

Critique

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**Reclaiming Home, Reclaiming the Nation and  
*The Great Shamasuddin Family***



It felt like a coincidence that I watched Anusha Rizvi's *The Great Shamasuddin Family* (2025), barely a month after watching *Zakhm* (1997) again on OTT. *Zakhm*, for me, is a film that changed my perception about two things: being in love and being religious. This film marked the beginning of the communalization of Indian politics and the changing dynamics of both society and politics in post-1990 India. More than that, the film very strongly argues that love is the biggest religion and that the being who is in love is part of the absolute itself. Here, I am ignoring the divide of patriarchal and equality based love as it could be a separate matter of debate which is beyond the preview of this paper. Almost three decades after *Zakhm*,

when being nationalist means being religious in a particular manner, Anusha Rizvi came back with a satire that highlights the struggles of belonging for people who are not just a religious minority but also those who believe in free and critical thinking. Along with other types of representation, Bani Ahmad, a lead protagonist, in the film, represents well-educated, well-employed, free, and independent minded Muslim women in the heart of the capital of India. But at the same time, this representation is constituted of layers of intersectionality (religion, gender, divorced, and lonely). Bani is a middle-class, educated, independent, but at the same time divorced Muslim Woman. In a time and era when Hindi cinema is functioning as a means

of propaganda and ideologies for the politics of otherization, hate, and dehumanization, Muslim representations in Hindi cinema always exist in the binary of being nationalist or anti-national. Bani Ahmad in *TGSF* does not simply challenge that simplistic representation but also gives an alternative to this. She represents radical Muslim Indian women. Being radical, here, does not simply mean someone who defies the structure of inequalities of class, caste, gender, religion and sexuality. But both Bani and her friend Amitabh in the film are true representation of relational ontological beings. Their modern ways of being, their language, their belief systems confirm that they are liberal beings, but in actuality, they are completely different from an individualised, autonomous, separated self. They rather represent the socially embedded relational beings who believe in interrelations and interconnections of beings apart from their immediate differences of religious and positional differences. It is this thinking of imagining the one in an equal and emotional relationship with the other is something that is truly radical in contemporary India. Both Bani and her friend Amitabh are true metaphors of that kind of relational radicalism. It is this belief in shared, relational connected ontologies is the distinctive feature of Indian epistemologies. Any free-thinking Indian intellectuals across caste, class, gender, sexual and religious identities believes in shared understanding of relational self. It is this believe in 'relational self' which is under threat in contemporary India. Indians who think beyond the separate categories and fixed identities, who imagine the self in mutual relationship with other, who believe in critical

and free thinking commonly, share this common threat of being categorised as anti-national.



The story of the film revolves around a group of Muslim women who belong to *TGSF*, but they break all stereotypes of Muslim women's representation in earlier Hindi cinema. In Hindi cinema, where Muslim women are either depicted as marginalised and oppressed as *tawaif* or nautch women or as women full of etiquette, beauty, and courtesy in the film like *Chaudhvin Ka Chand*, *Mere Mahboob*, Muslim women in *TGSF* counters both kind of representation. Young generation of Muslim women in the film challenge all types of gender and religious stereotypes. They are educated, believe in reciprocity in marriage, modern, and independent women. The elderly Muslim women too broke the stereotypical representation of helpless, suffering mothers or grandmothers or an ageing *Tawaif*; rather in *TGSF* all of them represent privileged middle-class housewives. Farida Jalal as Akko represents the pain of denial of primary citizenship in her own ancestral land.

The visual aesthetic of film, too, challenges the dominant traits of previously made Muslim socials. Bani Ahmad's home in *TGSF*, looks completely similar to any other modern Indian household. It is located

somewhere near Humayun Tomb. Thus, the film subtly registers the presence of the Islamic architectures in Delhi as a prominent aspect of its historicity and grandness. But when the camera comes inside the house, Bani Ahmad's flat resembles any other middle-class modern academician's household. The visual aesthetic of the room distances itself from the grand Islamicate cultural traits and places a distinctive modern aesthetic at the heart of the house. So, everywhere in the house, modern paintings of S. H. Raja are there with its unique modern aesthetic. And at the same time, in an important frame, the camera captures three sisters on the rooftop where the great Mughal architecture, the Humayun Tomb, is situated in the backyard. Camera in the film beautifully argues that no matter how hard we try to erase the memories of shared cohabitation of different communities in the capital, the architecture constantly remind the plural and syncretic cosmopolitan ethos of city of Delhi.

Coming back to the story, as an audience, in the very first shot, we become participants in Bani's tension as she has a deadline to fulfil. The film starts with this tension, and with each bell at Bani's house, it gradually and mildly pulls us into the bundle of tensions, trauma, and fear that middle-class radical India is facing. With each ring of Bani's doorbell, the film introduces us to multitudes of stereotypes and breaks them one by one.

