THE ILLUSION OF SECULARISM:
Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* and
The Consolidation of Hindu Hegemony

Angie Mallhi
Department of History in Art
University of Victoria
2005 CAPI Essay Competition Winner

Mani Ratnam "has highlighted the self-defeating nature of extremist thinking and xenophobia and stressed the need to take a more rational approach to the whole question of religious loyalties and ethnic affiliations in the context of multi-racial, multi-religious India."[1]

-Wimal Dissanayake & K. Moti Gokulsing

"If you make a film about Germans and Jews, and the Nazi party says it is a good film, then there must be something wrong. The movie is the particular view of a benign, tolerant but communal-minded Hindu."[2]

-Javed Akhtar

These two views are typical of the opposing reactions to Mani Ratnam's film *Bombay* (1995). By some it was celebrated for its convincing portrayal of the senselessness of communal[3] hatred, while others accused it of being on the verge of fascism. These diverse perspectives have earned *Bombay* a reputation for being one of the most controversial films in the history of Indian popular cinema, facilitated by the fact that it was banned in several Indian cities and its release was delayed for three months owing to censorship issues.[4] While approximately 795 Indian feature films were censored in 1995 alone, this was perhaps one of the most significant cases of censorship in the 1990s.[5]

The central focus of the film is the communal riots that plagued the city of Bombay following the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, on 6 December, 1992. While the site had been a point of contention between Muslims and Hindus for over a hundred years, rising Hindu fundamentalism in the country led to its final desecration in 1992. The demolition resulted in the worst nationwide bouts of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims since the Partition of 1947.[6] While the devastation was in no way comparable to what took place during India's Independence forty five years earlier, the riots that occurred were nevertheless a crude reminder of the very real tensions and conflicts that remain between these religious communities. *Bombay* chronicles these events as they unfolded in what was one of India's most liberal and cosmopolitan cities, where the level of violence and killings by far exceeded those in any other area in India.[7]

In the retelling of these events, Ratnam's film certainly can be interpreted as giving

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[1] Wimal Dissanayake and K. Moti Gokulsing, *Indian Popular Cinema – a narrative of cultural change*, New revised edition, Stoke on Trent, England: Trentham Books Limited, 2004, p. 28..

[2] Writer and poet, Javed Akhtar in Review, "Lifting the Veil: A Daring Film Explores Hindu-Muslim Relations," *Asiaweek*, 1995, Vol. 21, Issue 33 (pp. 30-31), p. 30.

[3] For a thorough discussion of the definition of communalism in the South Asian context, see Chapter 9 in Rasheeduddin Khan, *Bewildered India: Identity, Pluralism, Discord*, New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1994.

[4] Review, "Lifting the Veil," p. 30.

[5] Manjunath Pendakur, *Indian Popular Cinema: Industry, Ideology, and Consciousness*, Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, Inc, 2003, p. 25.

[6] Partition accompanied India's independence from British rule, and resulted in the formation of Pakistan and India, divided along religious lines. Riots during the exodus left more than half a million people dead. K.L. Chanchreek and Saroj Prasad, *Crisis in India*, Delhi: H.K. Publishers and Distributors, 1993.

[7] Chanchreek and Prasad, 135.

expression to the two divergent perspectives outlined at the beginning of this paper—the first because there are numerous moments that promote communal harmony and religious tolerance, the most obvious example being the representation of an inter-religious marriage; the second because of the Hindu right wing's approval of and intervention in the release of the film. Based on historical data on the Bombay riots, as well as a close reading of the signifying elements and strategies used in the film, my project here is to contest the first point of view and to expand on the second. By doing so, I shall argue that while the film seeks to promote values of secularism by placing the experience of an inter-religious family at the centre of the irrational violence caused by religious strife, it ultimately undermines this through what is essentially a proclamation of Hindu hegemony. I shall demonstrate the ways in which Hindu hegemony is both covertly and overtly established in the film, the former through the narrative and characters, the latter through its (mis)representation of the riots. My aim, then, is to answer Rustom Bharucha's call "to work against the grain of [this film] politically, in order to dismantle [its] seemingly 'secular' imaginaries, which are, in actuality, soft-Hindutva[8] ones couched, disguised, and dissimilated in secularist terms."[9] Thus, while I recognize that *Bombay* is a fictional narration of historical events rather than a documentary film, I believe it is important to take this extreme view because popular culture, particularly Bollywood films in the Indian context, has the power to disseminate/perpetuate the ideologies and interests of dominant groups by exploiting/misrepresenting those at the margins of that society, in this case, Indian Muslims.

