

Syed Asif Haider¹

***FIRAAQ*: REMEMBERING GUJARAT**

Firaaq: A Work of Fiction Based on Thousand True Stories. Directed by Nandita Das. Written by Nandita Das and Suchi Kothars. Starring Naseeruddin Shah, Deepti Naval, Naseeruddin Shah, Paresh Rawal, Raghuvir Yadav, and Tisca Chopra. Language: Hindi. Official Website: <http://www.firaaqthefilm.com>. Released 20 March 2009.

Since the release of Mani Ratnam's *Roja* in 1992, the frequency of films that focus on the issue of terrorism has grown making this a distinctly new genre in Hindi cinema. Yet what has remained absent from mainstream cinema in India is a depiction and representation of the violence that engulfed the state of Gujarat in February 2002. This contrast between the saliency of terrorism in Bollywood against the near absence of films reflecting the communal violence in 2002 is worth noting. Indian cinema is seen as the dominant media institution and 'an integral component of national cultural and social process' (Khan 2009). Against this background, this disparity invokes questions about Muslim representation in Hindi films. Films that focus on terrorism (mainly) use Muslim characters in terrorist roles. Depiction of the riots in Gujarat, by contrast, would by necessity have to represent Muslims in the role of victims of predominantly Hindu antagonists. The absence therefore of films that focus on the violence in 2002 raises questions about the Muslim presence and representation in contemporary Bollywood.

While mainstream cinema may have turned a blind eye to the horrors of 2002 that dark episode in India's very recent past did not go completely unnoticed. Documentaries such as Ramesh Pimple's *Aakrosh* (2003) and Ramesh Sharma's *Final Solutions* (2003) (both of which ran into trouble with the censor board and had delayed releases in India with no release in Gujarat itself) and feature films like Nandita Das' *Firaaq* (2008) and Rahul Dholakia's *Parzania* (2007) do make a visual/cinematic intervention into the public discourse on the riots eight years ago.

¹ Syed Asif Haider is a second year PhD student at the Department of Languages and Cultures of South Asia. He can be contacted at 184196@soas.ac.uk.



Both *Firaaq* and *Parzania* handle their subject matter carefully and present version of events that, on the one hand, emphasise the carnage and chaos during the violence, while on the other hand, point to the complicity of the state and the organised nature of the violence as well. Unlike *Parzania* though, *Firaaq* chooses not to engage in the dramatisation and depiction of the actual violence itself. Instead it focuses on the aftermath of the aggression. Also, unlike *Parzania*, the story in *Firaaq* is not told through the eyes of one selected character or family. Rather Das presents an array of characters of Hindu as well as Muslim background. Significantly, by focusing on the aftermath and the way in which various characters cope with the horrific events, the violence itself and its consequences are given centre stage. This is reinforced by the fact that the lives of the characters do not really intersect. They are only connected through the shared experience of the violence. Das also chooses a somewhat detached style that holds the viewer at a critical distance from the narrative. This almost Brechtian approach is facilitated by the use of authentic footage of the events which the film's fictional characters are occasionally shown watching. This approach achieves a greater sense of realism but it also impresses upon the audience a sense of the film's own fictionality. It thus challenges viewers and compels them to critically assess the subject matter represented on screen.

The film begins by showing two Muslim characters burying corpses being brought from various localities. The scale of the atrocities here is highlighted by the high number of bodies that are shown. The characters' own trepidation is clearly expressed by their trembling voices as they chant quietly under their breath religious prayers for the dead. Then, amongst the bodies brought over in another truck load, they discover a Hindu woman. Bewildered and angry, one of the characters attempts to mutilate the body. He is stopped by his companion who argues that there is no value in raging against the dead. This opening episode frames the film and helps distance it from expectations and allegations of being a one-sided sentimental depiction of the horrors experienced by Muslims. It acknowledges that Hindus also fell victim to the madness of those weeks in February 2002. In fact, one of the film's most evocative storylines involves Aarti (played by Deepti Naval), a Hindu woman who is plagued by guilt for not having done more to help Muslims who came knocking at her door for help and assistance. In a heart warming sequence Muhsin (played by Mohammed Samad), a young Muslim boy orphaned as result of the violence, is taken in by Aarti who shows him kindness and affection. He tells her what

happened to his family and relates that many of them were burnt alive. Upon seeing burns on Aarti's arm he inquires whether she too was a victim of arsonists. Her burns, however, are the result of self harm which Aarti performed as symbolic punishment for her inability to help the victims as well as a punishment she bears on behalf of the Hindu community at large. This sense of guilt by association is subtly mirrored through the character of Sameer Arshad Sheikh (Sanjay Suri). In a revealing exchange with his Hindu brother in law he says:

