



## Performing Terror, Mediating Religion: Indian Cinema and the Politics of National Belonging

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In 2002, the Indian state of Gujarat erupted in violence against Muslims that left thousands homeless and hundreds of women raped and assaulted. The relation between nation, religion, and gender has often been violent in the South Asian context, no less so with the emergence of India as a major economic power in the early 21st century. This article examines what the Gujarat genocide reveals about the Indian nation-state and its particular forms of religious and gendered identities. It also examines the symbiotic relation between the nation-state and the Indian film industry, which plays a critical role in mediating forms of national subjectivity and belonging.

*Keywords: Gujarat genocide; Indian cinema; media, religion, and violence*

### Introduction

In 2002, the Indian state of Gujarat erupted in violence against Muslims that left at least 2,000 dead, hundreds of women raped and sexually brutalized, and close to 100,000 homeless.<sup>1</sup> In addition to Muslims, other religious minorities, including Parsis, were victims of the violence perpetrated by Hindu groups. Initial state and media accounts presented the violence as originating in an earlier incident at a train station in Godhra, Gujarat. A group of Hindu Kar Sevaks—cadres of the extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—were reported to have been attacked by a group of Muslims at Godhra as these volunteers were returning home from their journey to Ayodhya. The cadres had traveled to Ayodhya to build a temple to Ram, the legendary Hindu god-king, and the Muslims were said to have set a carriage on fire in which 59 of the Sevaks were killed. This unprovoked Muslim attack allegedly sparked retaliatory Hindu violence across Gujarat, most intensely in the city of Ahmadabad. However, the evidence collected since then strongly indicates that the anti-Muslim violence was enabled—if not actually instigated—by the Gujarat government, headed by the extremist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is engaged in an ongoing battle to remake the meaning of Indian national belonging in the postcolonial era.

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<sup>1</sup> Official reports claim 2,000 people died in the violence, but unofficial human rights groups estimate the number to be closer to 5,000.

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The BJP was founded as the political arm of the RSS five years after Indira Gandhi's imposition of the state of emergency in 1975; by the 1980s, the party had joined forces with other Hindutva groups to make Ayodhya a battlefield by claiming it for the building of the Ram temple. The choice of this site for the temple was highly significant, for on this spot stood the Babri Masjid, a mosque built in 1527 at the order of the first Mughal emperor, Babur. Mass violence had occurred in Ayodhya in 1992 when the BJP, along with its ally, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), amassed 150,000 Hindutva activists to destroy the mosque—which they identified as being on the exact spot of Ram's birth. The mosque was demolished in stunning defiance of the BJP's assurance to the Indian Supreme Court that its supporters would not harm the mosque; despite these commitments, BJP leaders led the attack on the mosque (Tully, 2002). Ayodhya thus marked a critical moment in the trajectory of the postcolonial nation-state wherein ancient Hindu religio-mythic text became mapped onto geographical space such that national space itself became politically reinscribed as sacred space. Moreover, the demolition of the Babri Masjid enabled the BJP to mobilize mass political support for its extremist ideology at a pan-Indian level; the party was subsequently elected to power in the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra (1995), after which its ability to shape the national religio-political and economic agenda was greatly enhanced (Flint, 2005; Puniyani, 2012; Romey, 2006).

Ten years later, the Gujarat genocide revealed the extent to which the BJP's politics had been integrated into the machinery of the state. Contrary to official accounts of the 2002 violence identifying Muslim provocation as its cause, subsequent inquiries and commissions thoroughly discredited this official narrative. Instead, they documented, from the testimony of survivors and other sources, the extensive role of the Gujarat government in inciting the Hindu violence (by allowing the burned bodies of the Kar Sevaks to be paraded in the streets, for example) and enabling armed groups to attack Muslims (the police stood by and took no action to stop the violence) (Puniyani, 2009 - 2012). Subsequent inquiries continue to contest the state narrative: the Bannerjee Committee Report found the fire on the train that killed the Kar Sevaks to have been started accidentally and the Iyer Report implicated the train's passengers in the setting of the fire itself.<sup>2</sup> It was also found that names and addresses of the Muslim-owned businesses and residences that were targeted in the collective violence had been made public prior to the Godhra incident and that arms had been distributed to individuals in the city of Ahmadabad in advance of the violence (International Initiative for Justice in Gujarat, 2003). These findings point to a level of preplanning that directly implicates the Gujarat government (see Ram Puniyani's extensive reports on CounterCurrents.Org). More damagingly, a video of a sting operation conducted by *Tehelka*, a news magazine, showed leaders of the VHP and Bajrang Dal boasting about their role in the Gujarat violence (Majumdar, 2007).

Yet at the same time as these disturbing findings were being made public and despite mounting evidence about the involvement of Gujarat's then chief minister, Narendra Modi, in the violence, his popularity was increasing and he was voted India's most popular chief minister in subsequent national polls (India Today, Damodaran, 2006, 2007). The BJP defined Gujarat as the "laboratory" for its Hindutva

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<sup>2</sup> The Bannerjee Committee Report was commissioned by Lalu Prasad Yadav when he became minister of railways in 2004. The Concerned Citizens Tribunal of 2002 was headed by retired Supreme Court Justice Krishna Iyer.

program and its corporate-friendly, pro-liberalization policies subsidizing businesses, reducing taxes, upgrading infrastructure and courting foreign investment resulted in a 10% annual growth rate in agriculture during 2000–2001 to 2007–2008 (Chandhoke, 2012). These policies have been pronounced by the party's supporters as vital to the globalization of the Indian economy, with the urban middle class being a major beneficiary of the BJP-led economic growth (Nandy, 2008). Modi was soon lauded as the prime minister-in-waiting by leading Indian industrialists, he is now a major contender for the leadership of the BJP in the upcoming national elections. Gujarat's economy is thus widely considered a major BJP 'success' story, and one of Bollywood's biggest stars, Amitabh Bachchan, volunteered to represent Brand Gujarat to promote tourism to the state (TNN, 2010). Recognition of Gujarat's economic growth has also helped shore up international support for the BJP, and for Modi personally, celebrated now for providing fiscally responsible political leadership. *Forbes* magazine defined Gujarat as the "most market-oriented and business-friendly" of Indian states (The Indian Express, News Service, October 16, 2010), while the British government restored its diplomatic ties (relations had cooled off in protest of the genocide) with the Gujarat government to promote stronger economic relations between the two ("Diplomatic Coup for Modi," 2012). The relation between violence, economic growth, religion and political power in Gujarat, and in contemporary India, is thus likely to have serious repercussions for the foreseeable future, not least for Indian Muslims. With the BJP and RSS also enjoying considerable support in the Indian diaspora, their militant propaganda targeting Muslims has become a constant feature of transnational South Asian politics (Lal, 2005).

