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Dharma and Violence in Mumbai

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Abstract

Maqbool not only reimagines *Macbeth* as a struggle for power within the hierarchy of organized crime in Mumbai, but it also reiterates the religious conflict of Shakespeare's own England. The film's use of *dharma*, a concept embodied in the insidious plotting of two corrupt, Hindu police officers, offers a colloquial counterpart to Shakespeare's sense of Fate. These policemen promote a "balance" of power between Muslim gangsters by circumscribing and insidiously directing the violence that the film's gangsters inflict on one another. By the end, the cause of the violence is obscured by the wretched assurance that maintaining a "balance" between forces assures an interminable cycle of violence.

At first glance, *Maqbool* is a rather unimaginative retelling of the *Macbeth* story. As a means of preserving the violence of Shakespeare's tale in a twenty-first century setting, the film resorts to mobsters and their code of brutality-for-brutality, which has been endlessly mythologized by cinema. Hence, Miyan Maqbool, the film's title character, wrestles with the temptation to knock off the head of his crime family, and then, once he has committed the murder, confronts the whirlwind of death that naturally follows among unscrupulous men suddenly without a central authority to respect or to fear. Though a well-crafted film, including outstanding performances from all involved — notably, Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Tabu, and *Slumdog Millionaire*'s Irfan Khan in the title role — *Maqbool*'s gangster motif demonstrates little ingenuity. However, what the film's gangster story lacks in originality is more than compensated for by its brilliant religious subtext, an examination of religious tension on the Indian subcontinent that cleverly re-invokes the Protestant-Catholic hostility of Shakespeare's England.

The greatest impediment to peace and stability in India for the past six decades has been violence — brutal, savage, relentless, *Elizabethan* — between Muslims and Hindus. In May 2008, an Islamic group claimed responsibility for several bombs that exploded in coordination in

busy market areas of Jaipur, killing at least eighty. In 2002, more than one thousand Muslims in Gujarat were killed in widespread anti-Muslim riots following a fire on a train that killed a group of Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya, itself the site of an ongoing religious dispute that led to bloody, India-wide Hindu-Muslim clashes in 1992. The recitation of ugliness might go on, but this brief list should be sufficient to establish a correlation between modern India and sixteenth-century England, where, between the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth, thousands of Protestants and Catholics killed each other. Shakespeare's work is now commonly read as composed under the influence of this communal violence, and, whether one understands Shakespeare's world view as predominantly Catholic or Protestant, certainly *Macbeth* lends itself readily to interpretations that see in it a recapitulation of the cyclic storms of religiously fomented violence that had beset England during the time of Shakespeare's own memory.

For obvious reasons, *Macbeth* lends itself easily to new dramatizations of the experience of cyclical violence, but the real conflict in *Maqbool* — the conflict that promises to sustain itself quite independent of any of the individuals who promote it — exists on the fringes of the story. For the most part, members of Maqbool's gang are Muslims, and the gangsters' common religion is emphasized repeatedly: through the funeral they all attend early in the film, the ritual slaughter of a goat, to which the viewer's attention is drawn and which provides the premise for the first of Maqbool's guilty hallucinations, a henchman's refusal to drink alcohol, and various moments in which characters conduct themselves in prayer. Consequently, the death that races through the story seems very much the product of intra-communal, rather than inter-communal, conflict.

But the first image of the film, which recurs throughout, is a rectangular astrological diagram, a patently Hindu figure drawn on a foggy bus window by one of two policemen who seem to be in the pocket of the Muslim gangsters, and, indeed, are in the bus in order to execute a rat. A version of *Macbeth*'s three hags, the two policemen "predict" Maqbool's ascension in the gang's hierarchy, and help to bring it about, under the cryptic justification of *shakti ka samtulan*, or a "balance of power." At first, it seems as though their primary concern is the preservation of Maqbool's gang; after all, they execute a traitor within the first few minutes of the film. But by the end, when they set free one of Maqbool's principal rivals, Riyaz Boti — who, ultimately, shoots Maqbool in the back — it becomes clear that the "balance" the corrupt officers have pursued all along is merely a cynical method of law enforcement. As long as the gangsters kill each other, everyone else will live more securely. Both officers are explicitly Hindu. Besides their personal investment in astrology, both officers wear their hair in *shikhas*, tufts of hair left growing from the crown of the head as a sign of Vaishnava devotion. We find, then, that the intra-communal violence of the movie, by which Muslim kills Muslim, is inter-communal after all, but insidiously so, as it has been instigated and

nourished by the Hindu authorities so that its bearing is only inward, toward a small, blind Muslim community at the center of the story from an arc inscribed and veiled by a Hindu establishment.

These Hindu policemen and the control they exercise ultimately rise in the film to the level of ineluctable fate. Besides filling the function of *Macbeth's* witches by reading astrological diagrams to foretell Maqbool's rise, the officers' amoral manipulation of circumstances so as to promote "balance" identifies them plainly as agents of *dharma*, a concept as central to Hinduism as its meaning is obscure. Though the term's roots in the early development of Brahmanical Hinduism have to do with the proper conduct of ritual, it is popularly understood nowadays as the *natural* (which is to say, the *proper*) order of the universe, maintained through a balance of all its properties. In the narratives of Hinduism, divine power sometimes enters the world destructively in order to restore balance and preserve dharma. By invoking "balance" and by promoting it through their own murderous activity, *Maqbool's* Hindu officers not only perceive the workings of fate, but identify themselves with it. After the cascade of murder has begun, one of the officers warns his partner not to eat Saturn, when he finds him picking over an astrological chart constructed of sweets, since Saturn eats people. "Who does it want to swallow?" asks the officer, chewing on a piece of the chart. His partner replies, smiling, "Who do you want eaten?" They are agents of divine power, easing the world of an imbalance of evil.

Consequently, it may be that the religious subtext of *Maqbool* valorizes Hinduism. While Muslim gangsters thrash ignominiously in petty vendettas, extortion, alcohol, and illicit sex, Hindu authority overcomes the mean sins of mortality through cooperation with the transcendent forces of existence. On the other hand, the film may be exerting a critical view of Hinduism's conceit. Perhaps we should find the officers' unprincipled machinations distasteful. The presumption of the Hindu right in India, the notion that Hindus ought, ultimately, to exercise final authority, must surely share the blame for the communal violence that persistently erupts on the subcontinent — which is only to say that *Maqbool's* religious vision is complex. Considering the complexity of the religious circumstances of Shakespeare's England, *Macbeth* is an especially appropriate muse. If we cannot determine exactly what position this film takes with respect to its religious communities, we are also still arguing about whether Shakespeare's plays exhibit a preference for Catholicism or the Church of England.

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References

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