'It's easy for you to say, if some crazy Hindu fundamentalist kills someone, you don't have to hide, but if some fanatic jihadi detonates a bomb anywhere we all have to hang our heads in shame.'

Challenged by his brother-in-law about this sudden identification with Muslims despite of Sameer's integration into mainstream secular Indian culture Sameer responds: 'I don't know when me became we.'

Firaaq represents the increased polarisation that often follows communal riots, a point made by Jyoti Punani (2003) in her essay *My Area, Your Area: How Riots Changed the City*. Writing specifically about the violence that took place after the demolition of the Babari Masjid in 1992, she identifies an increased process of ghettoisation that occurred in Mumbai in the aftermath of the event. This pattern of polarisation is reflected in the film through the tension and fracture that emerges in the friendship between Munira (played by Shahana Goswani) and Jyoti (Amruta Subhash). Munira increasingly suspects that Jyoti not only knows but is also protecting those who burnt and looted her house. Unable to let go, Munira keeps asking Joyoti about the identity of the arsonists. Again and again, Jyoti replies that she does not know because she was away visiting an aunt when it all happened. Munira's repeated questioning, however, severely tests their friendship. Here, the film highlights the suspicion and animosity that is introduced by the riots between the communities.

The logic of communalism facilitates the perpetration of atrocities like those that occurred in Gujarat in 2002. At the same time, the violence reinforces and strengthens communalist sentiments. In *Firaaq* the ageing Khan Sahab (played by Naseruddin Shah) undercuts this logic. When his carer (played by Raguvir Yadav) informs him that Muslims are being ruthlessly murdered in the streets he replies that

it is not the fact that Muslims are being killed which concerns him but that human beings are killing other human beings. Here, however, this humanist perspective is not presented as a reference to a modern, secular, possibly Western notion of humanism. Instead, coming from a character who is portrayed as an ageing stalwart of classical Indian music the film seems to evoke a sense of an old timeless India that seemed able to prevent the horrors of communalism. In her book *The Politics of Extremism in South Asia* Ollapally (2008: 1) suggests that historically South Asia, a region characterised by culturally and religiously plural societies, was 'notable for tolerance and co-existence.' What Ollapally and *Firaaq* seem both to suggest is that the phenomenon of communalism and communalist violence cannot be considered throwbacks to tradition. Rather they need to be considered characteristics of 'modern' India. The film makes this point most clearly when Khan sahab laments the destruction of the shrine of Wali Gujarati. Considered a pioneer of Urdu poetry during the 17th and early 18th century (Yājñika & Sheth 2005: pxii) Wali Muhammad Wali is said to have been particularly fond of Gujarat where he died. He was affectionately named Wali Gujarati (Friend of Gujarat). A shrine was built in his honour in 1707 and was destroyed in the violence of 2002. In the film Khan sahab recalls the fondness Wali Gujarati had for Gujarat and recalls his own frequent visits to the shrine; a monument of the past that stood for plurality and tolerance, he recalls, destroyed in the modern age in a fit of wanton madness.

I consider *Firaaq* an impressive film that not only conveys on screen the violence that occurred in 2002 in Gujarat but actively interrogates the horror of it. With it Nandita Das proves herself to be not only a daring actress who chooses films for their artistic and social calibre, but a director who can address a subject as serious as the violence in Gujarat with a wonderful eruditeness. *Firaaq* convincingly illustrates that such an approach is more effective than mere representation of the violence onscreen. In this sense, the film not only constitutes an important intervention into the writing of a history of Gujarat and the pogrom that took place there eight years ago, but serves as an indictment of Bollywood for having thus far ignored what happened.

Bibliography

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