However, it should be noted that the Gujarat genocide has heightened opposition to the BJP and its policies, as well as to Modi himself, among many left and feminist constituencies in India and the diaspora. These critics of the party and its governance of Gujarat have defined the violence of 2002 as the most recent entry in the register of what is commonly known as "communalism"—that is, a form of violence rooted in the intolerance and hatred within religious traditions in South Asia. Communalism, as a national narrative, defines the partition that inaugurated the postcolonial Indian and Pakistani nation-states as the most intense expression of such hatred; communalism is also said to have erupted on numerous occasions since, including the attacks on Sikhs in Delhi following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi after she ordered Operation Blue Star (the Indian army's 1984 attack on the Golden Temple) and the 1992 Mumbai riots following the destruction of the Babri Masjid.

This article examines how the Gujarat genocide is depicted in four Indian films and how these texts negotiate the discourse of communalism and the politics of national belonging. Directed by and featuring some of the industry's most popular stars (including Amitabh Bachchan, Paresh Rawal, and Kareena Kapoor) as well as leading luminaries from the world of art cinema (including Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Deepti Nawal, Govind Nihalani, and Nandita Das), the films studied here are *Dev* (Director Govind Nihalani, 2004), *Parzania* (Director Rahul Dholakia, 2007), *Firaaq* (Director Nandita Das, 2008), and *Road to Sangam* (Director Amit Rai, 2009). Given Indian cinema's powerful role in constituting the pan-Indian and transnational South Asian cultural and religious identities that are integral to postcolonial forms of subjectivity, attending to this media in its particular engagements with violence, memory, and trauma reveals much about how the Indian nation and its subjects negotiate the meanings of the collective violence of—and within—the nation-state, as well as the processes that enable both to move on after its perpetration.

In the following sections I begin with a discussion of how critical scholars have engaged the dominant narrative of communalism, especially with regard to the partition of South Asia. Taking up the perspective that the violence of the partition cannot be defined as religious in essence (and hence devoid of politics), nor as primarily the result of innate religious intolerance, I argue that defining the partition as enduring historical *process*—not only historical *event*—reveals that the dynamic of anti-Muslim violence remains foundational to the ongoing re/production of the Indian nation-state in the early 21st century.

I then follow with a discussion of the role of Indian cinema in processes of state, nation, and subject formation. Drawing on the work of media scholars who have found cinema to be indispensable to state and nation formation, I analyze the key sociopolitical and aesthetic strategies deployed in cinematic depictions of the Gujarat genocide. But where many of these scholars define art (parallel) cinema as politically challenging, if not actually subversive, of the status quo in relation to commercial cinema, my reading of the films reveals a surprising convergence between these cinemas in their treatment of the collective violence. My reading of the four films' overall narrative plots, as well as of a number of specific scenes from these texts, demonstrates that the two cinemas do not differ much in their underlying assumptions regarding: the identity of the nation and its *real* subject: gender politics; and depictions of Muslims and Islam as the source of a deadly threat to the nation-state. Moreover, whereas media scholarship has recognized the impact of cinema in shaping particular constructs of nation and state, with their attendant forms of gendered and class identity, the relation between cinema and religious identity has received scant attention. My final argument will be that these films reveal how cinematic space is a site for the experience of a religiosity steeped in the fusing of the realm of the sacred with the religious as national (un)belonging in contemporary India.

### **The Violence of the Nation**

Communalism—which posits the religions of South Asia as essentially irrational and dangerous, prone to explode into violence at the slightest provocation—has long served as the discursive frame for colonial governance, and subsequently for the nationalist governance of the postcolony (Mandair, 2009). Defined as the major cause of the violence of partition, the discourse of communalism has implicated Islam in particular as disruptive of the secularist commitments of Indian modernity. This discourse retains its explanatory force in public discussion of the Gujarat violence, even among feminist and left scholar-activists, despite the efforts of numerous critical scholars to contest its power. Gyanendra Pandey (2005), for example, has interrogated the elite, nationalist, and state interests served by such violence as well as by its construction as “communal.” Challenging the depiction of such violence as irrational and pre-modern, Pandey highlights the “routine violence” of the modern nation-state, including its imposition of “political categories” and the writing of “national history.” Like other critical scholars of South Asia, Pandey defines communalism as a self-serving form of colonial knowledge that reifies religious identities as pre-existing and fully constituted outside the workings of colonial relations of power (Pandey, 2005; see also Breckenridge & Van der Veer, 1993). This discourse emerged as central to the process of British colonization and the emergence of the postcolonial South Asian nation-states. Scholars have also traced how Indian nationalists internalized and co-produced this colonial discourse, now identifying communalism and religious intolerance as a major obstacle to the development of modern forms of nationalism and citizenship. For example, challenging the binary distinction established between nationalism and

communalism, the historian Ayesha Jalal (2000) has pointed to the complexities of the religious and cultural traditions in South Asia that did not define religious plurality as incommensurable with national identity; instead, she finds there "were many competing narratives drawing on affiliations of linguistic and religious community that tried contributing to the discourse on Indian nation" (p. xiv). These competing narratives, however, were subsumed by the nationalist investment in the discourse of communalism and modernity.

In her study of the partition, Jalal points out that the violence of this division was perpetrated largely by "bigoted" individuals and cannot be attributed to the religious communities who have been implicated. Rather, the violence, perpetrated by individuals whom she describes as "banded individuals" coming together in armed militias, should be seen as serving the particular interests of the perpetrators. Struggles over the control of urban space helps explain the violence more accurately, which, in Jalal's view, were mainly struggles over control of property, land, and women. The supramasculine bonding among the perpetrators was stronger than any religious beliefs they may have shared, Jalal argues. Making a distinction between faith and religion, she acknowledges that religious identity certainly must be taken into account, but it cannot be considered the key factor in cause of the violence (Jalal, 2000, 2013). The question of masculinity will be taken up more fully below, here let me note that feminist scholarship has defined the partition violence as deeply gendered and perpetrated largely on the bodies of women as the borders between nations and communities were delineated.

Jalal's reading of the violence as a struggle over control of urban space is supported by Zamindar's (2007) study of what she calls the "long" partition. Studying the histories of individuals and families trapped in legal limbo—sometimes for many decades—between the conflicting policies of the new Indian and Pakistani states over their citizenship status, Zamindar argues that, "by placing the events of 1947 at only the beginning of what . . . was a *long Partition*," we can "stretch our very understanding of 'Partition violence' to include the bureaucratic violence of drawing political boundaries and nationalizing identities that became, in some lives, interminable" (p. 2, emphasis in original). Situating processes of state and nation formation at the center of the violence, Zamindar's study recovers "a remarkable history of how, in the midst of incomprehensible violence, two postcolonial states comprehended, intervened, and *shaped* the colossal displacements of Partition" (Zamindar, 2007, p. 3, emphasis in original). As she argues,

It was through the making of refugees as a governmental category, through refugee rehabilitation as a tool of planning, that new nations and the borders between them were made, and people, including families, were divided. The highly surveilled western Indo-Pak border, one of the most difficult for citizens of the region to cross to this day, was not a consequence of the Kashmir conflict, as security studies gurus may suggest, but rather was formed through a series of attempts to resolve the fundamental uncertainty of the political Partition itself—where did, where could, "Muslims" . . . belong. (Zamindar, 2007, p. 3)

Zamindar thus not only defines partition as a long process but places the violence of dispossession by bureaucratic decision making in cities like Delhi—at considerable distance from the

border—as critical to the partition violence. Muslim families were driven out of their neighborhoods by violence or, in many cases, even rumors of impending attacks. The Hindus and Sikhs who took over these Muslim-owned properties refused to vacate them upon the return of the owners. The emergent Indian state's policies upheld the claims made by the Hindu and Sikh communities over such properties, giving these citizens the right of possession over those claimed by Indian Muslims. Entire urban neighborhoods were thus evacuated of Muslims, many of them fleeing the violence temporarily with every intention of returning once it had subsided. But this was not to be the case as many of these Muslims were to discover. The prejudices of bureaucrats and local officials in their legal determination, classification and allocation of property, housing, compensation, rehabilitation, and provision of services, among other issues, were to be decisive in barring the return of Muslims to their homes and cities.

