

Myth, Legend, Conspiracy

Urban Terror in *Aamir* and *Delhi-6*

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The 21st century is only ten years old, yet it has already created an identity for itself – that of a crumbling modernity. The collapsing World Trade Centre has become the defining image of the decade, if not of the century, bringing terrorists out of their ‘Afghan caves’ and into the heart of the city, ushering in a terrorised urban existence.

Hindi cinema, like cinema across the world, has tried a variety of ways to define this fear, to understand the figure of the terrorist and, of course, to link and de-link terrorism and the ordinary Muslim. In the recent past, two Hindi films that have dealt with the issue of urban terror are Rajkumar Gupta's *Aamir* and Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's *Delhi-6*. In this essay, I would like to argue that despite stemming from a common purpose – to present an alternative view point to the existing discourse on terrorism and Islam's relationship with it in the 21st century – the two films achieve something decidedly different and, in fact, have opposite impacts.

***Aamir*: An Agenda Gone Awry?**

Rajkumar Gupta's *Aamir*, released in 2008, was not only a sleeper hit, but was also considered “an eloquent statement on the state of the nation and the Indian Muslim”.¹ The story of a young, educated, modern Muslim man forced to become part of a terrorist outfit and carry out instructions issued to him by phone or risk losing his entire family, *Aamir* seems to present a flip side to the dominant discourse linking Islam and terrorism. A quick scan of some blogs that reviewed *Aamir* when it came out indicates that the film was perceived as one that works as testimony that all Islamic terrorists are not so by choice.² I would argue that while the protagonist may be the eponymous *Aamir*, the central character that the film constructs is the city and, in particular, a community as it inhabits the city, accesses it and ultimately responds to it. And it is in this construction that the film goes against its own project.

The most striking thing about *Aamir* is the way in which Rajkumar Gupta and his cinematographer, Alphonse Roy, have shot the city of Mumbai. Conscious of its interventionist agenda, the first ten minutes of *Aamir* show a montage of fairly traditional images of Mumbai, images that capture the hybridity of the city – from high-rise buildings to shots of Dhobi Ghat and the local train – only to rupture this romantic image with what Roy called *cinéma vérité*.³

The attempt really is to develop a sense of the everyday rhythms of the city, a rhythm that will soon be broken, not just for the audience, but also for the protagonist. Aamir enters a city he grew up in but encounters a place he doesn't recognise. Through his movements during that one day, both he and the audience are taken through the filthiest sites of Mumbai. It is a city of ruin⁴ – one that is actively haunted by the predominant discourse of development and progress that Mumbai supposedly manifests. Given the rich, cinematic possibilities of Dharavi, slums have been used as a symbol of Mumbai almost as much as the Gateway of India has, so it is not the visual alone that is unique in this film, it is how and what that visual is made to communicate. As the nameless terrorist leader reveals, the purpose behind the journey he directs Aamir to was to show him the conditions in which the Muslim community lives. In the process, we are taken on a visual journey that maps visibly Muslim areas of the city, but despite his sympathetic plan with this film, Gupta decides to use fairly predictable and stereotypical ways of marking areas as 'authentically Muslim'. A case in point is the meat market that Aamir is directed to: the journey to and from that market is meticulously traced with bloody animal carcasses and butchers silently screaming an identity that inevitably links them to a not-so-abstract idea of Muslim-ness and, more importantly, to violence. Apart from the space that labels Muslims in the film comes a detail that complements it – eating habits. There are at least three moments in the film when characters (all Muslim) are shown eating. The first is when Aamir is sent to National Restaurant, with its Muslim management and clientele, all of whom are pointedly shown with half-eaten non-vegetarian food; the second is the food the gang leader eats in his house; and finally, the food put in front of Aamir. Eating habits are a traditional way of underscoring cultural differences, and in their grotesque usage, Gupta has employed them in a similar way.

Between the labyrinthine lanes of Mumbai, shot only for their overwhelming, squalid filth (and shot well enough for the visual to effectively convey the stench that goes with it), and the Muslims who seem to inhabit them, there is a connection created between the repulsion we feel at these sights and the community the film locates within them. The revulsion reaches saturation in a scene shot in a literally vomit-inducing bathroom; it is a poignant moment in the film but, more significantly, it places the entire community in a single class. In fact, the film manages to erase class distinction completely: it is not class that divides society here but religion. Aamir is the only upper middle-class moderate Muslim the film has, and it is therefore worth noting that his private space is not shown almost at all, except for one short, imagined scene when he recalls calling home and speaking to his family. When compared to the way in which the other, public, apparently non-secular spaces are mapped in the film, this scene, which is barely a few seconds long, can be easily forgotten. The way in which *Aamir* visually, and also psychologically, maps the city creates a palpable aura of all-encompassing fear that develops from a sense of otherness.