PLOT SUMMARY

As much as *Bombay* is a film about particular historical events in India, it nevertheless remains within the mainstream structure of Bollywood cinema through its representation of a love story, a key ingredient to ensure a movie's commercial success. At the same time, *Bombay* also subverts certain conventions within this model, specifically through its depiction of an inter-religious romance. These two opposing forces, Hindu and Muslim, are immediately apparent in the first scene, where the hero Shekar (Arvind Swamy) is walking along the jetty upon returning to his village from Bombay, and immediately spots his *burqa*-clad love interest, Shaila Bano (Manisha Koirala). After several 'chase' scenes, the couple's love becomes mutual. Shekar informs both his and Shaila Bano's parents of their wish to marry, but both families strongly disapprove of the union. The hero returns to Bombay where he works as a journalist, but continues to write to his beloved. He sends her a train ticket and she runs away from home to join him in the city, where they are married and she eventually gives birth to twin boys. The couple is shown living an idyllic family life, with no apparent religious conflict.[10]

However, the tone of the film changes with allusions to the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque and when riots break out between Hindus and Muslims in Bombay. The family

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[8] Hindutva is a doctrine promoted by Hindu fundamentalists, which calls for "the eventual de-secularisation of Indian society and the establishment of an ethnoreligious state." Harold A Gould, "The Babri Masjid and the secular contract," *in* Veena Das, Dipanker Gupta, and Patricia Uberoi, Eds., *Traditional, pluralism and identity: In honour of T.N. Madan*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999 (pp. 381-400) p. 395.

[9] Rustom Bharucha, *In the Name of the Secular: Contemporary Cultural Activism in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 171.

[10] There are brief references to religion as pertains to Shekar's and Shaila Bano's relationship, all taking place in a song sequence: there is a quick glimpse of Shaila Bano praying at home, which Shekar watches with a content smile, and they are briefly shown taking on one another's religious 'codes': Shekar adorns the distinctly Muslim cap, while Shaila Bano applies a red *tikka* (dot on the forehead, symbolizing that a Hindu woman is married).

is in the midst of the city when this happens, and the twin boys are lost in the mayhem and confusion. They are encircled by a group of unidentified men who douse them in kerosene and almost set them on fire, but their parents save them just in time. Both Shekar's and Shaila Bano's parents arrive in Bombay after hearing about the riots. There is a second wave of riots, due to which both Shekar's and Shaila Bano's parents die in a house fire. The twins are lost once again and this time they are separated, but eventually find one another in the continued rioting. In the end, the riots are brought to a halt by Shekar and various other people, notably a eunuch and a Muslim woman, who make impassioned speeches to their own religious groups, urging them to stop the violence. The parents are finally reunited with their children, and the film ends with the different communities coming together in peace, as they drop their weapons to hold hands.

BOMBAY AND BOLLYWOOD: BREAKING NEW GROUND

While my main contention in this paper is that *Bombay* should in fact be seen as an example of Hindu hegemony in a secular guise, I would nevertheless like to discuss one of the primary ways in which this film is indeed radical, signalling a critical shift in the conventions of Bollywood films. This innovation relates to the representation of love and marriage between a Hindu man and a Muslim woman. Hindu-Muslim relations in general had been dealt with in a fairly consistent manner over the past fifty years: the promotion of "a generic Pan-Indian identity" through the elimination of conflict and an emphasis on 'communal fraternizing'.[11] While the theme of love transgressing boundaries of class and caste had previously been addressed on screen, inter-religious love had never been portrayed in Indian popular cinema before *Bombay*.[12] The film that came closest to the representation of Hindu-Muslim love prior to the release of *Bombay* is *Henna* (1991), also a story between a Hindu man and a Muslim woman. In this film, the male protagonist loses his memory after a car accident lands him in a river, which transports his body from Kashmir to Pakistan where it is discovered by the female protagonist, Henna. She rehabilitates him and they fall in love, but on the day they are to marry, the hero regains his memory and remembers that he has a fiancée in India. Sacrificing her own love, Henna helps him cross the Indo-Pakistan border in order to reunite him with his first love, and, in the process, is killed in a clash between the Indian and Pakistani armies. While *Henna* is a plea for secular principles and harmonious relations between Hindus and Muslims, the film ultimately contradicts this message by "pointing instead to the impossibility of Hindu-Muslim romantic love, permitted only briefly in a moment of amnesia."[13] In this way, *Bombay* is a significant film not only because it represents love between a Hindu and a Muslim, but also because it goes beyond romance by portraying the possibility of having a family despite religious differences. However, while this representation is an important one in relation to Bollywood

conventions, it too, is flawed, and, as I shall demonstrate, is in the final analysis, exploited to uphold Hindu hegemony.

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[11] A classic example of 'communal fraternizing' in Indian cinema is *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), where three brothers are separated from one another and raised by a Hindu, Muslim and Christian family respectively. Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003, p. 75.

[12] Pendakur, p. 4.

[13] Ibid., p. 36.