Zamindar's study is useful to my research on the Gujarat violence, particularly for her interrogation of the label "Muslim," as this category was held responsible for the partition. "The *Muslims* I speak of here does not refer to a people constituted by shared beliefs or religious practices (emphasis in original)," explains Zamindar,

for certainly Muslims in South Asia are linguistically and culturally very diverse. Instead it refers to a constructed category of community and political mobilization that emerged under colonial conditions, and which was to become substantially transformed through the years of the long partition. (Zamindar, 2007, p. 3)

Indeed, as the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League accepted partition, "nation as community had to be transformed into nation as citizens of two states" (Zamindar, 2007, p. 4). Facilitating possession of the nation's territory by those deemed its rightful owners was thus crucial to the production of the nation-state, as it was to the demarcation of its legitimate and deserving citizens.

However, where Zamindar defines the partition as a 'long partition', it may be useful to define the partition as *ongoing*, for the labor of producing the nation, state, and citizen remains, by its very nature, incomplete. Indeed, these entities are deeply unstable, mired as they remain in processes of their own regeneration; in other words, the identity of the national subject is never stabilized or secured, fixed once and for all, but rather it is the outcome of ongoing processes of subject formation in the practices of everyday social life (Thobani, 2007). Defining the partition as ongoing also allows for an appreciation of the depth of the cultural, linguistic, regional, and other ties that have persisted in binding Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, and other communities in their experience of daily life in postcolonial South Asia. Approaching the partition as ongoing reveals how the spectacle of violence orchestrated by the BJP, as in Ayodhya and Gujarat, reconfigures contemporary religio-political identities by elevating these above the legalities of citizenship, as well as other social and affective bonds and affiliations, thereby reinscribing as "national" the borders between Hindus and Muslims at the psychic, corporeal, and politico-cultural level, *in defiance of the actual spatial and temporal ties shared by these communities*. In short, approaching the partition as ongoing seeks not to minimize its violence as traumatic historical event; instead, this approach underscores the palpability of the processes that seek to accomplish the severing of religious identities and communities that have proved quite resilient to such divisiveness. The cinematic space, as constituted by the four films related to Gujarat is, I argue, a vital site for the instantiation of such religio-

political severing of identities and communities and thus party to the ongoing partition. Construing these complex and multifaceted entities in an antagonistic and highly divisive manner, this cinematic space deepens the violent processes of inscribing as *national* the borders that rupture relations between communities bound in the shared sites of daily life.

### Religion and the Cinematic National

Walking on the ghats along the river Ganges in Benaras on my first evening in that city some years ago, I was struck by the Hindi film songs being played over the loudspeakers as worshippers gathered for the evening *arti*.<sup>3</sup> “Maiya, O Ganga Maiya,” a song I remembered from my childhood in East Africa, was the clear favorite. The ritual then began with what seemed to be the choreographed entry of a group of young men who could have walked straight off (or on?) a film set in their matching satin outfits. Their performance of the ritual in a dance-style routine was greatly appreciated by the community of worshippers, which clearly seemed to be Bollywood-savvy. Was this an instance of the Hinduization of Bollywood, or of the Bollywoodization of Hinduism? To the gathered worshippers, the pandits, and the young men performing the ceremony on the banks of the Ganges that evening, there was nothing untoward about the ritual as it was performed. Yet this imbrication of the cinematic universe within the world of religion—that is, the ritual of the *arti*—was to remain with me long after I left the city.

Film was introduced in India during the colonial era (1896), but scholars of Indian cinema have argued this media was indigenized from its very inception (Prasad, 1998; see also Gokulsing & Dissayanake, 1998). For example, the first Indian filmmaker, Dadasaheb Phalke, is said to have approached this media as “a nationalist, specifically ‘swadeshi’ enterprise” (Prasad, 1998, p. 2). Whether and how this technology could be indigenized is certainly a matter for debate, but what is less questionable is the role of Indian film in the process of state and nation formation. The “nation” is widely recognized to be a social construct shaped by principles of inclusion and exclusion, a construct that helps subsume the internal divisions arising from the relations of gender, class, and caste through the making of collective national identity, culture, and interest (Chatterjee 1993; Dirks, 2001; Mani, 1998). Popular Indian cinema has been a rich site for the study of the processes that help constitute particular forms of nationality, including common language, culture, and identity, as well as for the articulation of the ideologies that enable, contest, and negotiate the conflictual social relations that lie at the heart of the postcolonial nation-state (Prasad, 1998). A spirited defense of the popular film form was made by Nandy (1995), who, pointing to the class-based nature of film audiences, argued that

the strength of the commercial cinema lies in its ability to tap the fears, anxieties and felt pressures of deculturalization and even depersonalization which plague the Indians who do not find the normative framework of the established urban middle-class culture adequate for their needs and yet have been pushed to adopt it in everyday life. (p. 205)

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<sup>3</sup> Benaras, also known as Varanasi and Kashi, is one of oldest cities in India. A major pilgrimage site, the city is counted among the seven sacred cities in Hindu and Jain traditions. The famous Benaras ghats lead down to the river Ganga.

More recently, Lal and Nandy (2006) have criticized film critics who insist on the inherent value of historical realism for “bludgeon[ing] Indians into becoming historically-minded citizens”; instead, they ask whether the “mythic inheritance of Indian civilization” might not “have a qualitatively different bonding with democratic politics in India” (p. xxi). Bollywood, once derided as carnivalesque with its melodrama, phantasmic narrative plots, and over-the-top song-and-dance sequences, is now increasingly at the center of a scholarly attention that was, until recently, considered the due only of art cinema, with its stylistic privileging of realism and its avowedly politically interventionist approach to cinematic expression.

