

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

ALIGARH 2016

Hansal Mehta

Hindi Language

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

This courageous and subtle film is based on the real-life story of a professor who was suspended from Aligarh University (Uttar Pradesh, north India) after being filmed having sex with another man. The story focuses on Professor Siras and the young journalist, Deepu, who befriends him. Through Deepu's conversations with Siras, we learn about the professor's life, especially his inner life, while outside his story is taken up by the media and is the subject of a lengthy court case. Siras is suspended from the university for 'moral misconduct' and forced to leave his apartment. In court, he is found not guilty because in legal terms his right to privacy was violated by the reporters who forcibly entered his house and filmed him without permission. Despite his acquittal, Siras has been battered. He is found dead, with a lingering suspicion of murder.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

In 2010, when the events in the film took place, homosexuality had been temporarily decriminalised. A colonial-era law, which was still in place, had been declared unconstitutional by the Delhi High Court. In 2013, however, that ruling was overturned and the old law was reinstated. That was the situation at the time the film was made and released. (In 2017 homosexuality was finally decriminalised by new legislation.) Homosexuality, however, remains controversial among many sections of the population, and it has specific cultural nuances in India, with its long tradition of homosocial behaviour. As Siras himself explains, he was targeted not simply because he was gay but also because he was 'an outsider.' He was a professor of Marathi (the regional language of Maharashtra) in a city (Allahabad) that spoke Urdu. Moreover, Marathi is (primarily) a language of Hindu poetry, whereas Urdu is the vehicle of poetry associated with the Mughals and subsequent Muslim rulers. Aligarh University, where professor taught, also has a special place in modern Indian history. After the revolt in 1857, it became the expression of a Muslim modernity that sought accommodation rather than conflict with the Hindu majority of British India.

STORY

Intrusion The film begins at night, on 8 February, 2010, in the city of Allahabad in north India. The streets are deserted, lit by the noirish glow of street lamps. A well-dressed man is brought home to his apartment block in a cycle rickshaw. The rickshaw-wallah follows him into the block and up the stairs. A light goes on upstairs. It is silent except for dogs barking and a distant train. Two men approach the building, one is carrying a camera. When they see the light, one says, 'Still at it, eh?' The two burst into the apartment and we hear loud shouting. In the next scene, a man is on the floor, naked, hugging his knees and in tears.

Scandal Next, we follow a young journalist who goes to his office in New Delhi, opens his computer and reads the story: 'Professor S R Siras, Chair of Modern Languages at Aligarh University, has been suspended after being filmed by two unidentified reporters having sex with a rickshaw-wallah.' The journalist, named Deepu, is keen to follow up the story, but his boss (Nimala) points out that he is too inexperienced and gives the story to someone else, 'who is good with sex scandals.'

Apology Siras, a man in his fifties or sixties, is hiding behind bolted doors in his apartment. He is later persuaded by Sridharan, a colleague and friend, to write a letter of apology and to stay away from the campus. 'Things are really bad there,' the friend warns him. We see a shot of boisterous crowds, waving placards saying 'No Homos' and demanding the firing of Professor Siras.

Hiding Siras holes up inside his flat and listens to sad love songs from the past. He looks a wreck as he tentatively moves a curtain and peers out into the night. He goes to a clinic and learns that his blood pressure is very high.

Deepu In his office in New Delhi, Deepu sees the Aligarh story written up by one of his colleagues. 'Looks like a gay rights protest statement,' he says dismissively. Taking a cameraman friend, Deepu goes to Aligarh University to interview Prof. Siras, but finds an empty department. He manages to talk to Sridharan, who refuses to 'talk to the media.' Deepu says he thinks Siras was 'victimised' by a sting operation and that the two reporters should be punished. But Sridharan is adamant that Siras does not need more media attention. Deepu locates Siras' apartment, but it is locked and he is nowhere to be seen.

Meeting Deepu and his friend wait late into the night outside the apartment block until Siras arrives. He is carrying heavy bags and collapses. Deepu helps him into his apartment, but when the friend outside begins to snap pictures, Siras realises that he is a journalist and angrily throws him out. Deepu is furious with his friend and sends him back to Delhi.