What emerges, therefore, is a network of Muslims, all of whom are part of a total network of terrorism. Class distinction is consciously done away with to privilege the idea of the *kaum*, the community the nameless leader keeps harping on about. Every Muslim in the film is part of the network and is therefore doing his or her duty towards the community.

Everyone knows their role in this terror machine and is willing to carry out that role without questioning. This becomes evident when the gang leader refuses to answer any of Aamir's initial questions, and, as the film goes along, Aamir too realises that it is pointless to challenge what he's being asked to do. An absolute community is what is presented to us: one which is defined by a sense of otherness (both internally and externally), and one that has a common aim – to avenge the wrongs done to the Muslim community, by sending out messages through acts of violence. Language that by popular discourse is now attributed to terrorists is used by this leader, who wants to make Aamir a *mujahid*, a freedom fighter.

Apart from highlighting cultural differences, there is another way in which a distance between the community and a majority of the audience that would watch this film is created. The link with Pakistan, the biggest 'other' when it comes to India. The film makes it a point to extend the Muslim community beyond national borders because the problems at hand are not those of Indian Muslims alone, but of 'Muslim *bhai*' (brothers) across the world. Doing away with class and even national boundaries, *Aamir* creates a place-less community; in the process, the personal and, by extension, the human are subsumed by the communal and the political. Not only do we strictly access public spaces, but there is a conscious absence of a home space in the film, with the city taking over the visual narrative. Through Aamir's movements, a lack of stability is created that highlights the absence of home. It is in this process that the actual family is hardly seen while Aamir engages with this alternative family – the community. Taxis, hotels, STD booths, market places are what this film is made of, rendering rootedness an impossibility. Ironically, the only home space we see is that of the gang leader, who issues instructions from his home, peopled with other occupants who come and go and are therefore in the know of his sinister plan. The home space in this Muslim world therefore doubles as a terrorist headquarters of sorts as well.

While much is made of the liberal perspective of this film with regard to the connection between Islam and terrorism, the project seems lopsided in the two characters that occupy maximum screen time – Aamir and the gang leader. Nameless, and nearly faceless, the gang leader has a presence that overwhelms the narrative, while Aamir, despite being in every frame, is sadly dwarfed. Granted that Aamir is made to utter a few liberal, modern and secular homilies at a few moments in the film, but they remain mere details, while the absolute control of the gang leader takes over. The most horrifying moment (and also the most socially troubling one) of the film is the gang leader's spoken desire to hear the screams of the dying people on the bus. Except for Aamir, no character in the film is named, and their only identification is their religion – the fact that the gang leader has no name pushes this case further. Not a single Muslim in the film remains outside the network of terror, not even Aamir. There is an enduring sense the film communicates that despite education, a family and social standing, it is inevitable that the Muslim will have some connection with terrorism. He may not have a choice, but that is a small consideration in the larger picture, which seemingly concerns itself with personal and even national safety.

Delhi-6: The Other Side of All the Noise

The turbulent political history of the 21st century has ensured that fear – a political fear that is made personal – finds place everywhere, from dreams to reality, and consequently from realist cinema to other more derivative forms. I say this because while *Aamir* firmly situates itself through its aesthetic and its narrative in the realist mode, *Delhi-6* has a more fluid form. In *Delhi-6*, there are characters and a loose narrative, but the driving force seems to be of making a cinematic collage of Old Delhi. While it may not be a conscious decision on Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's part, the blend of myth, 'reality' and urban legend that he uses ensures a dialogue in the film between a fluid structure and a consequently layered narrative.