In the world of art cinema, directors including Satyajit Ray and Guru Dutt were internationally renowned in the 1940s and 1950s for their technical, artistic, and thematic sophistication. Their innovative and politically engaged work was followed in the 1960s with the emergence of a new wave in Indian filmmaking, referred to as “art” or “parallel” cinema. Varied in aesthetic style, this cinema was “unified by an oppositional stance towards the commercial cinema” (Prasad 1998, p. 124). Led by politically committed directors, many of them trained at the National Film and Television Institute in Pune, this ‘new’ cinema forged a “developmental aesthetic” with the support of state funding (Prasad 1998, p. 131). Contesting the narrative and aesthetic engagements of popular films, early art cinema foregrounded the inequalities and injustices that shaped the lives of disenfranchised populations, including women, Dalits, and the working classes. Popular cinema responded to this development by “usurping,” as Saari (2009) puts it, some of the thematic content and artistic style of the emergent form.

Toward the end of the 20th century, however, there was a blurring of the once clearer lines of demarcation between popular and art films, with directors, actors, and stars crossing genres as readily as cinematic and stylistic strategies and thematic and narrative content. Film scholarship has also shifted from a materialist approach focused on the state, ideology and representation to raising questions about the medium’s impact on consciousness, sexuality, and desire, as well as in constituting subjectivity within a postcolonial theoretical framework (see, e.g., Kabir, 2003; Rai, 2009). Film scholarship is also increasingly attending to the question of communalism (Dirks, 2001; Vasudevan, 2001). So, for example, in his insightful reading of *Roja*, Mani Ratnam’s film featuring the “terrorism” of Kashmiri Muslims and the failings of the Indian state, Dirks highlights the changing representation of India’s Muslim Other from being an external enemy (i.e., Pakistan) to the Indian Muslim as internal threat. For India, he notes,

Pakistan represented its failure, its threat, and its new (postcolonial) justification. But increasingly the justificatory rhetoric has shifted in emphasis, from asserting the exemplary ideal of universal secularism and democratic representation *vis-a-vis* the other, to reacting to the security threat and the mystificatory cultural alterity of the other. (Dirks, 2001, pp. 179–180)

Phantasms of this alterity were to have deadly consequences for Indian Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, construed as the enemy within in the waging of collective violence against them.

Significant as are the shifts in film scholarship discussed above, rarely, however, has the *relation* between film and religion (outside the question of representation) been interrogated in the South Asian context. In his work on media and religion, Hent de Vreij (2001) draws on Derrida’s rethinking of religion



to make a strong case for studying the “interface” between religion and media. Pointing out that religion has always been integrally connected to the medium of its articulation—such as language and text—de Vreis argues that instead of approaching religion and technology as oppositional, attention should be directed to

the significance of the processes of mediation and mediatization without and outside of which no religion would be able to manifest or reveal itself in the first place . . . mediatization and the technology it entails form the condition of possibility for all revelation—for its revealability, so to speak. (p. 28)

De Vreis’ perspective reflects a shift in the study of the relation between media and religion, a shift useful to my reading of Indian cinema’s changing relation to new religiosities and discourses of state, nation, and subjectivity in the politico-cultural geography of early 21st-century India, and in particular, Gujarat. It is to the four films that are the subject of my study that I now turn.

### **Performing Terror, Making Nation**

Although the differences in the four texts’ narrative, visual, and political engagements are certainly significant, so too are the striking and somewhat surprising parallels in their foundational assumptions with regard to the place of Muslims in India; the identity of the state and nation; and the relation between religion, the national subject, and gender. Whether classified as art or commercial cinema, a feature shared by the films is their framing of collective violence squarely within the paradigm of communalism—that is, as rooted primarily in innate religious intolerance and bigotry.<sup>4</sup> However, the treatment of the various religious traditions and communities of South Asia is far from evenhanded. Most of these religious traditions – and their communities of faith – are treated as modernizable (i.e., secularizable), with the singular exception of Islam. Risking some of the dangers of overgeneralization, the analysis I present in the final sections of this article will discuss the key themes outlined above in the context of the films’ overall narrative plots and also with reference to particular scenes that engage these themes most powerfully, for I cannot possibly do justice here to all the sub-themes and sub-plots that are to be found in these deeply layered and richly textured films.

### ***The Intransigence of Muslims***

Collective violence is overwhelmingly portrayed in the four films as either sparked by, in response to, or escalated by Muslim behavior, when not actually instigated by Muslims themselves. For example, in

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<sup>4</sup> Three of the four film films I study explicitly reference the 2002 Gujarat genocide (*Parzania*, *Dev*, *Firaaq*); the fourth (*Road to Sangam*) does so implicitly by the director’s linking of a real-life news report regarding the scattering of Gandhi’s ashes with its cinematic depiction as tied to contemporary communal conflicts; the film’s pointed subtitle, *Let’s Re-Unite*; the film’s recoding of a geographical site—the Triveni Sangam associated with Hindu worship—into a politico-ideological site for Hindu/Muslim harmony; and the film’s reception as a welcome contribution to improving relations between Hindus and Muslims in post-Gujarat India (See Sodhi, 2010).

*Parzania*, Muslims are shown cheering for Pakistan as they listen to a cricket match on the radio, a treason that angers the Hindus who witness the scene; in *Dev*, the hero-as-police commissioner meets with Muslim community leaders and accuses them of using their religious institutions to provide a platform to foreigners who preach hatred of the nation; in both *Dev* and *Road to Sangam*, Muslims become violent at demonstrations even though their leaders have assured the police these protests will be peaceful (an interesting reversal of the BJP instigation of the Babri Masjid destruction discussed earlier); and in *Firaaq*, the unemployed Muslim husband of Muneera, the only significant Muslim female character in this feminist film, walks the streets at night, armed and on the lookout for Hindus to kill in revenge.

Moreover, despite the violence in Gujarat having been waged overwhelmingly by Hindu groups, the plotting of violence by Muslim men is depicted in detail, with their organizing of attacks and acquisition of arms being laid out meticulously. Even when this violence is depicted as a response to earlier Hindu attacks on their communities, such as in *Parzania* and *Firaaq*, Muslim men are depicted as readily excitable, driven by hatred or revenge and thus quick to turn to violence, almost comical in their inept anger. So when Hanif (*Firaaq*) is shot dead (by a Hindu man standing on his balcony) as he searches for the Hindus who have burned down his house, the question left hanging by the scene is whether Hanif doesn't bring on his own death by ignoring the warnings of the police, whether his need for revenge didn't blind him to the dangers of breaking the curfew. Interestingly, Hanif's death remains unlamented by his wife, Muneera, who remains unaware of this at the end of the film.

If the violence planned by Muslim men is depicted in the actions of significant—when not major—characters, such is not the case for the violence perpetrated by Hindus. This violence is usually depicted in crowd scenes so that the perpetrators remain largely faceless, with almost none of the main Hindu characters actually shown as killers, looters, or rapists. In *Firaaq*, for example, although the main female character's brother-in-law (Deven) has participated in the gang rape of a Muslim woman, there is minimal reference to this sexual violence in the film, the raped woman has no on-screen presence (the rape is referred to only in the dialogues between Hindu men). Consequently, the extent of Hindu violence, even in the dialogues about rapes of Muslim women, do not acquire the affective power to counter the emotive charge of seeing Muslims plot violence, acquire arms, and spew anti-Hindu sentiments. *Parzania* is an interesting departure from this pattern in that it portrays in some detail the terror experienced by non-Hindu communities as their housing society comes under attack.<sup>5</sup> However, in the film's centering of the violence experienced by Parsis, it unfortunately displaces the scope of the attack on Gujarati Muslims, who were the main targets.

