot be overstated. The demolition of the Babri mosque and the resulting riots scarred the nation and is still (in 2019) the subject of ongoing court cases and public debate. One measure of the sensitivity of the film is that several scenes were cut from an early version. Also, when the film was released, bombs were thrown at the director's house and he spent some days in hospital. The actress playing Shaila also received numerous death threats. Despite, or because of this protest, the film was an immediate smash-hit and picked up seventeen awards in India and abroad. It might be said that the film, made only three years after the historical events it depicts, handles the theme of Hindu-Muslim tension a little clumsily, setting up the divisions and then the healing the wounds too neatly. However, it is undeniable that it presents one version of recent history and that it has a powerful effect on viewers.

STORY

Homecoming The film opens with a shot of a boat gliding on a misty river. Shekhar, a young Hindu man, is coming home to his village in Tamil Nadu, far from Bombay, where he has finished college. As he steps from the boat, he catches a glimpse of a young Muslim woman when the breeze lifts her veil from her face, and he is struck by her beauty. Reaching home, he tells his traditional father about his plans to work at a newspaper and study journalism at night. 'What ism?' the father asks, not impressed.

Courtship During his prolonged stay in the village, Shekhar works hard to introduce himself to Shaila, but she is shy and runs away. Desperate, Shekhar puts on a burqa and, going close in that disguise, whispers to her to meet him at a deserted fort. Waiting for her, he sings songs of despair and appears ready to kill himself, until she races up to him and they embrace. Hindu boy and Muslim girl are now officially in love.

Angry fathers The next step in the courtship is for Shekhar to go to Shaila's father and ask for her in marriage. Shaila's father, Basheer, is a brick-maker and a pious Muslim. When Shekhar explains why he has come, the father flies into a rage and refuses to consider the proposal, saying, 'Who are you and who are we? We are different blood. They don't mix.' Shekhar then takes the sword that the father is brandishing and cuts both his and Shaila's arms. Placing his cut arm on hers, he says, 'These bloods are mixed' and leaves. When Shekhar later tells his own father, Narayanan, that he wants to marry the brick-seller's daughter, the older man is dumbfounded.

Near-riot Narayanan goes to confront Basheer. At first, the two fathers shout abuse at each other, which nearly sparks a riot among the gathered crowd (a foreshadowing of what will happen a few months later, with thousands killed in Bombay). The two fathers eventually talk by themselves and

come to realise that they both oppose this cross-religious marriage.

Shaila's decision Defeated, Shekhar leaves home and returns to Bombay, from where he sends letters to Shaila, imploring her to join him. She is undecided, unable to break with her family. When her father finds out about the letters, he decides to marry her to a man in the village. Now, Shaila makes a brave decision and flees to Bombay, where she marries Shekhar in a civil ceremony.

Bombay Away from the prejudices of the village, Shekhar works as a journalist and Shaila keeps house. Although the animosity continues from their fathers, it dissipates as the years pass, and they slowly rebuild the broken bridges by writing letters. In Bombay, however, Hindu nationalists parade through the streets, giving Shaila and Shekhar pause for thought. Back in the village, communal strife is also afoot. When Shekhar's father asks Shaila's father to sell him bricks with 'Rama' (name of the Hindu god) written on them, the Muslim man is incensed since he knows that the bricks will be used to construct a new temple when the mosque is demolished.

Twins The hostile views of their families begin to wane when Shaila gives birth to twin boys, Kabir and Kamal. Years pass, the boys grow up, raised in both religions, and the couple prosper. Their secular dream continues until a group of Hindu nationalists knock on their door and ask for a donation to build the new Rama temple over the mosque.

Riots Now the film changes tone and splashes headlines that describe the demolition of the mosque and the plans to build a new temple. Riots break out in Bombay, mobs rampage, houses are burnt and people are killed. The police and army try to establish order, but they, too, are attacked and driven back.