Like Rajkumar Gupta's *Aamir*, Mehra's *Delhi-6* also prioritises the city in the guise of the story of its protagonist, Roshan (Abhishek Bachchan). Addressing questions regarding parallels between himself and Roshan, Mehra said, "*Delhi-6* is not an autobiography at all. I've just delved into my childhood memories and my youth in the film... It's more of the colour of that life that has been used in the background than anything else... Every day [of the shoot] was an anecdote for us".⁵ The choice of Old Delhi as the central site of the film is interesting not just because Mehra's personal memories originate there, but also because of its status in India's national and historical memory. In contrast to New Delhi, which was developed by the British, the memory of Old Delhi is still affixed with the memory of the Mughals. The film's representation of Old Delhi situates it in a time-cusp where the old and the new exist simultaneously. The old structures, like Roshan's ancestral house, are still standing, but the planning is less than adequate – the streets are too narrow, safety is an inevitable issue, as is privacy, and amenities are collapsing. All this in Old Delhi, once the symbol of royalty and sophistication. I would argue that despite being a lived space and sharing much with Walter Benjamin's idea of a counter-monument (Benjamin, 1928),⁶ the historical status of Old Delhi, which is still trapped in that space, brings it close to the idea of the monument but one which is collapsing. A telling example of this stripping of royalty is the house of Ali Beg (Rishi Kapoor). Everything about this character reeks of nostalgia for a past where refinement, poetry and sophistication were the flavour. His house, however, is in contrast to this surface regality. It is commercial, badly lit and a hotchpotch of cultural influences. It is almost paedestrian. The desire is for something more than a collapsing structure – for the sacred, perhaps. The mass participation in the Ramlila, the cow worship and ultimately the creation of the urban legend are all a result of this aspiration. The inability to fulfill this aspiration, and the fall from prestige inevitably lead, as Lefebvre says, to violence (Lefebvre, 1974).⁷

Like Roshan, who is part Hindu, part Muslim, Old Delhi too is captured for its hybrid cultural impulses. So while Roshan attends the Ramlila and also reads the *namaaz*, the narrow lanes of Old Delhi house devout Hindus, devout Muslims and, most significantly, a Muslim who is a Hanuman devotee – Mamdu (Deepak Dobriyal). The architecture of Delhi this film captures is worth examining. The narrowness of the lanes, the easy access from one house to the next and a significant number of public spaces (like shops and the Ramlila ground) establish a sense of a close-knit community. Neighbours are constantly in each other's space and manage to construct relationships despite artificial spatial divides since

they are all so easy to overcome. For instance, even though the Sharma brothers (played by Om Puri and Pawan Malhotra) have not been able to resolve their basic familial dispute, and have erected a wall on their property, marking out their individual territory, the relationship between their families is intact, and the two always know what is going on in the other person's house. The movement this architecture enables (I'm thinking in particular of Abhishek Bachchan jumping from one rooftop to the other) and gives a spatial dimension to the easy and rapid movement of rumours and, in this case, terror. The all-knowingness of the community is contrasted with the unknowable in the film – the urban legend of the Monkey Man (drawn from the mysterious creature that created mass hysteria in Delhi in May 2001 and who was never ultimately caught).

The coming together of varying impulses in the film can be seen through the simultaneously existing layers of the narrative, and they ultimately contribute to Mehra's somewhat didactic agenda (the unproblematised and clearly stated secularist moral at the end of both this film as well as Mehra's last cinematic venture, *Rang De Basanti*, corroborate this line of thought). First, the Monkey Man, at least in the way that it is perceived, has something fundamentally in common with Roshan – the hybrid. Not only do Hindus and Muslims in the film ascribe characteristics of each other on the Monkey Man, but it is also a tussle between myth, actuality and science since links with the monkey god, Hanuman, are created on the one hand and a scientific explanation is sought on the other. This, then, highlights the varying strains in the very phrase 'urban legend'.

The Monkey Man, who is referred to as an *aatankvaadi* (terrorist) in the film, is a device used by Mehra to pull terrorism out of the realist narrative. Mehra throws together the players that have a role in the discourse on terror – religious groups, politicians and the media – along with mythology (the Ramayana) and urban legend, thereby creating a new idiom of terrorism where the terrorist is subsumed by terror – in other words, where the terrorist is a construct while terror becomes fact. The insane man who roams the streets of Old Delhi with a mirror is a meaningful, albeit trite, presence in the film as he is clearly meant to open our eyes to our role in the construction of the terrorist. To accept madness is, therefore, perhaps the sanest move, being, in this context, closest to the truth.