The Muslims who plot attacks on Hindus are individualized, shown in their everyday familial and community relations and locations, making their turn to violence all the more insidious since these reel-life Muslims turn at unpredictable moments on their well-meaning Hindu colleagues, co-workers, and neighbors in the common spaces of daily life. The volatility and unpredictability attributed to Muslims in these scenes articulate—and feed—an anxiety about Muslim presence that has historically been voiced by

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<sup>5</sup> *Parzania* is based on a real-life incident in the Gujarat genocide (see Sengupta, 2007). Upon its release, the film's distribution in Gujarat was blocked by Hindutva groups who threatened to burn down the theatres that dared to screen the film.

Hindu nationals (Pandey, 1999); these scenes place the burden on Muslims to prove their presence is not a threat to the nation. Such depictions foster the paranoia that the Muslims who hate Hindus—regularly equated with hating the nation—control and manipulate their communities so that even seemingly innocent or moderate Muslims may suddenly explode into deadly rage. Further, despite the graphic and powerful depictions of violence by Hindu crowds, the depiction of Muslims as also violent works to balance—even dissipate—recognition of the level of the violence perpetrated against Muslim communities. Consequently, representation of this desire of Muslims for revenge leaves the fear hanging—what if they also had the means to . . . ?

In the cinematic Gujarat—and India—the causes of violence are thus lateralized: Muslims hate Hindus, and extremist Hindus hate Muslims is the metanarrative, with religiously inspired hatred being intrinsic to Muslim communities but only to *extremist* Hindus. When violence is depicted as resulting from the political machinations of Muslim extremists and corrupt leaders, this is presented as possible only because such hatred exists just beneath the surface for the Muslim population. The deeply institutionalized inequities and imbalance of power between Hindus and Muslims is rarely allowed to enter the frame, and if it is, the good intentions of the secular Hindu hero/heroine becomes a mitigating factor—his/her ideals and values, his/her personal acceptance of Muslims will set everything right. The Muslims who do not abide by these ideals and values are hopelessly naïve, and the proof of Muslim loyalty is, without exception, subservience to the values and embrace of enlightened Hindu characters, most of whom are secularists.

### ***Violence as Injury to Nation and State***

Common to the films also is the depiction of collective anti-Muslim violence as an injury not only to Muslims but, much more significantly, to the secular nation/al and their ideals. Certainly violence perpetrated by Hindus is depicted as harming Muslims, but such injury quickly becomes incidental to the even greater harm Hindu extremists inflict on the nation and its real subjects, secularly minded Hindus. In *Dev*, the police commissioner—as-hero's death becomes more noble and tragic than that of any of the other characters, including the death of Muslim leaders who advocate peaceful resistance to police brutality. As the "good" cop, Dev is committed to his (Hindu) dharma as the commissioner. So even when he kills an unarmed student in an unprovoked shooting, he remains the heroic upholder of the constitution in the face of the corruption that surrounds him. In the end, he dies for his loyalty to the constitution, for doing his duty to the state and nation.

In this regard, *Dev* depicts the injury by the collective violence as inflicted not only upon the nation, but also on the state. In his position of chief of police and in his uncompromising love for the constitution, as well as in his familial relationships and friendships, Dev embodies state and nation. This hero is patriotic and valiant to the core, and the film goes a long way in an on-screen rehabilitation of the off-screen (Gujarat) state after its instigation of violence against a sector of its own citizens. Given the extensive eyewitness testimonies about the Gujarat police doing nothing to stop the genocide or to protect the victims—indeed, police redirected fleeing Muslims into the path of oncoming Hindu crowds—*Dev's* rehabilitation of the police commissioner as highly ethical is politically charged and carries great weight,

coming as it does from a director whose earlier work exposed police brutality and lawlessness.<sup>6</sup> Restoring the state to its essential "goodness," *Dev* thus rescripts the role of the police from that of participant in state sanctioned genocide to the duty-bound police commissioner, willing to die for the Constitution. Indeed, the Gujarat government's actions revealed how readily the state's ongoing *de facto* treatment of Muslims as less-than-(Hindu)nationals turned into instigation of violence against the Gujarati Muslims who are its *de jure* citizens. Instead of revealing the tenuous relationship of Indian Muslims to the state, and the vulnerability of their status as citizens, these ambiguities are legitimized in the films' association of Indian Muslims with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other "foreign" states. As agents of these foreign states, Indian Muslims become potentially, even if not yet actually, a threat to the Indian state; the *de facto* treatment of Muslims thus becomes justified despite their *de jure* status.

In *Road to Sangam* and *Parzania*, it is Gandhi's Hindu-as-national ideals that are violated by the collective violence. The conflict in *Road to Sangam* revolves around a strike called by self-serving Muslim leaders so that the Gandhi-loving Muslim hero working to fix the motor of the car that will carry Gandhi's ashes for ritual immersion is torn between supporting the strike called by his community (from which he feels alienated) and breaking the strike for his commitment to Gandhi as personification of the peace-loving nation. In *Parzania*, as will be discussed more fully below, it is Gandhi's values that enable the main characters, Alan and Cyrus, to move beyond the violence. In both films, Gandhi features centrally as the quintessentially good Hindu, displacing the violence of his extremist coreligionists; Muslims are the ungrateful upstarts who do not remain true to Gandhi's values as father of the nation. Gandhi thus stands for communal harmony; he is virtuous, his virtue is absolute. As such, he stands *in* for the nation, for the virtue of the nation, which is also absolute. The question then arises: Are Muslims virtuous? If so, they will uphold Gandhism. If not, their morality is suspect. Here, Gandhi is brought out of nationalist hagiography to engage in a twofold battle: defeating the extremist Hinduism of the Hindutva forces by his Hinduism of compassion while keeping Muslims in check with his Hinduism-inspired love for them.

Unsurprisingly then, the cultural Hinduism-as-nationalism of the Indian state is left unexamined in the four films; instead, this relation is normalized in its being taken for granted. The Hindu/ism-nation/al/ism equation thus translates Hinduism-as-religion into Hinduism-as-culture—that is, Hinduism-as-national culture, which helps to consolidate the Indian/state-Hindu/citizen relation in post-Gujarat India. Hindus thus emerge as naturally in control of the national religio-politico-cultural space, and the state's role in enabling them to assert their dominance over this space remains uncontested. Moreover, these films' depiction of extremist Hindus and (all) Muslims as equally capable in their power to hate, as equally prone to waging violence, as having equal access to the means of waging such violence mystifies the real-life power relations within the nation-state. Inevitably, then, the collective violence of the extremist Hindus and Muslims becomes violence *done to* the nation and state, enabling the Hindu-as-national to emerge as the real victim of 'communalism'.