The first Bell deals with the practice of *Mahr* in Islamic marriages. The depiction of *Mahr* is not new in Hindi cinema. Long back in 1991 through films like *Sanam Bewafa*, Hindi cinema dealt with the customary

practice of *Mahr* adversely. It villainises the *Mahr* as a practice which transactionalised and commercialised women's dignity, value, and respect within the husband's family. *TGSF* counters this prejudicial portrayal in a lighter mode. Iram, otherwise a completely naïve being, practises financial agency through the cash amount of *Mahr*. She uses this money to help her office friend who is in a sort of financial crisis. The film subtly registers that *Mahr* not only gives a legal and contractual turn to Islamic marriages, but it also effectively provides financial support and agency to divorced women. The film also underscores the impact of demonetisation on these kinds of social and cultural transactions in directly. It has been never mentioned directly in the film but *Mahr* received by Iram in cash is a matter of tension for the family. It subtly highlights the disconnect between financial policy like this and its larger impact on women across communities.

With the next bell, the film introduces us to one of the most important characters, Amitabh, Bani's childhood friend. Amitabh confirms the stereotype of typical progressive intellectual. In the world of academia, we have multiple examples of people like Amitabh. A theoretician who can theorise anything and everything. He is the type of person for whom dropping in at a friend's house with a much younger woman all of a sudden, shamelessly peeping into somebody else's laptop and always being ready to theorise everyday issues without deep thinking is completely normal. Bani is not at all happy with his sudden arrival. She doesn't tell him directly but she literally wants him to leave. But Amitabh is a kind of friend who hardly bothers. Despite Bani's consistent

annoyance, he remained in the house carefreely and comfortably. He looks more comfortable and free in Bani's house than Bani herself. The film subtly establishes his connection and familiarity to the friend's house. It shows that despite disagreements, differences of personality and worldview, these two people are related to each other to such an extent that they can bear with each other's different ways of being. It got proven when Bani witnessed Amitabh's intimate moment with his girlfriend. Bani shows her anger but bears with it at last.

Amitabh's girlfriend exemplifies the paradox of progressiveness and liberalism. On one hand, she is a free spirited woman who is independent regarding her choices and interest in lives (as she decided to fall in love with her professor), On the other hand, she is constantly concerned about the professor's relationship with Bani. She looks at Bani and her family from the stereotypical religious lens. Her curiosity in Bani's divorce is not because she is concerned about Bani, but it is more because she too looks at Bani through the religiously homogeneous lens. She is extremely curious and empathetic regarding Bani's divorce, as she feels that Bani just like other Muslim women too is a victim of the practice of 'triple talaq' in Islam. It is this homogeneous and inferior gaze of seeing Muslim women has been confronted and protested throughout the film. Amitabh's girlfriend Latika's liberalism proved to be superficial when she asked Bani in Kitchen that "you too got divorced through TT (talaq, talaq, talaq)." Here, Latika too surrendered to the gaze of otherisation. Through Bani's furious response to Latika's question, the film subtly critiques civilisational otherisation and

cultural superiority syndrome through which most Hindus in India is suffering these days. Each Muslim woman is not a victim of Islam's religious patriarchy, and each divorce of Muslim women is not triple talaq. Bani Ahmad's divorce could be an outcome of women's choice and agency to break against unsuccessful marriage.

Humaira, a cousin of Bani, not just breaks another pigeonhole of married Muslim women but also Indian Muslim women. At first, she symbolises a Muslim woman who shares a romantic relationship with her husband based on mutuality and equality. Secondly, Humaira represents the sets of Muslim Indians whose sense of belonging to this nation is still intact. Despite being marginalised, and excluded as outsiders, they have no confusion that India is their homeland where they were born and raised together. In contemporary India, this conviction and feelings of Indian Muslims are constantly under challenge.

With the next few bells, the film introduces us to a group of elderly Muslim women of *TGSF*. Like many elderly Indian women fascinated with religious tourism these days (as witnessed during the recent *Kumbh*), Akko Bani's paternal aunt and her female followers within the family are planning a religious tour after following a new judgement that allows adult Muslim women to embark on religious journeys without male escorts but in groups. Akko (Farida Zalal) symbolises old upper-class Muslim women in India who still believe that nothing can match their delicacy and test culturally.

Here, the film explores the intergenerational differences among two sets

of women within a family. Elderly women claim superiority in terms of etiquettes and human bonding over internal differences, while the younger ones are struggling with fear, politics of hurt, divorce, hate, and respect for individual choices. The film highlights this generational gap, which emerges as a common site of struggle within any Indian household irrespective of their religiosity. Despite intergenerational differences, both sets of these Muslim women commonly are the sufferers and survivors of rising Islamophobia and the declining of both secularism and communal harmony in the country.