THE SHIV SENA AND 'HINDUTVA'

Before I discuss why *Bombay* is a promotion of Hindu hegemony rather than of secularism, I should like to return to Javed Akhtar's statement that, "if you make a film about Germans and Jews, and the Nazi party says it is a good film, then there must be something wrong." Herein, Akhtar equates Germans with Hindus, Jews with Muslims, and the Nazi Party with the Shiv Sena. In this way, he is also suggesting that the leader of the Shiv Sena, Bal Thackeray, is in no way different from Hitler.

The Shiv Sena is a right-wing Hindu party established by Thackeray in 1966, and gaining political hegemony particularly in the 1980s and 1990s.[14] With close ties to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the national Hindu right-wing party, the Shiv Sena "promotes regional chauvinism…and Hindutva, or Hindu supremacism (in which Bombay is part of the sacred geography of a Hindu nation and Muslims are 'outsiders')."[15] The link between the two parties is thus their shared belief in the doctrine of Hindutva, "the eventual de-secularisation of Indian society and the establishment of an ethnoreligious state."[16] According to this ideology, then, Muslims have no place either in Mahararashtra or in India.

With this anti-Muslim stance in mind, Akhtar's remark gains greater resonance when we consider the fact that Bal Thackeray described *Bombay* as " 'a damned good film'."[17] In this light, Akhtar's contention that there "must be something wrong" with the film if Thackeray supported it rings true. Consequently, it is my project here to reveal why Thackeray would have approved of *Bombay*, reasons which must necessarily be viewed in relation to the establishment/ maintenance of Hindu dominion in India. The latter message, I contend, is supported not only by state censorship as represented by Thackeray's direct intervention in the film's release, but also by the seemingly secularist narrative presented by Ratnam himself.[18]

ASSIMILATION OR SECULARISM? THE MUSLIM FEMALE BODY IN *BOMBAY*

While I previously argued that *Bombay* is an exemplary film because of its portrayal of a Hindu-Muslim love story, I should now like to demonstrate how this relationship is in fact one

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[14] Rashmi Varma, "Provincializing the Global City: From Bombay to Mumbai," *Social Text* (Winter 2004), Vol. 22, No. 4 (pp. 65-89) p. 67.

[15] Ibid. Keith Jones explains the relationship between the two parties as such: "For both ideological and political reasons, the Shiv Sena is a close ally of the Bharaitya Janata Party, the Hindu-chauvinist party which dominates India's ruling coalition. Through its alliance with the Shiv Sena, the BJP also has a share in Maharashtra's state government--an important nexus to the Indian bourgeoisie, as Bombay is India's financial center." Keith Jones, "India: BJP coalition partner indicted for organizing communal riots," World Socialist Web Site, 14 August 1998, www.wsws.org/news/1998/aug1998/bjp-a14.shtml (3 April 2005).

[16] Gould, p. 395.

[17] Ravi S. Vasudevan, "*Bombay* and Its Public," *in* Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, Eds., *Pleasure and the Nation: the History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, (pp. 186-211), p. 198.

[18] While self-censorship is certainly an issue in Indian cinema, I question the degree to which this figured in the making of *Bombay*. My judgment is admittedly influenced by Ratnam's previous blockbuster film, *Roja*, which also deals with issues of nationalism through the presentation of a dichotomy between Hinduism and Islam, in which the latter is again presented as an obstacle in nation-building. See Rustom Bharucha, "On the Border of Fascism: the Manufacture of Consent in *Roja*" in *In the Name of the Secular: Contemporary Cultural Activism in India*; and Nicholas B. Dirks, "The Home and the Nation: Consuming Culture and Politics in *Roja*" in Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, Eds., *Pleasure and the Nation: the History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*.

used to promote a specific type of secularism, ultimately meant to serve the vision of an ethnoreligious Hindu state. By employing Rustom Bharucha's definition of secular - the "*coexistence through a respect for differences within and beyond religion*" (Bharucha's italics)[19] - I shall demonstrate how Shekar's and Shaila Bano's relationship upholds Hindu hegemony by using the position of the secular patriarch, Shekar, to assimilate the Muslim body into Hindu society. What is important here is not the fact that Shekar is a non-practising Hindu, but that, even as a secular patriarch, he participates in the perpetuation of Hindutva values through the integration of Muslims into a predominately Hindu society. This is yet another example of what Bharucha identifies as soft-Hindutva values disguised in secularist terms, illustrating why Bal Thackeray voiced no objections to this aspect of the narrative.

Before Shaila Bano's assimilation into Hindu society takes place, the film establishes Shekar's dominance over her body through certain patriarchal codes. I agree with Ravi Vasudevan's contention that while it is presented as a relationship based on mutuality and freedom of choice, it is actually based on patriarchy: it is Shekar who "generates the momentum for the romance, in terms of meetings, ultimata to parents, the blood bonding with Shailabano, denial of parental authority, the mastery over movement by his sending of rail tickets to his beloved, the privileged view of Shailabano at Victoria Terminus, the setting-up of the registered marriage....Perhaps most significant of all: it is his non-religiosity which defines the non-identity of the children."[20] Shaila Bano's passivity in this process is determined from the opening scenes, when Shekar pursues her. He attempts to talk to her several times, to which she reacts by simply running away, never actually voicing an objection to his advances. In this way she is constructed as submissive, thereby setting up her subsequent subjugation to the male protagonist.