Press conference At a small press conference, a university spokesman announces that Siras will be charged with misconduct and must vacate his university-owned quarters within seven days. Deepu again raises the question of the two reporters who filmed the incident without permission. The spokesman waves his question away and says journalists go everywhere with their cameras.

An ally However, one professor at the conference expresses his admiration for Deepu's question and says that he is a friend of Siras. He is Prof. Islam, who also tells Deepu that Siras has been the victim of internal university politics. Deepu asks for details, but the professor says that he will do what he can to help Siras but that he 'cannot rock the boat too much.'

Interview Deepu returns to Siras' apartment block and, fortuitously, is able to help him reconnect his electricity. Although he does not have to vacate for another seven days, the authorities have cut off his power. Now, trusting Deepu, Siras explains that there has been a conspiracy against him because he teaches Marathi in a city that speaks Urdu. And that he is a bachelor among married couples. Yet, he was appointed head of the department, which angered his colleagues.

Revelations In the course of a quiet interview with Deepu, Siras also reveals his views about homosexuality, poetry and the current fashion to misunderstand things by relying on labels. Slowly, Deepu leads Siras to describe 'that night' and his narration is shown on screen as a flashback. Two men burst in, one with the camera and the other with a heavy stick. One filmed, while the other beat Siras and his sex-partner, the rickshaw-wallah, and tore off their clothes. Then, we learn something that has been suppressed: four of Siras' colleagues also came into the room during the filming. In other words, those four men set up the sting operation.

Campaign Some groups begin to campaign to exonerate Siras. A year earlier, the Indian High Court had decriminalised gay sex, and Siras presents them with an opportunity to make that ruling operative in real life. But Siras won't agree to participate in the campaign because he would have to say he is 'gay.' It isn't that he is ashamed but only that he doesn't like labels for complex things such as emotions.

The letter Eventually Siras agrees to have his suspension adjudicated in the courts. During the hearing, the prosecution reveals the letter of apology that Siras wrote admitting that he did wrong. Siras goes to his friend, Sridharan, who had persuaded him to write it, and asks his help in discrediting the letter. The friend will not help. 'You have to endure this alone,' he says. 'I told you at the time to just let this die down. But you joined a campaign.'

Court case Lawyers for the university attempt to smear Siras in court, claiming that his suspension was justified under university rules. Lawyers for Siras point out that the new law means that gay sex is not illegal and that the reporters and university officials who entered his apartment violated his right to privacy. Siras wins the case and he is officially reinstated at the university. His supporters host him at a party, where the intelligentsia has come to fete him. He entertains them with a recital of his poems.

Irfan During another long conversation, Siras tells Deepu that he was married once, when he was younger. His wife left him not because he was gay but because he was too preoccupied with his books. Deepu raises the possibility that Irfan, the rickshaw-wallah, deliberately let the reporters into his apartment that night. Deepu now tries to find Irfan, but the man has gone into hiding, after being beaten by the police.

Death Forced to leave his university quarters, Siras relocates but is forced out again, presumably

because of the scandal in the press. A few days later, he is found dead in his apartment. Police later found traces of poison in his blood but they ruled out murder. The court order reinstating him reached the university the day after he died.

THEMES

Homosexuality At the heart of this film is the issue of homosexuality in India. It begins with an (off-screen) scene of sex between two men and it dramatises attitudes to homosexuality, its changing legal position and its treatment in the media. While the film-maker is certainly sympathetic to 'gay rights', he subtly explores this not-so-simple issue in a highly traditional culture. Many of the nuances in the film are articulated by Professor Siras himself, as he unburdens himself to Deepu, the young journalist who befriends him. As a poet and intellectual, Siras does not like labels, including 'gay.' That three-letter English word cannot express his emotions. Poetry can get closer, he says, with its pauses and gaps. In another conversation, he says he dislikes the word 'lover' (again in English) and prefers to use 'love' instead. The film also includes the official university and conservative Muslim view that sex outside marriage is sinful. That is an easy target to attack, but Mehta also shows how gay rights campaigners, however well-intentioned, manipulate Siras' case to publicise their cause. The print, online and broadcast media feed off the scandal like vultures, whom the soft-spoken and shy Siras has to ward off in order to protect himself. AS a result, Siras the victim is allowed to be Siras the man. He was once married; his wife left him not because of sex but because he had his head in his books. He tells Deepu that he is lonely and seeks solace with men. His homosexual behaviour is what sparks the controversy and drives the film forward, especially with the ensuing court case and public campaign, but the film also reveals the complexity of being gay in contemporary India.