The next bell introduces us to ‘Joheb’, Bani’s cousin, and Pallavi, his marital interest. As an interfaith couple they approach Bani for help. Through this bell, the film critically comments on the communalisation of inter-community love and marriages in India. It questions the dominant narrative of ‘Love Jihad’, which transformed love- and choice- based marriages into a site of inter-community conflict and politics. Women's agency and consent in interfaith marriages have been subordinated to the dominant narrative of elopement and abduction. In a farcical manner, the film questions the politicisation of inter-community love. *TGSF* comically asserts that an act of elopement is the only way out for inter-faith couples in contemporary India. The film subtly establishes that human emotions, mutual love, and consensual agreements based on the consent of both partners are few of the key factors responsible for modern marriages for new generations in India. It also emphasises that the conditions of acceptance of choice-based marriages are changing across

communities. Akko embraces Pallavi as her daughter-in-law the moment she receives care and attention from Pallavi as a doctor. In *TGSF*, the family becomes a metaphor of nation. But unlike the patriarchal feudal family as a metaphor of masculine nation, family in *TGSF* represents feminine nation as it is based on diversity and differences yet thrives on familial values of mutual love and ethics of care.



It is quite evident that popular Hindi cinema is embracing the path of propaganda, ideologies, and hyper-masculinity these days. It is in this context, *TGSF* stands out as a film that counters that dominant trope and introduces us to a spectacle of protest. It introduces us to the alternative of the feudal family form as the dominant trope of the patriarchal nation in Hindi cinema. We have been exposed to several conception of family in *TGSF*. It’s a women’s world where negotiation is possible despite hundreds of differences. It appears as fresh air not just because it challenges the politics of hate, otherisation, and rising Islamophobia and breaks various stereotypes, but most importantly, *TGSF* should be considered a film of resistance, as *The Great Shammasuddin Family* represents a family constituted of a

group of women who govern themselves through a principle of love rather than power. Secondly, however, *TGSF* reflects on the fear and uncertainties of Muslim India, nonetheless, it also celebrates the sharedness of our existence irrespective of multiple differences. *TGSF* is more about an exploration of that 'sharedness', that 'common ground'. The film explores that common ground of fear felt by each of us who believe in pluralism, radicalism, critical thinking and academic freedom irrespective of our religiosity. The film shares the common crisis where academics across the globe are facing a threat of anti-intellectualism. Amitabh is a figure who represents that common ground. Although the film is extremely critical of the pseudo-liberalism of academia which Amitabh signifies in the film, he also reminds each of us as liberals to perform our basic task. The film beautifully inscribes the true role of progressive liberals in India.

Rather than just cribbing and sobbing about otherisation of Muslims, which may merely signal their progressiveness, they must begin with more constructive roles. Like Amitabh, they need to engage with this hatred and otherisation in their everyday lives. In this time of crisis and fear, intellectuals, especially intellectuals of minority communities, need people like Amitabh. Just like Amitabh, we will have to create an environment where we can overthrow this binarisation of us/them and insider/outsider. So for many of us, this film is less about fear and hatred and more about the friendship of Muslim Bani and Hindu Amitabh and the recklessness of their

friendship irrespective of various differences. This film is about a gentle reminder by Amitabh about the idea of India based on the principles of Gandhi's and Tagore's civilisational cosmopolitanism and heterogeneity rather than Western nationalism and homogeneity. It is this heterogeneity that is the root of cosmopolitan India, where both Amitabh and Bani grew up together with love for their nation. Amitabh reminds Bani that they grew up together in this country. In the schools they sang the national anthem together. He reminds Bani that just like home, national belonging is to nurture itself on the idea of shared-cohabitation. Just like home, nation too flourishes on the principle of coexistence and civic virtues. In the end, the film is about love, friendship, coexistence, human bonding, and free thinking. It is this love, freedom of thought and expression, mutual trust and faith in human bonding that are commonly under threat in contemporary India. Whoever has some belief in shared living as a source of that human bonding can sense that threat. *TGSF* registers a common threat against intellectualism and radical form of existence and emphasises the importance of human bonding based relational self as core of the idea of India. Here, this film comes closer to films like *Zakhm*, as one of its song goes like, *maine to pyar ko hi majhab banaliyaa hai, Is dil ko dil ki duniya ka rab bana liya hai, Iman ho gaya kya mera kharab likhna...* and both these films ask similar questions: what should be the core of our existence, love and trust or hate and fanaticism?

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