One of the most explicit ways in which this subjugation is established is through Shekar's physical control over Shailabano's body. After the hero and heroine's love becomes mutual, Shekar goes to Shailabano's house to inform her parents of their wish to marry. Her father reacts violently, threatening Shekar with a sword for even daring to make such a proposition. In reaction to her father's assertion that even their blood is different, Shekar cuts his hand with the sword and proceeds to make a cut in the arm of his beloved, who is both shocked and fearful, joining the two wounds together to emphasize the bonding of their blood. Here the cooptation of the Muslim woman's body is done in an aggressively violent manner, and serves to physically mark the Hindu male's possession of it. While there are moments when Shaila Bano is depicted as an active agent - she meets Shekar at the fort in order to profess her love for him and subsequently elopes to Bombay - these acts more accurately represent "the transformation from one structure of authority (a traditional patriarchy) into another which denies that it is authority," since it is based on the illusion of freedom of choice and mutuality.[21] Thus, the overall effect is the establishment of Shekar's dominance over Shaila Bano's body, for it is only then that the assimilation of it into Hindu society can take place.

This process of assimilation is signified by the obliteration of the codes that mark Shaila Bano's body as Muslim. The first example of this physical erasure of religious difference occurs in the second song of the film, 'Tu Hi Re', which is when Shaila Bano meets Shekar at the fort. While she is running towards him, apparently to prevent him from committing suicide, her veil gets caught in a hook, so she actively discards it and runs towards her lover. While most people have focused on this one scene, what is interesting is that the song actually depicts the gradual

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[19] Bharucha, p. 113.
Vasudevan, p. 189.
Ibid., p. 188.

removal of her *burqa*, in a way mirroring/ foreshadowing her gradual assimilation into Hindu society. The compiled effect is the physical erasure of religious difference. While the other public scenes up to this point clearly code Shaila Bano as Muslim because of her *burqa*, this scene is symbolic of the film's promotion of secularism through the obliteration of that very sign of difference.

This theme continues when Shaila Bano arrives in Bombay. She is in her *burqa* upon arriving at the railway station, but in the next scene at the marriage registry she is in a *sari*. While it is made clear that Shekar and Shaila Bano go to the marriage registry immediately after he picks her up from the railway station, for she still has her suitcase with her, at what point between Victoria Terminus and the marriage registry she removes her *burqa* is unclear. Would it not have made more narrative sense if she had remained in the *burqa*, or if there had been some indication of when and why she removed it? This silence presents the transition to be seamless and innocent, when in fact it is indicative of the beginning of her assimilation. As a matter of fact, in all but one of the subsequent scenes, Shaila Bano is dressed in a *sari*, even when she is in public. While *saris* are worn all over India, they are commonly identified as Hindu dress. This transition thus acts as a "subtle neutralization of her identity" and represents "the subordination or assimilation of community identity through marriage."[22]

In this light, the erasure of religious difference points to the secularism espoused by *Bombay*: the assimilation of Muslims into Hindu society, rather than an acceptance of their difference. Again, this message is emphasized through the body of the Muslim female, which is appropriated by the secular male protagonist to promote a vision of a secular nation that actually works to uphold Hindu society and culture as the norm. This again points to why Thackeray and the Shiv Sena would have had no problem with this narrative of Hindu-Muslim love.

THE OVERLY RELIGIOUS AND VIOLENT MUSLIM: THE CONSOLIDATION OF STEREOTYPES IN *BOMBAY*

Another reason for Thackeray's acceptance of *Bombay* is that it consolidates stereotypes about Muslims, which are in turn used to suggest that the community is an obstacle in the process of building a secular nation. For instance, one critic notes how the scenes showing the women in *burqas* going to school together constructs Muslims as "not being modern, of backwardness, of being exclusive, of not being integrative, which constitute the popular beliefs about the community."[23] It therefore suggests that the way Muslims live poses a problem, that they are in fact the obstacle for attaining communal harmony. The most destructive stereotypes are consolidated through a series of contrasts and confrontations between the two fathers, Bashir Ahmed and Narayan Mishra, where the dichotomy between Hindu and Muslim, 'us' and 'them', is used to underscore the Muslim threat to 'Hindustan'.

One of the recurring images in the film is that of Muslims praying, which serves to mark the community as overly religious, and as such, a hindrance in efforts for attaining secularity. Bashir's daily prayer sessions are continually emphasized: he is shown praying three times, while Narayan is only shown praying once, and even this is at a public *arti* ("act of worship

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[22] Ibid., p. 199.

