

# Bollywood as National(ist) Cinema

## Violence, Patriotism and the National- Popular in *Rang De Basanti*

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This essay sets out to explore the relationship between violence, patriotism and the national-popular within the medium of film by examining the Indian film-maker Rakeysh Mehra's recent Bollywood hit, *Rang de Basanti* (*Paint It Saffron*, 2006). The film can be seen to form part of a body of work that constructs and represents violence as integral to the emergence of a national identity, or rather, its recuperation. *Rang de Basanti* is significant in contemporary Indian film production for the enormous resonance it had among South Asian middle-class youth, both in India and in the diaspora. It rewrites, or rather restages, Indian nationalist history not in the customary pacifist Gandhian vein, but in the mode of martyrdom and armed struggle. It represents a more 'masculine' version of the nationalist narrative for its contemporary audiences, by retelling the story of the Punjabi revolutionary Bhagat Singh as an Indian hero and as an example for today's generation. This essay argues that its recuperation of a violent anti-colonial history is, in fact, integral to the middle-class ethos of the film, presenting the viewers with a bourgeois nationalism of immediate and timely appeal, coupled with an accessible (and politically acceptable) social activism. As the sociologist Ranjini Majumdar noted, 'the film successfully fuels the middle-class fantasy of corruption being the only problem of the country'.<sup>1</sup>

A focus on this film also invites interesting questions on the modes of representation of the Indian anti-colonial struggle and the example it subsequently set for other liberation movements around the world. The history of the Indian nationalist movement, read in terms of its espousal of non-violence, would play a determining role in the development of anti-colonial thought and practice, especially in African liberation movements in Senegal, Ghana and South Africa.<sup>2</sup> But Gandhian pacifism, characterised by civil disobedience and the rejection of violence, would also be vehemently contested by another influential

1. Quoted in Namrata Joshi, 'My Yellow Icon', *Outlook India*, online edition, 20 February 2006, available at: <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?230266>.

2. See Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001, for a detailed history of African socialism and the influence of Gandhian ideals.

strand of anti-colonial thought represented by Frantz Fanon. In this version of nationalism, violence is seen as central to the mobilisation of people in the liberation struggle; it is shown to be wholly justified by the execrable actions of the coloniser or the postcolonial oppressor, the corrupt nation-state, also because it is seen as a last resort. Violence is used when the oppressor cannot understand any other language: 'colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning qualities. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.'<sup>3</sup>

How does Mehra manage convincingly to equate the need to combat British colonial rule with that of opposing the contemporary Indian democratic state in the film? He does this by divesting Bhagat Singh of his revolutionary Marxist ideals and repackaging him as a hero for urban youth. Significantly, Mehra claims that he did not intend to be anti-establishment; the message of the film suggests the need for (violent) regime change, not social revolution. It suggests that there is a 'true' Indian nation among the middle-class youth of today, the ideal heirs of Bhagat Singh and his collaborators, and not the corrupt political class that is hegemonic and dictatorial like the British during the Raj.

The film can be read as an example of nationalist cinema. But the notion of nationalism in cinema is contradictory, 'for images both anchor and "liberate" the signifier'; viewers tend to re-contextualise, or extrapolate, filmic iconography for their own purposes, as the afterlife of *Rang de Basanti* amply demonstrated.<sup>4</sup> *Rang de Basanti* is a 'popular' film, a product of commercial Hindi cinema, though as we shall see, perhaps it is less 'popular' than would appear at a first viewing, and many critics felt it had markedly elite features that distinguished it from 'ordinary' Bollywood fare.

A classic example of nationalist cinema is Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film, *The Battle of Algiers*, about the Algerian war of independence against the French colonisers. It bears some interesting resemblances to *Rang de Basanti*, despite the distinct differences between the two films in other respects. *The Battle of Algiers* also represents a justification of violence in the context of a national struggle for liberation. While both films are about nation, however, there is also one profound difference: *The Battle of Algiers* is about a nation in the making, while *Rang de Basanti* represents a nation that was supposedly established through sacrifice and the freedom struggle, but whose 'heroic' roots need to be revived. For this reason, *Rang de Basanti* presents a double narrative, the heroic struggle of the freedom fighters in the 1920s–1930s (in sepia tones) juxtaposed with the contemporary plot of young Indians slowly rediscovering their patriotism. Nationalist cinema usefully illustrates the constant tension between the 'pedagogical' and 'performative' aspects of nation-forming. Nation-forming is best exemplified as a dialogic narrative process, 'a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address'.<sup>5</sup> The monumentalising narratives of nationhood that often coincide with elite or official perspectives cannot be seamlessly read into the everyday popular notions of the national, the 'rags, scraps, patches of everyday life' that perform 'nation' on a quotidian level. And here commercial or popular cinema plays an interesting role in its ambivalent relationship to nation, because, on the one hand,

3. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans Constance Farrington, Grove Press, New York, 1968, p 61
4. Sumita Chakravarty, 'Fragmenting the Nation: Images of Terrorism in Indian Popular Cinema', in *Cinema and Nation*, eds Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie, Routledge, London, 2000, p 225
5. Homi Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *Nation and Narration*, ed Homi Bhabha, Routledge, London, 1990, p 297

‘commercial cinema’s mass appeal provides precisely a sense of the “view from below”, a glimpse of the hopes, fears, and aspirations of ordinary people that is behind the natural fit between cinema and nation’.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, ‘what makes many mainstream cinemas “national” is their (broad) identification with official versions of national priorities, of which maintaining nation-state unity is the key’.<sup>7</sup> The risk is that often official nationalist discourse co-opts and directs this ‘view from below’, presenting as ‘spontaneous’ and ‘popular’ a national sentiment that is actually informed by middle-class and elite interests. This will be my line of reading of *Rang de Basanti*: the subtitle of the film, ‘A Generation Awakens’, refers to a very specific one: the urban university-going middle-class youth of India. While recognising that the film has had a powerful transnational appeal – it earned \$30 million as a film in worldwide distribution – I mainly address the film here as the product of a national film industry. *Rang de Basanti* was both viewed and analysed as a specifically nationalist film that actively promoted a sense of patriotism. In this sense, it was likened to the recent Hindi films *Sarfarosh* (1999), *Lagaan* (2001), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005), and *Fanaa* (2006), all starring Aamir Khan, and all presenting a nationalist theme.

In terms of popular versus elite versions of the nation, it is interesting to examine the ways in which *The Battle of Algiers*, the original title of which was to be *Birth in Sorrow*, narrated the coming about of Algerian independence. Here nation is not yet identified with state formation, and official narratives have not yet crystallised into elite pronouncements or nationalist hagiography. Gillo Pontecorvo was drawn to the Algerian independence struggle partly because of his past role in the liberation of Italy from Fascism through armed struggle. His work established a clear link between anti-colonialism and anti-Fascism, and the experiences of the Algerian freedom fighters resonated deeply with his memories of being a *partigiano* during the Resistance. In the following discussion I will examine *Rang de Basanti* with occasional references to *The Battle of Algiers* in order to identify the different ways in which violence is mobilised as a necessary form of sacrifice and aggression for the nation. Films that represent political violence as forging the nation contextualise it within a situation of ‘national-popular’ struggle. But these forms of the national-popular take on very different configurations in the two films, which have less to do with the historical and political differences between the Algeria of the 1960s and the India of 2006, and more to do with the sort of ‘imagined’ national audience that these films aim for. I use the term national-popular here as it was designated by Antonio Gramsci in relationship to culture. Gramsci argued that Italian intellectuals of the 1930s had been unable to articulate and develop a version of culture that would appeal to the masses. Gramsci’s notion of the national-popular as an essential step in bringing about a convergence of diverse class interests and establishing a working-class hegemony was profoundly influential for Italian neo-realism of which the film-maker Pontecorvo was an heir. In Italy, ‘the national-popular was adopted as the left intelligentsia’s mandate after World War II in their use of progressive and socialist realism in various art forms, including film and literature’.<sup>8</sup> The national-popular also had a ‘tremendous significance’ for the Indian cultural context after independence, and as Jyotika Viridi argues:

6. Chakravarty, op cit, p 224

7. Ibid

8. Jyotika Viridi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2003, p 10

... 1950s Indian cinema, poised as national-popular culture, passed over into commercial interests with little or no connection with the left and instead began faithfully serving the interest of the bourgeoisie. This cinema represents bourgeois hegemony successfully, straddling an alliance with the working class... Thus while the industry faithfully articulates the interests and values of the bourgeoisie, all classes, especially working-class audiences, identify with it.<sup>9</sup>

