# *Bombay* (1995)

*Annika McPherson*

*dir. Mani Ratnam; prod. S. Sriram; screenplay Mani Ratnam; photography Rajiv Menon; music A. R. Rahman. 35mm, color, 141 mins. Aalayam Productions, distrib. Aalayam Productions.*

On the occasion of its 25th anniversary in 2020, Mani Ratnam's Tamil movie *Bombay* was re-reviewed almost as controversially as upon its first release in 1995. At the time, wounds were still fresh from the 1992-93 communal riots that had erupted in Bombay in the wake of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu fundamentalists. Based on charges of politicians' incitement to violence, as well as of police complicity and transgression, the subsequent events have also been described as an anti-Muslim massacre, and the film's depiction of these events continues to be contested in terms of its politics of representation. Questions of responsibility for the significantly higher Muslim death toll become inextricably linked to how the film's aesthetics are unpacked, and which elements of its complex genre configuration are highlighted and imbued with broader social and political meaning. Any interpretive endeavor is further complicated by the effects of censorship on the movie (Gopalan 24-36), as well as by reports and assessments that emerged only after the movie's release. Hence, the film's representational dynamics need to be assessed within the field of tension between local and national politics and with an eye to the various aesthetic traditions and popular tropes from which it draws. Its Madras-based writer-director, Mani Ratnam, has worked across various Indian film industries in several languages (Stafford). He has explored tensions between personal relationships and national(ist) politics in a range of films that link marriage plots to communal strife, secessionist politics, guerilla movements, or civil war, frequently depicting »winning combinations of desire and power« (Gopalan 14), most notably in the highly successful and controversial film *Roja* (1992), in which a couple's romance collides with the Kashmir conflict.

Reading *Bombay* predominantly through either the lens of romance, coded through the family melodrama that informs much of its first part, or mainly as a political commentary on the 1992-1993 riots, which dominate its second part, inevitably generates different interpretations of the film. Yet, it is the very mesh of genres and film traditions (including segments alluding to the »Muslim social«) interlaced with its own

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aesthetic particularities (such as Steadicam scenes) that marks Ratnam's most controversial movie as »a cross-pollination of popular and art film« (Virdi 73). One of the key questions posed in this context relates to the film's position *vis-à-vis* secularism. This is indeed where the communalist politics are interwoven with the melodramatic, as it is in the inter-religious marriage of the Hindu man and the Muslim woman that the melodrama both unfolds and finds its limits.

While journalist Shekhar (played by Arvind Swamy) is not a devout Hindu like his father, he can be aligned with a patriarchal Hindu-normative social order. On return to his home village from Bombay, he instantly falls in love with Shaila Banu (Manisha Koirala) after having caught only a brief distant glimpse of her face when the wind lifts her *burqua*. While he courts her, she accidentally, but significantly, loses her veil as a marker of difference. Their southern village families, and especially the fathers, are portrayed in a manner aiming at satire but drawing heavily on stereotypes, such as Muslim fathers being prone to physical violence. Although Shaila Banu undergoes a visible cultural assimilation to her Hindu-normative surroundings once she reunites with and marries Shekhar in Bombay, an emphasis on the ostensible erasure of her difference risks perpetuating the equation of the woman with the community she represents (Virdi 75). Moreover, Sheila Banu is by no means portrayed as passive: Many scenes—including the first song-and-dance sequence—both narratively and visually emphasize her desire, agency, and decisions. She also affirms her Muslim identity when confronted by Shekhar's landlady. In the first part's detailed elaboration of the couple's romance, the newlyweds are shown to gradually connect both physically and culturally. The song-and-dance sequences of the popular cinematic tradition are marked by acclaimed composer A. R. Rahman's highly memorable music (with lyrics by Vairamuthu in the Tamil version and Mehboob in the Hindi version) and provide interpretive cues throughout the movie.