[23] A.L. Georgekutty, "The Sacred, the Secular and the Nation in *Bombay*," *Deep Focus: A Film Quarterly* (1996), Vol. VI (pp. 77-81), p. 80. On the other hand, the fact that these women are getting an education and moving outside of the private sphere can also be seen as a sign of mobility and therefore modernity. However, the fact that they are depicted going to school only with other Muslim women suggests that they are being exclusive and isolationist.

celebrating light")[24] where they are singing hymns. The latter is also the only instance shown of Hindus praying in the film, whereas, on the whole, there are more instances of Muslim prayers . This constructs Muslims as overly religious, and as such, unable to abide by secular principles, whereas the religiosity of Hindus is not as stringent. This is a prevalent stereotype about the Muslim community, verified in a 1983 report by the Minorities Commission in India.   The report outlines prejudices held by the police against Muslims, one of them being that "Muslims are excitable and irrational people who are guided by their religious instincts. Hindus, on the other hand, are law abiding and cooperate with the police in controlling communal violence."[25] In this way, the repeated images of Muslims praying covertly identify their religiosity as the root of the problem in the quest for secularity.

The most disturbing consolidation of stereotypes is that of the Muslim man as aggressive and violent. Again, this is illustrated in the film by differentiating Bashir from Narayan, this time through their relationships with their families. While both Bashir and Narayan are represented as highly patriarchal, the Muslim male's patriarchy is consolidated by aggression. For instance, when Bashir discovers that Shekar is writing to his daughter from Bombay, he drags his wife into the courtyard by the ear. He then confronts Shaila Bano, pleading with her to promise him that she will not make such a mistake again, i.e., to fall in love with a Hindu man. However, she defies his authority by not accepting his outstretched hand, to which he reacts by slapping her across the face. Hence, this scene suggests that he controls both women through physical force.

On the other hand, Narayan's interaction with his daughter and wife is not physically defined. While the structure is clearly patriarchal - his wife scarcely speaks a word, she is repeatedly shown serving him - it is not a patriarchy defined by physical violence. For instance, when Narayan confronts Shekar about Shaila Bano, Shekar's sister defends him by declaring that Shaila Bano is a nice girl. Reacting to the disregard for his authority, Narayan stomps towards his daughter and points his finger in her face. However, he does not physically harm her, though still physically proclaiming his position as the authority. Likewise, in reaction to Shekar's defiance, while violence is touched upon when Narayan grabs his son's collar, he ultimately appeals to Shekar through emotions and words. This juxtaposition of patriarchal styles suggests that while the Muslim male will resort to physical violence to control, the Hindu male uses his words, for he is capable of exercising restraint.

This theme of physical versus verbal aggression is most apparent in the direct encounters between the two fathers, in which Bashir again resorts to physical assault in many of these scenes. Their first confrontation takes place when Narayan marches to Bashir's home after he learns that Shekar intends to marry Shaila Bano. While Narayan is the first to threaten with bloodshed, it is Bashir that ultimately resorts to physical aggression. In fact, whilst making verbal threats, he takes hold of a machete not once, but twice, in this scene alone. On the other hand, Narayan "is given to verbal anger and noticeably backs down…, urging moderation."[26] Indeed, when the other members of the community begin to quarrel, it is Narayan who disperses the crowd, while Bashir stands by with machete still in hand. Consequently, this scene

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[24] "Hinduism Glossary: Common Sanskrit Terms & Their Meaning," http://hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/extra/bl-glossary-index.htm (20 April 2005).
[25] V.N. Rai, "A Study on Prejudiced Perceptions of the Police Causing Biased Actions Against Muslims During Riots," *in* Iqbal A. Ansari, Ed., *Communal Riots: The State and Law in India*, New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997, (pp. 101-108), p. 107.
[26] Vasudevan, p. 189.

establishes the Muslim as violent, suggesting that these characteristics are "already inscribed in the community, awaiting particular circumstances to bring them to the surface."[27] Surely, the Shiv Sena would have had no objections to the representation of the Muslim as inherently violent, for it serves to construct the Hindu as more rational and in control, an idea that justifies Hindu supremacy. It also foreshadows Muslim aggression depicted in the film during the riots in the city. Collectively, the consolidation of these stereotypes constructs Muslims as obstacles in the formation of a secular nation.

'INSTITUTIONALIZED COMMUNALISM'[28]: BAL THACKERAY AND CENSORSHIP

Thus far I have challenged the idea that *Bombay* is a promotion of secularism by discussing the relationships between the main characters in the film. I should now like to continue with this idea of the farce of secularism with a more overt example of how it is actually an example of Hindu hegemony: the politics of censorship.