In doing so, commercial Hindi cinema actually reverses Gramsci's aspirations for national-popular culture as a unifying force for different class interests, especially that between the intellectuals and the masses; in other words, it is instrumental in bringing about a bourgeois hegemony. In *Rang de Basanti* we see this regressive version of the national-popular in action. By focusing on the urban middle class as the sector of society that can ultimately solve the ills of the nation, it elides any possibility of alliance with the working-class or the rural poor which does not entail the dominance of the bourgeoisie over these other groups. Both the film and its reception are very much in line with other significant national(ist) films produced by the Bombay film industry. 'Thus while the industry faithfully articulates the interests and values of the bourgeoisie, all classes, especially working-class audiences, identify with it.'<sup>10</sup>

### THE USES OF REALISM

On the face of it, *The Battle of Algiers* and *Rang de Basanti* share a common formal feature: they both aspire to the condition of realist films. Realism 'is not so much a matter of the object of representation but a mode of textual organisation of knowledge, a hierarchical layering of discourses'. Realism establishes a coincidence between representation and referent in that it operates as a form of meta-language that seeks to deny its own status as a narrative mode, because of 'its ambition to become a transparent medium for making visible the meanings immanent in the object-language world'.<sup>11</sup> Realism, initially used by critics as a formal and aesthetic category to analyse literary texts, later passed into film studies. In cinema, the camera fulfils the function of a metalanguage:

'The narrative of events – the knowledge which the film provides of how things really are – is the metalanguage in which we can talk of the various characters in the film.'... What is significant here is the implication that in cinema the metalanguage moves closer to the condition of invisibility, while remaining identifiable in the traces of the work of narration.<sup>12</sup>

The difference between *The Battle of Algiers* and *Rang de Basanti* lies in their radically different ideological uses of realism. *The Battle of Algiers*, which portrays the Algerian struggle to achieve national independence through an epic narrative form that shows Pontecorvo's debt to Italian neo-realism, displays some of the characteristics of what M Madhava Prasad calls 'nationalist realism'. Nationalist realism 'finds itself functioning as one of the mechanisms of the modern state's hegemonic project, giving *substance* to the state's claim to represent the "nation" it encompasses'. The nation, in the film of national realism, is presented as the 'discourse of the state'.<sup>13</sup> Pontecorvo's film, released in 1966 after

9. Ibid

10. Ibid

11. M Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p 58

12. Colin MacCabe quoted in Prasad, op cit, p 59

13. Prasad, op cit, p 61

Algerian independence, and thus at a time in which the Algerian state had already become a reality, was commissioned by Yacef Saadi, an ex-leader of the FLN (the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale) and produced by an Algerian production company, Casbah Films. In its original screenplay, Saadi had sought to present a markedly 'hagiographic' account of the Algerian war of liberation but, in accepting the commission, Pontecorvo made it a condition that he be allowed to rewrite the screenplay with the help of his collaborator Franco Solinas in a less celebratory and more 'objective' mode.<sup>14</sup> In making the film he developed his own distinctive cinematic language that had been influenced by neo-realist films such as Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà* (1946), which focused on the liberation of Italy on the part of the Italian Resistance and the Allied Forces. The innovative impact of Pontecorvo's film also lay in transposing an aesthetic mode that had been used to represent national struggles for a distinctly national(ist) purpose, namely with the aim of cementing a postwar Italian identity that distanced itself from Fascism and invested in the republican and democratic ideals of the reborn nation-state, into the context of an anti-colonial war of liberation against a European power. *The Battle of Algiers* thus both supports and complicates Prasad's notion of a 'national realist' cinema.

However, Pontecorvo's realism is undeniably different, both formally and ideologically, from that of *Rang de Basanti*. In analysing this film, Prasad's articulation of what he calls 'Hollywood realism' is particularly helpful as a form that both differs from nationalist realism and presents itself as an 'aspirational mode' for Bombay film-makers. A developmentalist mentality has often plagued Indian film studies and the Indian film industry as a whole; realism is seen as the 'true historical essence' of cinema, so Hindi cinema in particular, with its distinctly non-realist aesthetics, has often been characterised as 'not-yet-cinema' when measured against the standards of a certain desired 'reality-effect' that is purportedly best exemplified by Western films. *Rang de Basanti* went further than most Bollywood hits to satisfy the demands of a certain Western-style realism in cinema. It was not by chance that it was chosen to be India's entry for the Academy Awards nomination for Best Foreign Film in 2006, though it generated a heated discussion in the Indian press about whether it would have enough 'cross-cultural' appeal to please the Western Academy members. This sharper focus on realism, combined with a patriotic theme, helped to make it one of the defining films of the 2006 Hindi cinema season.