Ratnam's play with popular tropes, however, is mainly conveyed in the comic squabbles of Shekhar's and Shaila Banu's fathers over their grandsons Kabir Narajan and Kamal Bashir—one bearing a Hindu name combined with his paternal grandfather's, the other a Muslim name combined with his maternal grandfather's. When they meet at their children's Bombay residence, the grandfathers quite humorously outperform each other in their attempts to form the twins in their respective image. Shekhar's and Shaila Banu's approach to the matter of naming, in turn, symbolizes an attempt at syncretism to appease and compensate their families' erstwhile rejection of their union, which had only been mitigated by the birth of the grandchildren and their village families' fears for their lives after hearing about the first riot. However, their rather playful attempts to mix traditions and religions prove not only naïve but also almost fatal when the tensions in the city rise and culminate in the threat of the twins' immolation during the first clashes, which deeply traumatizes them. The lighthearted switching of signs of their respective communities that is alluded to in the song sequence when Shaila Banu places a *tikka* on her forehead and Shekhar dons a Muslim-connoted head covering thus takes a dramatic turn during the riots, when lives are taken solely based on stereotypically displayed markers. While the initial play with religious markers may signify a secularist overcoming within the family, the fact that Shekhar's father and Shaila Banu's parents die in the burning house during the second wave of violence indicates the futility of such an endeavor in the face of lethal sectarian ideologies. In various instances, supported by songs and intermedial refer-

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ences from newspapers, radio, and television, the movie speaks to these ideologies as the real culprit behind the violence. Shekhar—a journalist aspiring to offer a balanced assessment—also blames fundamentalism but tellingly does not take sides.

Prefigured by the threat of the twins being doused with gasoline during the initial riots, it is Shekhar's ambivalent threat of self-immolation towards the end of the movie that brings about a decisive turn to halt the violence through the trope of the sacrificial male body (Vasudevan 230). However, he is not the only one to intervene and reason with the mob surrounding him. The *hijra* who protects and takes care of Kamal when the twins are separated during the chaos of the second wave of violence is another figure who attempts to stop the attacks in a parallel self-sacrificial gesture, as does a Muslim woman who, in turn, takes up the role of mediator to her community. Their visually intercut affective pleas lead to a final joining of hands across communalist lines of division that is superimposed onto images of the family's reunification. These gestures, however, can undo neither the violence nor the trauma caused by lethal sectarian violence. Yet, the nationalist melodrama culminates in emphatic appeals to Indianness on all sides, indirectly upholding the constitutional ideal of secularism while clearly demonstrating its unfulfilled promise and continuous precarity.

Critical responses to the movie's communal representations have condemned it for not taking a more decisive stance against the possibility of aligning Shekhar with Hindu hegemony in spite of his ostensible secularism and, even more so, for scenes highlighting Muslims as perpetrators. It is significant, though, that several references to building a Hindu temple in Ayodhya in the movie's first part mark Shekhar's father, local community leaders, and politicians as complicit and thus at least indirectly responsible for the ensuing riots. Some of these scenes, which uncannily foreshadow the violence, are mediated through Shaila Banu's perception. Based on techniques such as the »open image,« idiosyncratic takes, and the »stalking« camera, Gopalan even rereads *Bombay* through the lens of horror (37-62). While Shekhar is depicted as searching for the truth, as when interviewing a policeman and pointing to the police's role in the killings, it is precisely in such references that censorship takes a toll on the film's representational politics. Whether one wants to praise its daring and, at the time rather uncommon, depiction of inter-religious love with scenes of marital bliss and happy family life, or rather to take it to task for its silences and omissions (either censorship-induced or resulting from stereotypical characterizations and aesthetic choices), the movie in any case ultimately conveys a strong plea for secularism.

Overall, the pathos-ridden final joining of hands in *Bombay* allegorizes a call for reigning the communities back into a family-bound social order. Weighed against its more playful, and sometimes comic, segments, which both expose and perpetuate stereotypes along communal and gendered lines, it is crucial to note that Shekhar and Shaila Banu's extended family cannot be reconstituted due to having lost grandparents in the violence. Thus, it may be less melodramatic excess than the real-life excess of continuous and state-sanctioned violence against Muslims that makes interpretive closure impossible for *Bombay* more than twenty-five years after its initial release.

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