One of the most well- known facts about the release of *Bombay* is that Amitabh Bachchan, the distributor of the film, set up a meeting between Bal Thackeray and Mani Ratnam prior to its release. In accordance with the discussion, certain cuts were made based on objections raised by Bal Thackeray, which I will discuss shortly.[29] Because of the Shiv Sena stronghold in Bombay at this time, the film most likely would not have been released had Ratnam not conceded to Thackeray's demands.[30] This points to the impossibility of the freedom of expression in India, particularly as it pertains to the questioning of Hindu dominance, for expression is controlled by the very structures of Indian society that think India is only for Hindus. As such, to label the film secular would be a gross exaggeration, for it is in reality an example of 'institutionalized communalism'. As Rustom Bharucha puts it, the fact that the worst instance of violence between Hindus and Muslims since Independence had to be cleared by the Hindu fundamentalist politician who was most active in actually manufacturing the violence, is surely "one of the worst insidious affirmations of how violence can be legitimized by its own political agency."[31]

Thackeray specifically wanted two scenes from the film deleted. The first was a 4½ minute speech in which Tinnu Anand, the actor who plays Thackeray, "spoke of 'ethnic cleansing' in Bombay and preserving that city only for the Hindus whose ancestry is Maharashtrian," dialogue apparently taken directly from actual speeches made by the Shiv Sena leader.[32]   The second scene depicted Anand repenting the riots. These were clearly problematic because they would directly point to Shiv Sena involvement in the riots, for repenting them would be to admit a role in instigating them. As such, Thackeray's intervention ensured that the film's narrative depicted the riots "as a Hindu retaliation against Muslim aggression."[33] Ironically, following these cuts, the Shiv Sena assumed the position of "a liberal defence of free speech," as Thackeray "stridently asserted that he would ensure the release of the film against

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[27] Ibid., p. 190.

[28] I borrow this term from Rustom Bharucha.

[29] Significantly, Thackeray's demand that the film should be called 'Mumbai' (a politicized renaming of the city by the Shiv Sena in 1995), was not met, nor did he persist with this point. Vasudevan, p. 198.

[30] Pendakur, p. 79.

[31] Bharucha, p. 137.

[32] Pendakur, p. 79.

[33] Vasudevan, p. 198.

the drive of Muslim groups to have it banned."[34] Thus, after his own intervention in the film's release, Thackeray used Muslim opposition to the film as an example of the hindrance of free speech. This also became an opportunity for the Shiv Sena leader to construct himself as a tolerant leader, directly in opposition to the Muslim forces attempting to thwart 'free speech'. This pattern of events indicates that while the film attempted to indict Thackeray in at least this regard, "the fiction does not, overall, *directly* assail the Hindu right or their understanding of what happened."[35] An analysis of the riot scenes clearly indicates why this is the case. Again, while I recognize that *Bombay* is not a documentary film, it is still important to assess the degree to which it veers away from well-known historical realities, particularly as it claims the authority of a documentary by specifying dates and locations during the riot sequences.[36]

   The film begins the first phase of riots with images of newspaper headlines reporting the destruction of the Babri Masjid, superimposed on an image of the mosque itself. Immediately after this, the scene cuts to a young Muslim male (clearly coded so by his cap) brandishing a sword and crying out, "*Hai Allah!*" (Oh God!). The next shot cuts to a group of Muslim men praying at a mosque. Apparently roused by the young man's cry, they rise from their bowed praying positions and seem to immediately run into the streets with weapons. This once again serves to fortify the link between Muslim religiosity and violence. In these first clips, Muslims are the only ones represented, as they run through the streets setting fires, smashing police vehicles, abusing police officers, and vandalizing shops. Their activity is further fore grounded by the careful framing of their white caps, whereas "the Hindu mobs are more indistinct."[37] For instance, a group of Hindu men are briefly shown running aggressively through the streets, but they are not engaged in vandalism or bloodshed, and it is difficult to make out their faces. Consequently, these opening scenes overwhelmingly emphasize Muslim activity, thereby portraying Muslims as the instigators of the riots. This narrative "indicates the premise of a mainstream, and therefore necessarily *Hindu* secularist narrative dealing with cultural difference as its central theme: in its reconstruction of events, and its bid for intercommunal reconciliation, the narrative cannot neutralize constructions of the Muslim as other."[38]

   The second phase of riots in the film is again made to seem as though instigated by Muslims. The camera meanders through a Bombay neighbourhood at night, ending at a home that is clearly marked as Hindu by a swastika symbol painted on the door. The house is set on fire and it is understood that the entire Hindu family will perish. The next shot cuts to the streets in the morning, with Hindu men running with weapons in their hands, but again, they are not actually shown in the act of violence. It is Muslim men who are subsequently shown setting fire to Shekar's building. The following scenes unfold in a rapid manner, giving the illusion that both Hindus and Muslims are equally culpable. As the riots continue, there are subsequently more explicit representations of Hindus actively engaged in the bloodshed, such as the burning of a Muslim family in a car. However, it is significant that the images of violent mobs are, overall, overwhelmingly composed of Muslim men. It is here that the facts of the riots must be

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[34] Ibid..