### ***RANG DE BASANTI: WHICH GENERATION AWAKENS?***

*Rang de Basanti* will be analysed here as a commercial version of a 'nationalist' film that stages a justification of violence as essential for nation-building, rewriting Indian history along these lines. At its release, *Rang de Basanti: A Generation Awakens* seemed to inaugurate a new style of Bollywood film, still within the commercial genre but with apparently wider social and artistic ambitions than the usual focus on love stories, family relationships and musical/dance sequences. The Bollywood film can be defined as the genre of commercial Hindi cinema that is aggressively orientated towards box office success and strong

14. Neelam Srivastava, 'Interview with the Italian Film Director Gillo Pontecorvo, 1 July 2003', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 7:1, 2005, p 111

audience appeal. These films ‘present an essentially conservative outlook, regardless of their cosmopolitan and MTV-inspired visual style’.<sup>15</sup> In the 1990s, the typical Bollywood film was the sort known as a ‘family entertainer’, with a focus on the dynamics and relationships of the extended family which usually end by reinforcing the patriarchal norm and resolving the conflicts within the great god, family:

These family entertainers present a commodified Indian identity arising from a specifically North Indian, Hindu cultural milieu, and based on stereotypes of the ‘joint family’. Thus, the success of such films has been interpreted by the media and the state as a celebration of ‘family values’ and an affirmation of ‘Indian tradition’ in an increasingly globalized world.<sup>16</sup>

The Hindi Bollywood film has become a major medium for exporting national Indian culture abroad, albeit from an ideologically conservative perspective. *Rang de Basanti*, while marking a distinct shift in its subject-matter from the ‘family entertainer’, nevertheless fits very well into another recent trend of Bollywood cinema, that of the resurgence of ‘nationalist’ films. This is a trend that links contemporary Bollywood to previous eras of Indian film-making, especially those films produced just after independence, such as *Mother India*. The subtitle *A Generation Awakens* emphasises the filial relationship between the nation and its citizens, and posits ‘blood-ties’ and familial bonds between older and younger generations of Indians as the basis of national cohesion. But the ‘nation as family’ metaphor clearly refers to the Indian middle class, the only group that can ultimately redeem and save the nation from its hijacking by corrupt politicians. Other more radical political solutions are not envisaged, through the simple expedient of not representing any other social classes on screen. The heroes at the centre of the novel are a group of middle-class youths whose lives are shown as aimless and pointless at first, but whose subsequent ‘awakening’ highlights the implicit potential of this post-*Midnight’s Children* generation. It is interesting to see how this awakening is linked to the influence of visual media, particularly film, on the characters.

When the film came out, Indian critics dubbed it a ‘class hit’, and a film for the ‘thinking viewer of the multiplexes’ rather than for a mass audience. The Bombay film industry draws a rather patronising distinction between distinct viewing publics, the ‘classes’ and the ‘masses’ (middle class versus working class). This socioeconomic classification, based on class, caste, geographical location, education and occupation is modelled on a developmentalist idea of the Indian population. The term ‘multiplex audience’ is a recently coined term in Bombay film marketing parlance that indicates:

... smaller-budget, off-beat films focusing on elite, urban life-styles produced for limited release [that] are now becoming economically viable due to the smaller sizes of theatres within multiplexes, since filling a 200 seat theatre is much easier than filling a 2,000 seat one.<sup>17</sup>

15. Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p 41

16. *Ibid*

17. *Ibid*, p 65

‘Multiplex’ thus becomes shorthand for a certain type of film viewer also represented by the more widely encompassing term ‘classes’: urbanised,

with more sophisticated tastes, 'preferring realism, able to handle a slower-paced film, open to innovation in subject-matter'.<sup>18</sup>

*Rang de Basanti* is part of a spate of recent Indian films about terrorism and its threat to the nation, such as *The Terrorist* (1999) and *Dil Se* (1998), in which the terrorist is often the villain. The focus on the terrorist in recent Indian cinema 'suggests that the nation is problematic, if not compromised, and needs to be rethought'. The nation and its terrorist opponents 'end up mirroring each other, for terrorist violence is spawned by state violence and oppression'.<sup>19</sup> In *Rang de Basanti*, what is initially denounced as terrorism is eventually reconfigured as an act of patriotism.

