

FILM

FIRAAQ

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Nandita DaS' "Firaaq—Search / Separation" (Hindi, Colour, 101 mins) in an ellipse in Ahmedabad, spread over two days, just a month after the Gujarat communal riots and killings of 2002. There is a pre-credits insertion stating that the work of film fiction is based on true stories. Two lungi-clad men dig up a ground, and drag dead bodies in the mass grave. A truck arrives with more dead bodies. One of the Muslim labourers gets agitated when he notices the dead body of a Hindu woman, clad in a sari, with vermilion on forehead. He almost strikes the dead woman with a shovel. A month later traffic on the roads is normal. Muneera (Shahan Goswami), a Muslim girl returns to her old locality in a three-wheeler auto-rickshaw, holding her baby. There are armed police camps in the vicinity. Muneera's ground floor tenement has been burnt and devastated. All belongings have been looted. The auto-driver husband, Hanif (Nowaz) screams and shouts abuses. Muneera recovers a few currency notes from an old tin box. Hanif has suspicions and assaults Muneera.

At a Hindu middle class home, there is drab food, as vegetables are yet to reach the local markets, in full supply. Images of the Gujarat riots are flashed by NDTV. Housewife, Arati (Deepti Naval) suffers from terror frights, recalling memories of an afternoon when she turned away a Muslim woman, when she was banging her door, to escape assault from a Hindu mob. Arati pours drops of burning cooking oil on her hands, to experience the pain of being burnt to death. Her husband, Sanjay (Paresh Rawal) puts off the TV news on the riots. At another enclave, Jagir Khan, (Naseeruddin Shah) an aged musician is fixing his sarod. His assistant, Karim Mia (Raghuvir Yadav) tries to repair the TV set. There are only three crumbs of candies, and Karim is worried if a large number of music lovers arrive. In another tale, a Hindu-Muslim couple, husband Sameer Sheikh (Sanjay Suri) and wife, Anu / Anuradha Desai (Tisca Chopra) plan to relocate to Delhi. They are affluent, and Sameer's show room-cum-shop has been looted in the riots. Their lives are now confined to packing boxes. While driving along, Anu's car scrapes, Sanjay's scooter. Though it was the fault of the scooterist, Sameer in the co-driver's seat pays off Sanjay. At home, Anu's sister watches children on TV recounting the horrors of the riots. Hindu wife, Arati presses her father-in-law's legs.

Muneera and Hanif try to fix up their house. Hanif wants to know who was behind the destruction, and soon leaves on his auto. Khan sings light classical songs and presents a box of sweets to Maya, the Hindu doctor's little daughter. Many music lovers fail to come. Sameer is worried that the Hindu political leaders had data bases of all Muslim businesses. While shopping for vegetables, Arati meets a lost boy, Mossaid, who relates that his mother has been killed, and his father not traceable. Arati brings the boy home as a domestic help, and gives him a Hindu name, Mohan. The father-in-law gives his dentures to Mossaid for cleaning. At an Islamic school boys and girls pray. Travelling along a road, Khan stops the auto-rickshaw, and scratches for the 'mazaar' grave of a Muslim saint, Wali. But the mazaar has been destroyed by the rioters. With another Muslim girl, Muneera does odd jobs of applying 'mehendi' on face and hands of Hindu women, at Hindu weddings. When religious zealots knock on

the door to collect donations for a Lakshmi temple, Sameer changes his name to Sameer Desai, where Desai is actually Anu's surname. Of course, Sameer in Arabic means a companion who talks to one in the evening. Mossaid relates the ghastly riots to Arati, and does not want to return to the security camp for refugees. When TV shows snaps of young girls killed, Arati asks of husband, Sanjay whether he had honour? When Sanjay slaps Arati, Mossaid opens the door and flees. Sanjay had participated in the lootings.

Auto driver Hanif and his friend Munna visit a Muslim locality, and recount the burings. Hanif wants a pistol. Five Muslim goons in search of firearms catch lost Mossaid. The TV displays snippets of looting from shops. Sameer and Anu identify Sanjay, the scooterist who had hit their car, as one of the looters. A fear psychosis grips Sameer, and the couple re-consider their plans of moving to Delhi. There are security cordons in the city. Muneera and her friend are stopped for identification. A Hindu doctor writes down musical notes from Khan, and takes Karim to hospital when he cuts his fingers, while chopping vegetables. Hindu women discuss that all Muslim rickshaw drivers are to be avoided. Sameer and Anu stop at a roadside snack bar for an omelette. Disbelief sieves the shop owner and the policeman when Sameer discloses that he is a Muslim, married to a Hindu. A mentally retarded deaf and dumb boy, helps Hanif and his friends retrieve a pistol from Suleiman's burnt out shop. Police raid the Muslim localities in search of weapons. During a chase along lanes and rooftops, Hanif halts for a while in front of a Hindu house. Police sirens blare. From a second floor balcony, a man drops a large stone on Hanif's head, and he collapses. Fear awakes Sameer in the middle of the night, but he decides to stay in Gujarat. Khan continues singing light classical. Next morning, the little boy, Mossiad reaches the refugee camp, where Muslim refugees are huddled on the verandah of an old building. Children play marbles.

Shuchi Kothari and Nandita Das' script places the burning riots of Gujarat in the background, and the principal characters in the foreground. The diverse characters in the post-riots scenario, and the disparate episodes in the trajectory of the narrative, are integrated to build a troubling vision of a city divided by religious fanaticism. Ravi Chandran's mobile camera observes the tragic human and the TV riots news analysis with attention. The episodes carry a conventional note, and similar to the TV displays, are repetitive. While the search for a father and the separation away from house, whenever outdoors, is always distressing, the search for a pistol with bullets and the search for the killers abounds in suspense and intrigues. The police chase is action oriented, without any tenderness for the riot victims, and the falling stone slab to cause a fatality appears theatrical. The interjections of rage and suffering, along with Khan's personal world of music, do not strengthen introspection on the riots.

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