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<sup>6</sup> Govind Nihalani's filmography includes *Ardh Satya* (1983), a stark denunciation of police brutality. When asked whether there is a connection between *Ardh Satya* and *Dev*, Nihalani answered, "I don't know about resemblance, but 'Dev' in a way is a sequel to 'Ardh Satya' in its spirit. While 'Ardh Satya' dealt with contemporary politics of that time, 'Dev' deals with politics of today" (Sam, 2004). The obvious suggestion is that the new political moment calls for an ideological rehabilitation of the police.

### ***Religion and the Secular(izable)***

Given the hegemonic paradigm of communalism within which the films operate, it is predictable that they define religion as the cause of collective violence and secularism its solution. It is notable, however, that the films' articulation of the different religious traditions of South Asia is highly uneven, as some of these traditions—and their communities of faith—are treated as religious *and* secularizable, hence nationalizable. These traditions include Hinduism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism, but not Islam. In other words, despite the avowedly secularist commitments of the films, they nevertheless valorize particular religious traditions for being compatible with the nation's identity, its cultural politics and forms of social belonging. These traditions are thus enfolded into the nation as Islam and Muslims are fixed firmly outside.

The secularizability of religion and the remaking of religious alliances along nationalist lines are most evident in *Parzania*. The film is a rich text in which the confluence between religiosity and secularity emerges in a highly nuanced manner; this film also stands out for what it reveals about the deep and integral relation between religion and cinema. Centered on the real-life disappearance of a young Parsi boy in the attack on the Gulberg Society housing colony that left at least 69 people dead, the film follows the struggle of the Pithawala family as they attempt to find their son and rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the violence. Cyrus, the father, has developed a strong friendship with Alan, an American who comes to Gujarat before the outbreak of the violence to write a thesis on Gandhi. Although raised as a Christian, Alan considers Gandhian values exemplary for all humanity and, in studying these, hopes to find meaning in his own life. Here the ideal Hindu—Gandhi—finds his true disciple in the figure of the enlightened Christian, Alan, who *really* understands the value of Gandhi's ideals, unlike the masses of Gujarat. Alan, the enlightened Christian—as-true Hindu, risks his life for the Parsi family. As Cyrus and Alan—always accompanied by the omnipresent Gandhi—work together to restore calm after the chaos of the violence, to protect family and community, and to make sense of the carnage, the bond between Alan-Gandhi-Cyrus functions as the epitome of the virtue of these three heroic men living by their religiously infused worldviews. The religious commitments of this triad however, are never incompatible with their secularized practices, unlike the threats to their survival presented by the extremist Hindu crowds and, in a different manner, by their Muslim neighbors (planning revenge attacks against Hindus in the camp set up for the dislocated population). Cyrus, his family, and Alan, like Gandhi, are never moved to retaliate with violence, they never threaten the nation's values; indeed, they demonstrate loyalty to the nation's investment in secularism as the "good" religious minority communities, in contrast to that troublesome and volatile Other minority, the Muslim neighbors. As this Hindu-Parsi-Christian alliance highlights the nation's plural religious traditions, it simultaneously excludes Islam and Muslims.

*Parzania's* constitution of Parsis and Christians as agents of peace, equated with Indian secular values, has particular resonance in the context of the history of Gujarat. The construction of a distinct Gujarati identity, language, and culture was accomplished by a group of the state's elite literati who set about in the 19th century to Hinduize this identity and Sanskritize the language, purging both of their Parsi and Muslim religious, cultural and linguistic inflections (Isaka, 2006). Fashioning this Gujarati identity in the model set by the British colonial rulers, the historical presence of Muslims and Parsis within Gujarat, and their contribution to Gujarati history and society, was thus obscured. *Parzania* bravely

attempts a reversal of this recent history in its placing of Parsis at the center of Gujarati society and its identity, and in its wresting of the authority to inscribe this identity away from the sole purview of the Hindutva forces in that state. However, in so doing, the film replicates the historical constitution of the Muslim as absolute Other to the now-pluralized Hindu-Parsi-Christian Gujarati identity. The Muslim, it seems, still cannot be conceived of as a true Gujarati (read Indian).

*Parzania* also features an extraordinary scene that reveals the deep communion between contemporary cinema and religiosity. After a futile search for his missing son, Cyrus (played by veteran actor Naseeruddin Shah) consults a Parsi priest on whose advice he decides to undertake a religious quest to learn about his son's fate. After going on a fast and wandering the streets for days, Cyrus comes upon the cinema hall that he had operated before the violence. This is a place to which his beloved son had often accompanied him and where father and son had joyfully worked the projector together. Now alone, physically exhausted, and emotionally depleted, the father staggers into the theater and drops onto a seat in the empty cinema hall. Delirious and struggling to remain conscious, Cyrus hears the projector mysteriously switch on and he sees a powerful beam of light projected onto the screen. The theater has been destroyed in the violence (eerily referencing the destruction of the Babri Masjid?). As the projector whirs away, the knowledge for which Cyrus has been preparing himself in the religious ritual is revealed to him. He has a hallucinatory vision of his son's body - projected onto the screen - laid out as stipulated in Zoroastrian funerary rites. As the knowledge that his son is dead is revealed to him from a transcendent realm in answer to his prayers, the cinema hall is transformed into sacred ground, the Tower of Silence. In surely one of the finest cinematic moments in the history of Indian film, the medium literally becomes the message; as the projector whirs on by itself in the darkness of the cinema hall, the dreamlike filmic image becomes divine revelation, experienced as cinematic knowledge; the acquisition of divinely revealed knowledge becomes simultaneously like being in and watching a film. The audience, along with Cyrus, now knows the fate of the son, Parzan. In this powerful scene, what begins as religious endeavor becomes spiritual experience in the secular space of cinema, thus accomplishing religiosity's (i.e., Zoroastrianism's) secularization and universalization. In the experience of cinema as revelation, a literal equation emerges between cinematic knowledge and the religious experience of divinely revealed knowledge.

Studying the interface between media and religion, Hent de Vreis (2001) establishes a link between media special effects and miracles. These phenomena are connected, he argues, for in the realm of the religious, miracles are dependent on their "mechanicity" or "technicity." He asks, "Is a miracle a special effect? Does the special effect, or what is commonly described as such, enter into the tradition inaugurated or legitimized by the invocation of miracles?" (p. 23). For him, the answer is yes, the special effect and the miracle "resemble each other *formally*" and "*phenomenologically*" (p. 23, emphasis in original). It is impossible to understand the "'special effect' . . . without implicitly or indirectly returning to the tradition called 'religious,'" claims de Vreis (pp. 24–25).

Experiencing *Parzania's* articulation of miracle-as-special effect is indeed uncanny. The special effect, a scene of revelation in the film, provides a fascinating glimpse into the co-constitutive relation of religion and cinema—that is, religion as special effect, special effect as religious knowledge. Even as this religious experience is embraced in the film's processes of valorization, the scene of revelation accomplishes its secularization of the miraculous by universalizing the experience as spiritually available to

the audience, not just to the believers in a particular religious tradition—that is, Parsis. Religiosity and spirituality thus become deeply secularized here; the strong Hindu-Parsi-Christian bond that shapes the key filmic relationships among the protagonists thus redeems all three traditions. The figure of the Parsi, Cyrus, is the conduit, and, through him, the audience also comes to share in this secularized redemption of religion.