Narrow escape When Shekhar's and Shaila's two sons get lost, the parents are driven mad with worry as they search for them in the riots. The two little boys are captured by masked men, who demand to know if they are Hindu or Muslim. The boys say, 'Hindu. Muslim. Both.' The men douse them with kerosene and strike a match, but the match won't light and the police rush forward with the parents. The boys are saved, although they suffer from nightmares.

Reconciliation Shekhar's father arrives in Bombay, telling his son that he heard about the riots and had to see him. He asks his grandchildren their names, and when they say 'Kamal Basheer and Kabir Basheer' (Muslim names), he hugs them with joy. Weeks later, Shaila's father arrives and the reconciliation is complete.

More riots In the streets, however, communal tensions rise. Shekhar interviews Hindu and Muslim leaders, who each blame the other side for the riots and a second wave of rioting starts. Shekhar's father is about to be killed by Muslims when Shaila's father vouches for him as a Muslim and he is saved.

Tragedy Later, both fathers die in a fire that engulfs Shekhar's home, and the parents are again separated from their sons. Then the boys become separated from each other. Shaila searches everywhere, even among the corpses in the hospitals, while Shekhar tries to moderate between angry mobs. Meanwhile, one of the boys is given shelter by a hermaphrodite lady. Soon the other twin joins them. The killing continues until the hermaphrodite, Muslim leaders and Shekhar, in separate instances, appeal to the mobs in 'the name of god.'

Reunion When the rioters disperse, Shekhar and Shaila find their two sons, who have been rescued by a combination of Hindus and Muslims. The film ends with poems about unity and various people join hands.

THEMES

Communalism The evil of communalism is the obvious theme of this controversial film, which depicts the historical events of the riots in Bombay sparked by the demolition of a mosque in December 1992. The tensions between Hindus and Muslims are presented on two levels: the local and the national. In the village, a Hindu boy and Muslim girl fall in love, but their traditional fathers prevent their marriage. So far, so normal. Inter-religious marriages were not common in the 1990s

(nor are they in 2019). The film-maker then inserts the national debate into this local love affair when the Hindu boy's father asks the Muslim girl's father to make him bricks with the name of the Hindu god Rama on them. This is historically accurate: there was a nation-wide movement to demolish a mosque (believed to have been built on top of an old Rama temple) and to rebuild the temple using bricks with the god's name on them. Once the film leaves the village, we feel as if the lovers have left that communal hatred behind. Soon, however, communalism on the national level, specifically the demolition of the mosque, infects the city and the family is caught up in violent riots. Both sets of parents die in a fire, and only the brave efforts of an unnamed hermaphrodite and Shekhar prevent the children from dying. In both the village and the city, we hear Hindus say that Muslims are not 'proper Indians,' and Muslims say that Hindus are 'vile dogs.' There is no attempt to explore the reasons for this hatred, nor is that the intention of the film-maker, who claimed that he wanted to present the problem and to show a solution on a personal level. There is no denying the brutality, the wanton destruction and bloody killing that took place in Bombay in January 1993, and that it was fuelled by inter-religious hatred. The film does not flinch from these realities, and for that it must be admired.

Secularism Alongside the ugly truth of communal hatred, the film presents isolated acts of love and kindness that might add up to a secularism. Once the couple elope to Bombay, they get married in a civil ceremony, and (with one notable exception) no one pays any attention to their backgrounds. The big city and the state are (it seems) secular, just as the constitution of India proclaims. Predictably, given his love for Shaila, Shekhar is the main advocate of communal unity. In one particularly powerful scene, he cuts his arm and Shaila's arm, and then mixes their blood to show that the two religious communities can be one. In another scene, Shekhar's father dies when he dives back into a burning building to save the Koran of Shaila's father, a man he had once considered his enemy. The need for crossing boundaries is also emphasised in the figure of a hermaphrodite (*hijra*, in Hindi) who provides shelter to the two boys during the second riot. She, like them, is a combination of binary categories. The purest secular vision is invested in the young boys, who carry Muslim names but are brought up in the traditions of both religions (how this is possible is a problem ignored by the film). When they are captured by an angry mob and asked if they are Muslim or Hindu, they answer 'both.' This is the message of the film, which concludes with different people holding hands as a song praises India as a country of 'one word, one way, one life.'