The film presents a historical narrative that recuperates political violence as a crucial moment in the Indian nationalist struggle, by focusing on the revolutionaries who were members of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (Army) and who are little studied by historians of the nationalist period. These were the Sikh political activist Bhagat Singh, Chandrasekhar Azad, Ramprasad Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan and Jatin Das (all characters in the film). The film evokes, in sepia tones, epic events that distinguished their armed struggle for the national liberation of India from the British coloniser. The filmic narrative is constructed as a series of shifts between the main story set in contemporary Delhi and the film that is being made about these revolutionaries. Sue, a young British woman, played by Alice Patten (ironically, the daughter of Christopher Patten, the last colonial governor of Hong Kong), comes to India to make a documentary about the revolutionary nationalist Bhagat Singh and his companions. The conceit of the film is that each of the revolutionaries is played by one of the modern-day characters in the main plot. The double filmic narrative has the function of offering up *this* history to contemporary Indian film-goers, rather than the more well-trodden trajectory of Gandhi and his endorsement of non-violence as the Indian method of anti-colonial struggle. The historical re-imagining that takes place in the film signals a weariness with Gandhian ideals that are identified with passivity and lack of vigorous (ie violent) action in defence of national values. When Sue initially tries to pitch her film to British television executives, they turn it down; while a story about Gandhi will 'sell', one about violent revolutionaries will not. It is implied that the history of India's struggle for independence has been entirely appropriated by a pacifist rewriting that sees Gandhi and his ideals of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* at the centre of the narrative, and as constitutive of a distinctly 'Indian' identity. This is the version of India that the British film producers believe will cater to Western audiences, perhaps because it fulfils certain Orientalist expectations about Indians being peace-loving and other-worldly. Perhaps the film is also implicitly invoking the enormous success enjoyed by Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* among Western viewers, though it has since been criticised for its highly problematic portrayal of the Indian nationalist movement.

It is no coincidence, then, that *Rang de Basanti*'s alternative national narrative, this effort to transform Bhagat Singh's story into a pedagogical moment of nation-forming for a younger generation of Indians, focuses on a group of nationalists who had felt let down by Gandhian methods of non-violence in the 1920s and who turned to armed violence as a more radical political solution. In 1922 Gandhi suddenly called off

18. *Ibid*, p 64

19. Chakravarty, *op cit*, p 232

the nationwide Non-Cooperation Movement that he had launched against the British. This, perhaps the first mass anti-colonial demonstration to take place in British India, was suspended by him because of the outbreak of political violence against a police station in Northern India. Many young activists were very disappointed by Gandhi's decision – they began to question the basic strategy of non-violence and 'to look for alternatives'.<sup>20</sup> Bhagat Singh and his companions 'had been enthusiastic participants in the non-violent Non-Cooperation Movement' and subsequently turned to armed violence.<sup>21</sup>

Sue's idea to make a film about the revolutionary has been inspired by reading the diary of her grandfather, a colonial official who put Bhagat Singh and others in prison and then oversaw their execution. *Rang de Basanti* opens with the scene of Bhagat Singh in prison, and the camera pauses on each of the revolutionaries in their cell just prior to their execution. This scene may remind the Indian film viewer of a classic black-and-white Hindi film made about the life of Singh, entitled *Shaheed* (*Martyr*, 1965), and starring the actor Manoj Kumar who was to become the very symbol of the patriotic hero on the Indian screen. In *Shaheed* the camera pauses on Bhagat Singh's face and those of his confederates before their execution. This film purportedly inspired Mehra to make *Rang de Basanti*; the patriotic song 'Mera rang de basanti chola' ('dye my clothes in saffron yellow') is an acknowledgement of Mehra's debt to the earlier film, as well the 'Punjabi inflection of the new patriotism, showcased in the song 'Pagri sambhal jatta', performed in *Shaheed*.<sup>22</sup>

When Sue reaches Delhi, her friend Sonia helps her with the auditions for the film by calling on university students. We are presented with a highly idealised and typically Bollywood version of Delhi University. However, what distinguishes the film from more mainstream Bollywood products (and what singles it out as a film for an 'elite' viewing audience, at least in the patronising expectations of the film critics) is a certain attention to realism, as when the protagonists are pictured eating in the *dhabas* and canteens around the university. The film was a hit with university-going students who immediately identified with the engaging characters, all attractive and hip university students. The viewing experience thus became more 'real' to them. The easy identification of the Indian youth audience with the protagonists of the film facilitated the subsequent activism that was supposedly inspired by the actions of the characters in the fictional feature.