New media do not simply transmit old religion, but bring about a qualitative leap and “instantiate a certain ambiguity” with which institutionalized religions have to then struggle (De Vreis, 2001, pp. 12–13). Here it is Islam that bears the brunt of the “qualitative leap” accomplished by the “old” media of Indian cinema, for unlike the triad of Hinduism-Christianity-Zoroastrianism, Islam is the one religion that is maligned in the qualitative leap facilitated by *Parzania*, as well as in the various other kinds of leaps facilitated by all four films. Islam is the only tradition that is allowed no positive relation with the cinematic apparatus that lends its mighty support to the other religious traditions of Gujarat (and South Asia) in these films, instead, this cinematic universe further isolates and deepens the alienation of Islam.

### ***The Gendered Heroic National***

In addition to religious identity being central to the shaping of the nation, gender is another axis that delineates forms of national belonging in the Indian context. *Firaaq* (Separation/Quest), made by (proto)feminist actress-filmmaker Nandita Das, best highlights this relation of gender to religion and national identity. The film depicts the experiences of four “ordinary” characters in their respective communities after the Gujarat genocide. The film presents itself as based on “1000 true experiences” and begins with a truckload of Muslim bodies being dumped into a mass grave. At the centre of the mostly male bodies lies the body of one woman, visibly identifiable as Hindu. The film’s opening thus equates the body of one Hindu woman with those of the thousands of bodies of Muslims killed in the carnage, depicted here as only male. A Muslim gravedigger, enraged at the site of the dead Hindu woman, grabs an axe to chop the body. She thus becomes a victim hated even beyond death by the Muslim male. *Firaaq*’s politics of gender, religion, and nation are signaled early in this scene as the film inserts the gendered Hindu subject as also—if not the real—victim of the violence, thus gendering the (Hindu) national—as-victim discussed earlier. Such a conflation of the nation with certain forms of femininity is a trope that has a long history in the colonial, Orientalist, and subsequently nationalist constructions of Indian nationhood, reproduced quite un-self-reflexively in the film. A position of innocence and victimhood for the Hindu woman—facilitated by the elevation of gender over other identities —becomes the starting point for the telling of this tale.

Of the film’s four main characters, three are Hindu women who care for Muslims: Aarti is a middle-class housewife abused by her husband and - haunted by her failure to help a Muslim woman during the violence - inflicts burns on herself in self-flagellation; Anu, a professional upper-class woman, is married to a Muslim man who is a self-professed “coward”; and Jyoti helps her Muslim neighbor and friend, Muneera, in their lower-middle-class neighborhood. The fourth character, Khan Sahab, is an almost senile Muslim man, living in the (Islamic) glories of the past and barely connected to the world around him. Aarti assuages her guilt by taking in and feeding an orphan Muslim boy; Anu is willing to leave her home and family for her Muslim husband who wants to leave Gujarat and, pained by his public

humiliation, protects him from the police; and Jyoti puts a bindi on Muneera's forehead to pass her off as a Hindu to help her find work and to protect her from the police on the streets. These Hindu women belong to three different classes, all are shown as allies of Muslims; all three Hindu women take on considerable risks to themselves to help Muslims. Muneera (the only significant Muslim female character), on the other hand, is deeply suspicious of her Hindu friend, convinced (falsely, as it turns out) of Jyoti's involvement in the burning and looting of her home, despite Jyoti's generosity and good intentions. The Hindu woman thus emerges as the heroine of this feminist film, willing to stand up for Muslims, yet the object of Muslim mistrust and hatred, including that of Muslim women.

As the Hindu woman becomes the victim of the violence of Hindu extremists and Muslim men, and the object of the suspicion of Muslim women, she displaces the gendered and sexual violence done to Muslims, and to Muslim women in particular. The rapes and deaths of Muslim women during the Gujarat violence do not become real in any emotive sense in this cinematic Gujarat; the invisibility of these violations on-screen means they lack the affective power to move the viewing audience and to humanize Muslim women. In contrast, the audience is invited and enabled to identify with the three brave Hindu women of the film. As the abuse and humiliation of the middle-class Hindu housewife (Aarti) by her Hindu husband is repeatedly depicted, the off-screen violence done to Muslim women in Gujarat fades away, a backdrop to the on-screen violence done to the suffering Hindu housewife. The forms of violence perpetrated on Muslim women's bodies, documented extensively in survivor and eyewitness testimony, come to lack the narrative imagery and emotive power to become real on-screen; *Firaaq's* narcissistic (abused and misunderstood) Hindu woman is both victim of gender violence and victim-by-association-with-Muslims of the religious violence that haunts and traumatizes *her*. She thus emerges as the real victim of the genocide.

The gendered nature of collective violence has been highlighted in the feminist scholarship that draws attention to the centrality of sexual and reproductive regulation of women's bodies to patriarchal relations within religious communities (Butalia, 2000; Das, 2007). Women, as symbols of purity and pollution, are critical to the marking of the borders of these communities. Moreover, gender had earlier assumed great significance in the practices of the colonial regime of the Raj and in the reform-minded politics of nationalist movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Chatterjee, 1993; Menon, 1999; Sangari & Vaid, 1989). The partition as experienced by women from different communities included killings, rape, abduction, and forced marriage, such that the labor of delineating the borders of the community was often literally waged on the bodies of women in the economy of violence. Breaking the silence imposed on women through concepts of community honor and shame, and giving voice to women to articulate their gendered experiences of the partition, has been a feminist project of considerable significance. Recuperating the experiences of women has also revealed the patriarchal practices of the postcolonial state as it set itself up as the protector of woman, family and nation through its projects of recovery and return of abducted women to their pre-partition religious communities, often against the expressed wishes of the women themselves as many of them resisted recovery and forced repatriation (Butalia, 2000; Das, 2007). The state's refusal to accept the religious conversions of these women and their request to remain with their marital families buttressed the patriarchal rites (rights?) of their natal communities, ossifying the women's religious—turned political—identity at birth by imposing official classification over the women's self-identification. In excavating the violence against women during the



partition, feminist scholars have also examined the role played by women themselves in upholding patriarchal power relations by, for example, policing the behavior of raped and abducted women. However, the focus of much of this scholarship has been on highlighting the victimization of women by men, families, communities, and states, as all these have been implicated—in different ways and to differing degree—in the gendered partition.

The case of Gujarat, however, was a watershed event in that it utterly transformed public understanding about the role of women in the perpetration of collective and genocidal violence, for Hindu women were often at the forefront of instigating the violence against Muslims—men, women, and children. Hindu women have been documented to play a significant role in furthering the violence, including the sexual violence against Muslim women.<sup>7</sup> Supported and empowered by state, family and community sanction, Hindu women, along with the men, participated in the genocide and also covered up the sexual violence of men as they defended their husbands, fathers, and sons in the aftermath. Gujarat thus ruptured the national feminist narrative of women as largely victims of communal violence, not its instigators.