Hindu hegemony Despite this intended message, critics have argued that *Bombay* presents a vision of Hindu domination in the guise of secularism. This argument points out that it is largely Shaila, the Muslim woman, who loses her Muslim identity in the melting pot of a marriage in the big city. In the village, she wears the traditional burqa, while after marriage in Bombay, she wears only a sari. Some Muslim women do wear the sari, but the point is that she has discarded her normal dress to adopt a more neutral choice. It is also true, as critics have commented, that Shaila is 'unveiled' over the course of the film. Shekhar first sees her when her veil is lifted by the wind. Later, when she rushes to save him from suicide, her veil catches on a nail and she rips it off. By contrast, the only case in which a Hindu symbol is erased involves Shekhar's father. He is carrying his grandson on his shoulders in the city when an angry group of Muslims approaches. The little boy reaches down and wipes the Hindu ash mark off his forehead so that he can pass as Muslim. Overall, then, the film tells a story of a secularism that is in fact an assimilation of a Muslim girl into a dominant Hindu society. This may be one reason why Hindu nationalist leaders welcomed the film, and Muslim leaders objected to its release.

CHARACTERS

Shekhar Shekhar, a Hindu, is the male protagonist. Shekar is a young and impetuous man. He can be slightly comical in his actions, but he has determination and stamina, whether he is attempting to meet a pretty girl or get answers from a stubborn politician. Although he leaves his family because of his father's opposition to his love for a Muslim, he never loses his affection for him.

Comical Shekhar's reckless behaviour is sometimes comical. The best example is his desperate attempt to have a conversation with Shaila. She is getting into a boat, with other veiled Muslim women, when Shekhar runs to the boat, also wearing a burqa and pretends to be Shaila's cousin. Although his trainers show beneath the long black garment, he does his best to imitate a woman's walk, though it looks more like a mincing goat than a young female. The charade continues inside the boat. Shaila screams when she sees who is really underneath the burqa and her friends become worried. 'Hold her, hold her tight,' they say to the person they think is her cousin. With a satisfied

smirk, which we can see, but no one else can, Shekhar puts his hairy hand around her shoulders and draws her close. It is affectionate and comical at the same time.
(Shekhar, right, disguised in a burqa, talks to Shaila)

Impassioned Shekhar is driven by his passions, especially his love for Shaila and his belief in secularism. At one point in the riots, he stands in front of a raging mob of Hindus and offers himself as a sacrifice, crying in a mocking voice, 'Burn me! Burn me!' An equally powerful (and to my mind more effective) scene occurs much earlier, in the village. Shekhar has gone to Shaila's house to ask his father permission to marry her. The father objects angrily and screams, 'We are different, different blood. We do not mix.' Seizing a sword, which the father was brandishing, Shekhar cuts first his arm and then Shaila's, too. Pressing his arm against hers, he says, triumphantly and defiantly, 'We have mixed our blood.' Melodramatic and a little improbable, this scene is nevertheless visceral, vivid and hard to forget. Shekhar is not a person to do things halfway.

Truth-seeker Another, not dissimilar, side of Shekhar is displayed in his life as a journalist, especially after a series of bomb blasts in the city. In a reflection of real events, we see him doggedly interviewing a police official. The man simply wants to hide from the press, but Shekhar keeps asking him why his men shot people in the head and back. The man claims that only 56 people were killed by the bombs, while Shekhar maintains (as officially announced later) that the total was 256. Frustrated, the police official turns on Shekhar and asks, 'Don't you have any respect for the police? We are human, too.' Shekhar looks at him eye to eye and replies, 'Yes, I have huge respect for you and your men. They saved the lives of my children.'