Privacy The brilliance of this film rests largely on its articulation of a second theme. As Deepu himself realises at the beginning, the case of Prof. Siras in bed with another man is not (or not primarily) a gay rights story. It is, rather, a story of privacy, of a man whose constitutional right to that privacy was violated when men burst into his apartment and filmed him without his permission. This moral and legal argument is articulated by Deepu at a press conference held by the university who have suspended Prof. Siras. But when Deepu tries to shift the focus from Siras to the reporters who broke into his apartment, the university spokesman says, 'No, no. The issue here is not the camera, but the content of the video.' The invasion of one's home and the illegal videoing of someone in a private moment is also the argument put to the court by Siras' lawyers. 'Article 21 of the Constitution clearly states that every citizen of this country is entitled to privacy and dignity. That means, everyone is entitled to solitude and to boundaries. Those boundaries were violated on the night in question when men forced their way into his house and filmed him.' The lawyer who made this argument knew full well that a defence of homosexuality itself was (at the time of the events) likely to fail. He chose the legal route and he was successful.

CHARACTERS

Siras Siras is a university professor at the heart of the story. Professor Siras is a sixty-four-year old professor of language and linguistics. He is gay, though he rejects that label. Shy, he prefers the world of poetry and music to that of the outside world. He is lonely, separated from a wife long ago and without children. Sensitive and talented in his field, he is also capable of humour and likes a nice glass of whisky.

Lonely Professor Siras is, by his own admission, a lonely person. He lives by himself and teaches in a department with only a handful of students. One or two colleagues are occasional friends. His loneliness is illustrated in an early scene, which occurs soon after the 'incident.' He has been humiliated, filmed by reporters sent by university officials. We see him in his little apartment, sitting on his bed in low light, listening to old film songs on his ancient record player. 'Someone tell the storm, that I've found my shore,' the sings cries. 'Oh, heart, stop beating so fast, I've found my destiny.' His face is creased with emotion, pain or pleasure is hard to tell. Then he begins to hum along with the line, 'Oh, my love, your shadow falls across my heart.' He is far away, immersed in feelings and memories.

Proud Although he is quiet and contemplative, Siras has strong emotions, as seen in his love of music and poetry. Another deep feeling is his pride, not in an arrogant way, but merely a respect for his work and himself. This pride, tinged with anger, is demonstrated in a scene where he is still in his university quarters. He is holed up inside, hiding from the media, from colleagues and wallowing in his film music. One night, Deepu gains his trust and is allowed to enter his apartment. But when

Siras discovers that Deepu is another journalist, he threatens the young man with a large umbrella and orders him to leave. Deepu tries to explain that he is on his side, but Siras isn't listening. 'You think this is a joke?' he asks sarcastically. 'That I'm a clown in a circus?' He closes the door on the 'intruder' and tries to sooth his bruised pride with a glass of whisky and more songs of lost love.

Sensitive The essential feature of Siras' character is his capacity to feel and to understand the world. He is a poet, a linguistics professor and an admirer of forgotten cinema songs. The most moving example of his reflective quality comes during a conversation with Deepu, the journalist whom he has learned to trust. Siras explains why his colleagues dislike him: he's an outsider—I teach Marathi in a city that speaks Urdu.' And he's a bachelor among married couples. 'Is it because you're gay [using the English word]?' Deepu asks, respectfully. Siras looks at him for a long moment before saying, 'I don't understand that word.' Deepu says, 'So you're not gay?' Siras shakes his head and says, 'How can someone describe my feelings in three letters of an English word? It's like poetry and music. Deep within me.' His is the response of a poet, a person sensitive to language and connotations. This is why he is so shy with the outside world, even gay rights supporters. His sensibilities are too fragile for the rough exterior of life.