[35] Ibid.

[36] The director's representation of the events is particularly shocking given that "in his research work before producing *Bombay*, Mani Ratnam personally spent days talking to social activists and journalists from the metropolis who had been witness to the carnage while trying to douse communal flames or reporting from the field." Javed Anand and Teesta Setalvad, "Cry Bombay," www.sacw.net/i_aii/bombay.html (19 April 2005).

[37] Ibid, note 3, p. 208.

[38] Ibid., p. 191.

used to question the notion of a 'balanced', or factually based, portrayal of the violence.

The reality is that the January 1993 riots were an orchestrated massacre of Bombay's Muslim community led by Bal Thackeray and the Shiv Sena, and assisted by the Maharashtra police.[39] I shall return specifically to police involvement in the massacres and their depiction in the film in a moment. But first, it must be recognized that the Shiv Sena used the December 1992 riots, recognized as nothing more than "a spontaneous reaction of leaderless and incensed Muslim mobs, which commenced as peaceful, but soon degenerated ...", to launch an assault against Bombay's Muslims in the riots of January 1993.[40] In the film, of course, the Muslim reaction to the destruction of the Babri Masjid is represented as violent from the beginning.

Furthermore, the stabbing death of two Hindu dock workers and the burning death of a Hindu family in their home, real events displayed in the film as reasons for triggering the second wave of riots, were in fact chosen by the Shiv Sena to mobilize Hindus against Muslims. When violence broke out, the Shiv Sena daily newspaper, *Saamna*, further encouraged it by upholding these two episodes as demonstrations of Hindu vulnerability: "They [Muslims] have taken advantage of our helplessness and timidity….If the law cannot protect us, then to hell with the law."[41]

The fascist underpinnings of the Maharastran state government were explicit from the beginning. Indeed, in an interview with the international edition of *Time* magazine on 25 January 1993, Thackeray justified the massacres, stating that "there is nothing wrong, if they [Muslims] are treated as Jews were in Nazi Germany…If they are not going away, kick them out!"[42] The disturbing events for which he shows no remorse were chronicled by the media, including international newspapers such as *The New York Times*, whose India correspondent described the events in this way:

> Day after day after day, for nine days and nights beginning on January 6, 1993, mobs of Hindus rampaged through this city, killing and burning people only because they were Muslims. No Muslim was safe--not in the slums, not in high-rise apartments, not in the city's bustling offices--in an orgy of violence that left 600 people dead and 2000 injured.[43]

The figures given by this reporter account for the number of Muslim deaths only, but it should be noted that approximately 300 Hindus were also killed, primarily in Muslim majority neighbourhoods.[44] My intention here is not to reduce the devastation to numbers, but rather, to illustrate that the notion of the film representing a balanced view of the riots because it shows both Hindus and Muslims rioting is erroneous given the realities of the massacre. The inapplicability of such an argument becomes even clearer when we consider Thackeray's propaganda speeches made following Muslim protests in reaction to the destruction of the Babri Masjid, in which he encouraged retaliation against the Muslim community.[45]

The Maharashtran state's involvement in the censorship of the film is an overt example

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[39] Omar Khalidi, *Indian Muslims Since Independence*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House PVT Ltd., 1996, p. 163.
[40] Quoted in Jones.
[41] Edward A. Gargan, "Police Complicity in Bombay Riots," *in* Iqbal A. Ansari, Ed., *Communal Riots: The State and Law in India*, New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997, (pp. 193-200) pp. 196-197.
[42] Quoted in Khalidi, p. 163.
[43] Ibid., pp. 30-31.
[44] Jones.
[45] Ibid.

of why *Bombay* cannot be viewed as a promotion of secularism, but rather, should be seen as an instrument for upholding Hindu hegemony. By comparing reports on the riots to their representation in the film, the reasons for Thackeray's proclamation that it was 'a damned good film' are evident.

'INSTITUTIONALIZED COMMUNALISM': POLICE AND CENSORSHIP

I should now like to turn to another instance of state-sanctioned violence that is grossly misrepresented in *Bombay*. As with Thackeray, the film was pre-screened for top police and crime branch officials, this time at the discretion of the Censor Board of Film Certification. Despite being a violation of the 1952 Cinematograph Act, as amended, the Censor Board deemed it prudent to show the film to five top-ranking police officials to decide if the film were appropriate for public consumption, since it dealt with such a sensitive event.[46] Not only did the Censor Board's consultation with the police make "a mockery of the law,"[47] as A.G. Noorani contends, but it also raises questions of whether or not the film's content relating to police conduct was compromised in any way. While the disparity between police conduct during the riots and its representation in *Bombay* would suggest so, there is no documentary evidence to prove this. Nevertheless, it is important to point out these discrepancies because they also demonstrate Hindu hegemony at the level of law enforcement.

