

In FIRAAQ of justice

Nandita Das

Cinema has often been a powerful medium to speak truth to power. Amu told a tale of Sikh genocide and Ram Ke Naam told us about Babri mosque demolition and the rise of the Hindutva agenda. Parzania left a powerful message to those who sing hosannas to India's rise as a major economic power. Firaq once again shows ideological poverty and human response to mental bankruptcy blessed by the establishment.

Firaq' is an Urdu word which means both separation and quest. I chose to call my film on the aftermath of the Gujarat riots that, because it reminds us that we have a choice over how we want to see what is around us — a world rife with separation and division, or a quest for peace and justice. In fact, the one choice we can make is to choose our own response to violence. And I intended Firaq to be a small mirror that shows us not only who we are, but also who we can be.

Now that I look back on my directorial debut feature, I realise that making the film was only half the journey. Taking it to audiences is the second half that requires not just promotional skills but also the perseverance to peel away the layers of misunderstanding and resistance towards the 'other,' and questioning anything under the surface of our 'civilised' lives. While I have enjoyed taking Firaq to festivals abroad, what I was really waiting for was its release in India. I felt that it was here that people would relate most to the context and understand its nuances.

Cinema, unlike poetry or painting, is not a personal art. You make it to share it with people and engage with them. As an actor, I resolved the dilemma of wanting to be part of stories that need to be told even if not many people actually wanted to hear them, by choosing to do those roles. But as a director, I also wanted to reach out to as many people as I could, of course with the story I so wanted to tell.

For those who have still not seen Firaq, it is set a month after the Gujarat carnage of 2002 and deals with five different relationships and the impact of violence on their lives. Firaq is about how fear, prejudice, guilt and violence linger on much after their obvious manifestation is over. In fact, there is hardly any violence in my film and yet the fear and tension are palpable. The story traces the emotional journeys of ordinary people — some who are victims, some perpetrators and some who choose to watch silently.

It was not my desire to direct that led me to these stories. Instead, the stories that were festering inside me compelled me to direct. It had to do with waking up to newspapers full of violence, getting into conversations about religion and identity that would turn into polarised debates on "them versus us," meeting victims of violence at the relief camps, interacting with young college students who were finding their faith and idealism fading away, and many such life experiences that I needed to express. For me, making Firaq was cathartic.

The film has been made against all odds but the responses I have been getting have more than compensated for all the challenges I have faced since its inception. The film has no overt message that it hammers or prescribes. Its intent is best captured by one of the reviewers who titled his piece "Firaq holds a mirror to national healing." With sectarian divisions on the rise, what we need is

not just protest but also healing and that takes time. One of the viewers from Bangalore emailed me, "Not often does one come across a story that so subtly drifts inside you and raises questions you have been afraid to ask." That is all I have attempted to do. Or as somebody said, "you gave a voice to so much that remained silent."

There are emails, calls and SMSs from people I have known and not known and none of them stops with a congratulatory note. What has overwhelmed me is their need to engage with their observations, share their stories, go into the depths of their feelings, question their own prejudices, surface their own fears, so much so that people wanted to reconnect days after they had seen it, to express the complex emotions that the film evoked in them.

Of course, the film has also evoked other sorts of reactions. There are some who feel that it is a "one-sided story," that it is "pro-Muslim" or that it is "not balanced." It clearly states at the beginning of the film that Firaq is a work of fiction based on a

thousand true stories. And I did want it to be true to the context of Gujarat, which sadly, was a carnage and not a riot. So if the reality itself is skewed, it would not be correct to balance it artificially. The blame belongs not to artists who represent that reality but to those who created that imbalance in the first place.

In any case, Firaq is not about pointing fingers. It looks at the tragedy from the only perspective that is morally valid — the victims — and doesn't revel in the heinous crimes of the perpetrators, even though they did occur. Above all, I wanted to evoke empathy, an emotion that we are fast forgetting.

I have also been asked the predictable question "why Gujarat and why not Kashmir?" As a storyteller, I wanted to respond to the world around me. The Gujarat carnage happened and affected me at a stage in my creative life where I could respond to it directly. Had I been at the same stage, say, when the Sikh genocide happened in

Delhi or when the exodus of Pandits from the Kashmir Valley was forced through terrorist acts, I probably would have made films concerning them. But there is a more fundamental issue at stake here: Muslims in Gujarat, Sikhs in Delhi and the plight of the Kashmiri Pandits are not competing tragedies over which sympathies must be traded. Worse still are those who try to use the suffering of one set of victims to justify or rationalise the suffering of others. Two wrongs don't ever make a right.

A feature film needs a context, a setting, but it doesn't mean that it cannot go beyond the context. In fact, the reason why people have been able to connect with Firaq in different parts of the world is that it has resonated with their contexts. I met a Sri Lankan Tamil who said this was a film about the Tamils and the Sinhalese. A woman from Cyprus that I met in Greece said it was about the people of Turkey and Cyprus and a man in Korea could see it in his context and shared his grandfather's stories of the Japanese and the Koreans.

Human emotions and predicaments are universal, and it is not just a lest-we-forget film, but there is no shying away from the fact that it deals with a deep-rooted divide that is surfacing more than ever. With elections round the corner, the use of violence and religion for political ends is not new to us. So now it is the choice we all need to make between the walls of separation and the quest for peace. Firaq is a means to an end, a journey that began seven years ago. Making sure it reaches its end is for all of us to decide. (The author is an actor and director. This piece appeared in The Hindu and is being published courtesy that newspaper.)



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