*Firaaq* thus becomes an especially important moment in restabilizing the disrupted feminist narrative, in absolving Hindu women from implication in the anti-Muslim violence. The film's placing of the abuse of—and suspicion toward—Hindu women at the center of its analysis of patriarchy, religion, and violence works, however unwittingly, to obfuscate and thus discount the information available in the public domain of the actuality of Hindu women's collusion in the violence and its forms of dispossession.

Moreover, *Firaaq's* doubled elevation of the Hindu woman as victim par excellence and champion of Muslims relies not only on its erasure of Muslim women's resistance to the violence but also its simultaneous infantilization and de-masculinization of Muslim men. Aarti, the middle-class Hindu housewife, takes in a stray Muslim boy after the violence; Anu's Muslim husband tells her "I have no balls" after he denies his Muslim identity to the police to escape the deadly consequences of this identity, he also wants to leave Gujarat rather than stay put and fight back like a man (like his wife!); and Jyoti becomes the economic benefactress while Muneera's husband cannot support his family. The heroism of the Hindu woman in these various settings seems inconceivable without the concurrent de-masculinization of the Muslim man and the erasure of the Muslim woman's power to resist. Apparently these are the only grounds on which the Hindu woman is able to articulate her alliance—such as it is—with Muslims. The Muslim woman cannot be imagined as coeval gendered subject in this framing, nor can the Muslim man exist as coeval citizen if the Hindu woman is to emerge as the gendered ideal of the wounded national sensibility.

### Conclusion

The successful reproduction of the politics of national belonging is crucial to the ascendance of the Indian nation-state as a major power within the geopolitical order. In a globalizing India whose

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<sup>7</sup> See *Final Solution* (2003), an excellent documentary on the Gujarat genocide directed by Rakesh Sharma.

increasing power and international standing has given rise to speculation about global shifts in power, the BJP continues to enjoy considerable political support. The Indian economy's strength relies in no small measure on state and popular constructs of collective national interests and identity as cohesive, unitary and stable. Gujarat reveals the forms of violence that underpin such cohesiveness and stability.

Antiviolence activist Ram Puniyani (2012) has argued that the success of the BJP lies not only in its targeting of Muslim and other minorities but in its ability to "instill fear" in the majority community that their interests are threatened by the minority. Pandey (2005, p. 33) likewise argues:

The violent slogans and demands of organizations like the VHP and killing sprees, looting and destruction they have sparked do not poison the minds of the people for only a moment. On the contrary, given the colonial and postcolonial constructions of India's history, the very different scale of resources available to small secular groups and the growing communal forces in the country, the opportunism of the major political parties, and the continued and repeated outbreak of collective violence, the most extreme suggestions about the evil, dangerous and threatening character of the other community (or communities) have become established as popular dogma.

My reading of the four films finds these texts do little to contest the processes that produce the "popular dogma" about "the evil, dangerous and threatening character" of the Indian Muslim. Indeed, these films extend the affective reach of such dogma.

The four films studied here have received national and international accolades for contributing to communal harmony and they have won prestigious awards, including those linked to the promotion of human rights. Yet I find they offer little else than subservience to Muslims in the sense that they do not engage meaningfully with the off-screen status of Muslims in India, nor do they center Muslim experiences and perspectives on the collective violence of the nation with which they must contend. Instead, Muslims and their faith are routinely linked with instigating the violence and are thus set up for the enmity of the nation/al.

Pandey (2005) has observed that many commentators who point to the economic and political factors involved in the waging of collective violence fail to take into account the "affect and agency" of the people involved. It is with this affect and agency in mind that I have raised questions about these films' engagement with "the Muslim question." In their respective depictions of the Gujarat violence, I find the films play an important role in forging the bonds of affiliation that help sediment relations among particular communities as insiders to the nation, with the exception of Muslims. In their performance of the nation and the identity of its ideal subject, the films make particular kinds of gendered, religious, and secularized subject positions available for viewing publics to inhabit in their own practices of self-constitution. For the most part, these films displace the violence done to Muslims by casting them as either bringing the violence onto themselves or as perpetrators of the violence. Muslims are thus presented as being of the same ilk as the extremist Hindutva forces that engage in violence, even if *individual* Muslims are (sometimes) depicted as undeserving of such violence. The films thus actively counter the attempts of Muslims who have sought to articulate their experiences of the violence in the

public domain, and, in this way, these texts help diminish public recognition of the magnitude of the violence. More disturbing, instead of the violence being treated as injury to Muslims, it is recast such that the violence can be experienced as harm to the nation, to its secularity and humanist values. The films thus center the perspectives and investments of Indian secularists, not of the Indian Muslims who have insisted on defining the violence as genocidal and criminal injury to them, their families, and their communities of faith. Instead, Gujarat is cast as the site of a grievous wound to the nation, its national subject, and even to the state. The claim of Muslims as nationals, as citizens, is disappeared in such castings.

Contrary to expectations that secularist, left, and feminist filmmakers might contest dominant nationalist and extremist narratives regarding collective violence, my research finds the opposite to be the case. These films share many of the Hindutva assumptions regarding the Muslim and his/her place in the nation. Indeed, national space is imagined as the proper domain of Hindus, albeit secularized Hindus. At best, caring for Muslims serves as proof of the compassion and tolerance of these nationals, while the Muslim as coeval national subject remains beyond the imaginary capacity of these films.

Finally, given that none of the four films contests the Hinduization (religious and secular) of national culture, identity, and subjectivity, they implicitly further such conflation of nation and Hinduism in the early 21st century. Muslims thus remain positioned centrally in the processes invested in identity, nation, and state formation, a positioning that has become even more salient given the rising Islamophobia in the geopolitical landscape and in the emergence of new ideologies within a globalizing India. The Islamophobia that grounds the ideology of the global war on terror associates Muslims—particularly in Central and South Asia—with terrorism, construing them as a threat to global and national security. Indian national discourses that have long circulated damaging representations of Indian Muslims are fed by, and in turn feed, such international Islamophobic discourses, which have now become pervasive in global media. The study of the intersection of anti-Muslim Indian discourses with global Islamophobic discourses requires urgent scholarly attention. In the Indian context, Muslims are perceived as having no loyalty to a nation that embraces them, ingrates in their rejection of the Gandhian and nationalist values of the secularist forces that wish to protect them.

In closing, my reading finds these four films to be largely about a post-Gujarat recuperation of the national Indian subject through the suturing of the deep—and violent—cleavages within the nation-state. As such, these films enable the nation/al to move on by finding collective redemption in the aftermath of collective violence. This public recuperation of the nation and state relies in no small measure on the successful restabilization of the Hindu subject as vulnerable, and the casting of this subject as essentially secularizable helps contain the damage done to the nation's sense of itself by the Gujarat violence. In other words, the partition remains ongoing.

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