The media presence in the film is the opposite of this insane man. On the surface, the media is all about rationality – with access to interviews with policemen, local people and all those associated with the event, the attempt is clearly to represent the here-and-now immediacy of the situation. Except that there isn't one. Used with a great deal of self-consciousness, the Hindi news anchor (who agreed to caricature himself for the film) is the key player of this role. While in an ultra modern setting of a news channel studio, his language is that of legend. In one snippet of news that we hear, the words 'fear psychosis' are mentioned, but are then quickly pushed under the rug because treating the Monkey Man situation as investigative reportage, full of hard evidence, is more exciting for the viewer, where the attempt is to prove that there is actually substance to a news piece and a story is not, in fact, a tall tale.

Mehra's engagement with the idiom of terrorism that is available to the public is hence a counter-movement to rightwing groups and the role they play in creating a jingoistic language

at the moment. Consider, for instance, the statement by the Shiv Sena's Delhi unit in 2001, responding to the terror of the Monkey Man: "The ISI is behind it; 131 monkeys have come across the border to spread terror".⁸ There is a precision to this sentence that makes it believable, especially in the use of the number 131, which labours to lend authenticity to the claim. Mehra's film undoes this certainty, and the load of the real is reduced by introducing myth and legend.

Conclusion

Both *Delhi-6* and *Aamir*, therefore, start out with a common project: to combat prevalent terrorist discourse, especially as promoted by the media, and to do this by looking at the making of a terrorist. The process and impact of the two, however, is drastically different. In situating *Aamir* in one specific event, and in its use of heightened realism, Rajkumar Gupta's film remains the story of one individual. The structures of perception remain the same. At the end of the film, the image of the monster has not altered, it has only become more firm. There is a large kitty of such films being made across the world, and India is no exception. On the other hand, *Delhi-6* works retroactively – in other words, at a post-terrorism stage, where the issue is not one event but the language of accessing terrorism, in particular in its relationship with society.

Notes

1. Quoted from film critic Anupama Chopra's review of *Aamir*. Available at: http://movies.ndtv.com/movie_review.aspx?lang=hindi&id=313&moviename=%20Aamir (accessed 8 November 2009).
2. A sample opinion from a first-time blogger: "*Aamir* is a film which addresses a topic of today, which has been viewed with a one-dimensional perspective by the majority. Rajkumar Gupta presents another dimension, his own interpretation and his own opinion on the issue. The film shocks you. No one, at least yours truly, would have ever thought of viewing the issue from the perspective of the writer, and this is where lies the success of the writer. Right from the first few scenes, where *Aamir* Ali's baggage is checked, to the last scene, the writer compels you to think. Kudos to Rajkumar Gupta for daring to tread the path less traveled..." Available at: <http://themoviema-niacabhishek.blogspot.com/2008/06/movie-review-aamir.html> (accessed 8 November 2009). Yet another review says, "The film is based completely on the lives of Muslims in general and how they are provoked and manipulated by some very sick people and these are those people that have damaged their community the most... *Aamir* is one of the progressive Muslims with modern thinking and he is trapped by a Muslim leader who kidnaps his family and blackmails him to act as he says. He then forces him to do some things or else he would kill his family". Available at: <http://bollywoodrated.wordpress.com/2008/06/19/aamir-movie-review/> (accessed 8 November 2009).
3. Alphonse Roy, Rajkumar Gupta and Rajeev Khandelwal were in conversation with Ranjani Mazumdar in *New Delhi* during the 11th *Osian's Cinefan Festival*, October 2009. While speaking at length about the various photography techniques used in this film, Roy emphasised that the influence on him while filming *Aamir* was of *cinéma vérité*.
4. The concept of the city as the site of ruin is inspired by Ranjani Mazumdar's article "Ruin and the Uncanny City: Memory, Despair and Death in Parinda" in *Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life* (Sarai, CSDS+The Society for Old & New Media, Delhi, 2002) Available at: http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/02-the-cities-of-everyday-life/05ruin_uncanny.pdf (accessed 15 November 2009).
5. Interview with Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra from *NDTVMovies.com*, 16 February 2009. Available at: http://movies.ndtv.com/movie_story.aspx?id=ENTEN20090083702 (accessed 13 November 2009).
6. Walter Benjamin [1928]. "A Berlin Chronicle". In *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (Verso Classics, 1992, London).
7. Henri Lefebvre [1974]. Extract from *The Production of Space*. Quoted in (ed.) Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (Routledge, 1997, New York).
8. From a report in *The Hindustan Times*, 17 May 2001. Quoted in Aditya Nigam, "Theatre of the Urban: The Strange Case of the Monkey Man" in *Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life*, op. cit.