Light-hearted Siras, however, is more than just poetical, pensive and lonely. He can be light-hearted, if only momentarily. There are a few such moments in the otherwise grim film. One of those moments occurs during a conversation with Deepu, while his court case is still in progress. Deepu asks how the trial is going and Siras says, 'It's very boring. I'm dying of boredom.' Both of them laugh and Siras explains. 'I blame my father for this. He was a lawyer. I grew up hearing about petitions, arguments and depositions, I didn't understand it then. And I still don't.' Although Siras has pride in his profession, he doesn't take himself too seriously. He just wants to be left alone with his loves.

Deepu Deepu is a journalist from Delhi, who befriends and supports Siras. Deepu is a young journalist, sure of himself and full of enterprise. He is also a thoughtful person, sharp-witted and respectful of others. His gentle manner wins over the suspicious Siras, but even then Deepu sometimes shows his lack of maturity with 'bull in the china shop' type of questions.

Cocky Deepu does not lack self-belief. He graduated top of his journalism group in college and is highly motivated. This is evident during his first appearance in the movie. He is at work, in a newspaper office, when he sees the online report about the 'suspension of a gay professor.' Immediately, he thinks he can take on this story, despite his junior status in the office and the huge controversy of the issue. He interrupts his (female) boss, who is talking on the phone and looks at him with wary eyes. 'First, you look pretty in that sari,' Deepu says and then explains that he wants to follow up on the story. His request is refused and the story is given to someone else 'who is good at sex stories,' but Deepu doesn't follow orders. Days later, he wheedles an authorisation for travel expenses and goes to Aligarh University to interview Siras.

Legal eagle Another side of Deepu is revealed in the scene just described is his legal acumen. Although he has only read a summary of the story online, headlined 'Suspension of Gay Professor,' he is sharp enough to see that this is not just a case of gay rights. It is primarily a violation of a citizen's right to privacy. People broke into Siras' apartment to film him, which, in legal terms, is as unlawful as breaking in to steal. The speed with which Deepu grasps the underlying foundation of the story is impressive and puts him far ahead of anyone else in his office, and among the viewing public. Only later are we told that prior to working as a journalist, Deepu went to law school. Obviously, he learned something there.

Gentle Deepu has a calm manner, speaks softly and respects the silences that occur when he is talking with Siras. That gentle demeanour is what wins him the trust of the fearful professor. A good illustration of Deepu's tender nature occurs during his first long interview. Siras has opened up and told Deepu exactly what happened that night, the humiliation and violence. Throughout his narration, Deepu listens. His face shows empathy and respect for the man's feelings. When Siras says that he nearly killed himself, Deepu lowers his eyes for the first time, but again, wisely, says nothing. 'But I'm glad I didn't,' Siras says, and Deepu says, 'Yes, sir.' Those two words are all that Deepu says during this long scene, which displays his tenderness toward the disturbed professor.

Earnest However compassionate he is, though, Deepu is interested in getting the true story. He supports Siras and would not do nothing to hurt him, either emotionally or legally. But he still probes around, trying to uncover hitherto unknown or unspoken details. An excellent example of his

determination to uncover the whole truth occurs when Deepu and Siras are in the middle of calm river, sitting in a boat. After Siras has opened up and spoken about his failed marriage, Deepu says, 'I'm sorry to ask you, but what about Irfan [the rickshaw-wallah he had sex with]?' Siras doesn't want to talk about him, but Deepu explains that the courts and the media will hound him until more is known. Deepu then suggests that Irfan might have been in league with the reporters who filmed him. 'You see,' Deepu says, 'there was no sign of damage to the door.' Siras dismisses this idea and says that he probably forgot to lock the door. 'But there are three locks on that door. I don't think you forgot to lock all three.' The suggestion that the rickshaw man betrayed him is deeply troubling to Siras, but Deepu makes him consider the possibility. It might be disturbing, but to Deepu the truth is more important.

Sridharan Sridharan is a friend who later distances himself from Siras.
Nimala Nimala is Deepu's boss in the newspaper office.
Prof. Islam Professor Islam is a supporter of Siras.
Grover Grover is the lawyer who defends Siras in court.



(Prof. Siras listening to legal arguments)



(Siras and Deepu on a boat)



(Deepu, left, and Siras enjoy a joke over lunch)