Shaila Shaila, a Muslim, is the female protagonist. Shaila is a young Muslim woman in a small village; her father is a brick-maker. She is perhaps seventeen or eighteen, studying for her final exams. She is traditional and shy but also capable of taking important decisions.

Shy Covered in her burqa, Shaila looks out on the world with caution. When he notices that a certain young man is trying to catch her eye, she averts her gaze and walks away. But she cannot forget him. Their secret romance reaches a critical point when Shekhar pledges his love and asks if she will meet him at an isolated fort by the sea. 'I'll do anything for you,' he says. 'I'll be waiting for you. Come if you love me.' As he speaks, she says nothing, while her face conveys a series of emotions. First, she is reluctant to listen. Next, she is ashamed to be spoken to so openly. Then, she tries to deny what is happening by turning away and shaking her head. And, finally, she looks into his eyes and sees that he is sincere. At that point, her shyness turns into affection.

Brave The shy girl is also courageous. After Shekhar leaves the village (because their fathers both oppose their marriage), he writes letters to her, keeping their love alive. Then her father finds the letters and confronts her. 'You have humiliated me enough,' he screams at her. 'Promise me now that you will stop this, this thing with Shekhar. Do not humiliate me further.' But Shaila, shaking with tears, does not promise, and her father hits her and says, 'I will marry you off in ten days.' Now, Shaila finds her strength and takes the most important decision of her life. Under the cover of darkness, she slips out of the house and travels to Bombay. She knows that she will be disowned by her father, but her love for Shekhar has made her brave.

Narayanan Narayanan is Shekhar's father. Narayanan is Shekhar's father and a Hindu priest. Although not a Brahmin, he is nevertheless high-caste and a man of immense pride. He loves his son but is also bound by tradition. He can be short-tempered, though we also see that he is essentially a good-hearted man.

Proud As a Hindu priest, who wears thick ash marks on his forehead, Narayanan is proud of his traditions. Most important among them is marriage and maintaining a proper image within his community, which means marrying his son to a Hindu girl. His pride is best illustrated in a scene when Shekhar tells him that he wants to marry Shaila. 'What?' he screams in disbelief. 'Daughter of that brick-seller?' He pushes everyone aside and storms out of the house to confront Shaila's father. 'If your daughter goes with my son, there'll be murder here,' he warns the Muslim man. 'You only want my son because he is educated and we are wealthy, compared to you.' It is an unfair accusation, since the Muslim father is as opposed to the marriage as he is, but the scene reveals the deep pride that governs Narayanan's life.

Humble Humility is not a characteristic that we would associate with Narayanan, but he undergoes a transformation. We see this change when he arrives unexpectedly at the door of Shekhar's house in

Bombay after hearing of the riots that ravaged the city. The two men, father and son, look at each other on the threshold. Narayanan has sad eyes when he says, 'We betrayed you, my son [by opposing his marriage].' Shekhar tries to speak, but his father continues, 'We heard that the city was burning, I had to come to see that you are alive.' Shekhar starts to speak, but his father interrupts, 'Why did you leave us? I am your father.' When Shekhar invites him inside, Narayanan says, 'No, I didn't come for any formalities, only to see if you are alive. I don't want to...' Narayanan stops in mid-sentence and hugs his son in tears. He had more or less ordered his son out of his house for refusing to marry a Hindu girl, and now, years later, he comes to his son's house and asks to be admitted. It is a climb-down that only enhances our respect for him.

Basheer Basheer is Shaila's father
Kabir Kabir is Shaila's and Shekar's son.
Kamal Kamal is also their son and Kabir's twin.



(Shekhar and Shaila embrace after his near-suicide)



(Shekhar and Shaila in the riots, looking for their children)



(Shekhar, centre, challenges fellow Hindus during the riots by asking them if the *Gita*, the Hindu holy book, condones their actions)



(Shekhar, right, disguised in a burqa, talks to Shaila)