While the film does bring up the issue of police conduct in several scenes, the overall representation is distorted. For instance, in the first phase of riots the police is shown shooting and killing Muslims, including an innocent woman running away from the conflict, the latter instance clearly pointing to police misconduct. This introduces a discrepancy within the film itself, for while it recognizes police misconduct, it fails to represent it in its entirety. For instance, Shekar questions a police officer about the force's conduct, alluding to the fact that 70% of those killed by the police force were innocent, yet the execution of the Muslim woman is the only visual representation of this. Furthermore, while the police force is depicted as shooting to kill, the cumulative effect of these scenes set Muslims up as violent aggressors, essentially serving to justify the police opening fire--the violent Muslim is so deranged that all measures must be taken to control "him." This justification is further highlighted by the fact that the first phase of riots ends with the police killing the assailants attempting to immolate the twins. Not only have they saved innocent lives and characters viewers have come to care about, they have also saved the secular family, the symbol of a nation that stands in opposition to the violence depicted in the secular imaginaries of the film.

The Indian People's Human Rights Commission set up a Commission of Inquiry relating to the Bombay riots, part of which was an investigation of the role of the police. The report, based on the testimony of numerous witnesses, reveals that the police were often bystanders during the violence, and frequently favoured the Hindu aggressors.[48] This is not surprising since many "*police officers and constables openly said that they were Shiv Sainiks at heart and policemen of a supposedly secular State by accident*" (Suresh & Daud's italics).[49] Their

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[46] A.G. Noorani, "Police as Film Censors," *Economic and Political Weekly* (February 1995), Vol. XXX, No. 5, p. 240.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Justices H. Suresh & Daud, "People's Verdict: Bombay Riots, 1992-93 & the State Agencies," *in* Iqbal A. Ansari, Ed., *Communal Riots: The State and Law in India*, New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997, (pp. 185-192), p. 185.

[49] Ibid., p. 185.

misconduct during the riots was made known by journalists, social activists and eye-witnesses, who unanimously reported police involvement in the deaths of innocent people, which Shekar also refers to in the film. However, what is left out is that many of the victims were unarmed women, children, and old men, shot at close range, primarily within their own homes.[50] *Bombay* instead depicts police presence in the streets as one of establishing control over riotous Muslims.

Furthermore, when the riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims in December 1992, Amnesty International's Memorandum on police procedures during the Bombay riots indicates that most of the Muslims killed in the first phase of riots died in police firing.[51] Post-mortem examinations show that 90% of the victims suffered injuries above the abdomen, indicating that the police fired to kill, not to maim or injure.[52]

Many of these atrocities are glossed over in *Bombay*. The police are for the most part shown establishing 'order' in the chaotic streets, never targeting Muslims in their homes or in mosques. Whether or not Ratnam had to make concessions based on the police's viewing of the film is not documented. However, what is important is that the representation of a primarily Hindu police force enforcing justice rather than partaking in crime is yet another example of the institutionalization of Hindu hegemony.

CONCLUSION

This paper has expanded on one of the two prevalent reactions to Mani Ratnam's film *Bombay* (1995). By considering both the covert and overt affirmations of Hindu hegemony in the film, I have argued that *Bombay*, as released by the director and interpreted in its context, should not be seen as a promotion of secularism, especially because of Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray's approval of it. I have demonstrated that the Hindu-Muslim love story and the juxtaposition of the Hindu and Muslim patriarchs can be interpreted as one level at which Hindu dominance and supremacy are sustained in the film. On another level, my consideration of the involvement of Bal Thackeray and the Maharashtran Police force in the screening of the film – two institutions most brutally involved in the Bombay riots – has illustrated that the secularism espoused by the film is a mere illusion. Through this re-examination of a highly successful film chronicling one of the most devastating incidents of violence in post-Independence India, I hope to have answered Rustom Bharucha's call to dismantle the illusions of secularism presented in *Bombay*, to reveal the underlying ideology of Hindu dominion based on anti-Muslim rhetoric. This is a particularly imperative project because the popularity of Bollywood films aids in the perpetuation of hegemonic ideologies that are presented as normative. A question raised by this examination of *Bombay* is the extent to which Indian popular cinema is on the whole an industry monopolized by Hindu interests, and the pressure directors feel to remain within the boundaries established by these interest groups.

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[50] Ibid., p. 186.

[51] Amnesty International, "Amnesty International's Memorandum on the Police Procedures & Practices in India and the Bombay Riots 1992-93," *in* Iqbal A. Ansari, Ed., *Communal Riots: The State and Law in India*, New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 1997 (pp. 185-153), p. 144.
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