As the auditions progress for Sue's film, however, it becomes increasingly obvious to her and Sonia that no young Indian of today is able to imitate the revolutionaries of yesterday. None of them is able to sing 'Bande Mataram', the familiar nationalist hymn, in a credible and heartfelt way – the most one of them can manage is a rap version of it. Sonia then takes Sue to visit her friends, a charming and handsome group of erstwhile university students who while away their time smoking and drinking. The leader of the pack is DJ, played by the Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan. Sue is immediately struck by their potential as the heroes of her film. In a scene at the *dhaba* run by DJ's mother, Sue converses with them about their sense of patriotism. She tells them the story of Bhagat Singh and his revolutionary companions. Karan, the moody, quiet character who eventually gets cast as Bhagat Singh, tells

20. Bipan Chandra, *India's Struggle for Independence 1857–1947*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1989, p 247

21. *Ibid*, p 247

22. Mukul Kesavan, 'I, The Nation', *Outlook India*, online edition, 21 May 2007, available at: <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?234669>



her that ‘all this talk of patriotism is boring’. Sue, shocked, says to him that ‘these guys gave their lives for the freedom of your country’. ‘What freedom?’ counteracts Aslam, who is Muslim. ‘Unemployment? Exploding population? Corruption?’ But Ajay, the fighter pilot, retorts that he believes in his country – otherwise why would he be fighting for it?

Sue gradually persuades the friends to act in her film with DJ’s help since he has fallen in love with her. The catalysing event through which the ‘awakening’ of the characters occurs in *Rang de Basanti* is the death of Ajay in a plane crash. The MiG fighter plane that he was piloting goes up in flames because of faulty parts, bought cheaply by the government from shady Russian dealers. To compound the tragedy, the Indian Defence Minister goes on television claiming that the crash was the pilot’s fault, in order to cover up the simmering corruption scandal. Both saddened and outraged, the friends organise a peaceful demonstration against the government in front of India Gate. But the Defence Minister gets wind of it and orders the police to beat up the demonstrators. The scene of the police bearing down on the demonstrators has a double function, both realistic and symbolic. It triggers an association with contemporary media images of police brutality and state violence, all too familiar to Indian viewers, and simultaneously historicises the moment as a symbolic link to the demonstrations of passive resistance led by Gandhi during the nationalist struggle for independence against the British. In the course of the demonstration, Ajay’s mother is wounded and falls into a coma. The subsequent images of her lying in a hospital room with a drip in her arm serve to remind viewers of another mother being drained of her vitality, an over-the-top reference to ‘Mother India’.

In the face of this patent injustice and violence on the part of the corrupt Indian state and its politicians, the friends decide to act, clearly inspired by the revolutionary narrative of Bhagat Singh and his companions that they have been rehearsing for Sue’s film. The friends become an exemplary nation, a utopian microcosm acting in the name of ‘true India’. They assassinate the Defence Minister in a transparent re-enactment of Bhagat Singh’s killing of the colonial policeman Saunders (scenes of the two episodes, past and present, are juxtaposed – reminding the viewer that the characters have already symbolically committed the act while they were playing their parts as revolutionaries in Sue’s film). But then, like Bhagat Singh, the friends feel the need to justify their actions publicly, to show the nation that they are not terrorists but were morally justified in what they did. In order to achieve this aim, they take over a radio station and proclaim their motivations to the nation. They are not terrorists: terrorists kill innocent people, and the Defence Minister is far from innocent. Moreover, Karan declares that ‘we don’t belong to any political party. We are just five students from Delhi University.’ But all the friends die as martyrs to their cause; the army and the police storm the radio station and mow them all down, though they are practically unarmed.

Like *The Battle of Algiers*, the film constantly highlights the violence against the protagonists as much greater than the violence they enact. The voiceover of the colonial officer, who is Sue’s grandfather and part of the parallel historical narrative, comments that the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre of 1919, when General Dyer opened fire on an unarmed Indian crowd, ‘made an essentially non-violent people consider taking up arms’.

Public monuments feature prominently in the film. There is a scene when Sue and the others are circling the India Gate in Delhi on a jeep, while stirring electronic music accompanies their gaze towards this tangible symbol of the nation. The whole film is constructed through a series of proleptic moments such as this one that hint at the future transformation of the four boys into revolutionaries and agents of change. The key character on whom this narrative of transformation revolves might be said to be Karan, rather than the more apparent centrality of Aamir Khan's character DJ. Karan's father is a corrupt industrialist, partially responsible for ordering the faulty parts that occasioned the crash of Ajay's plane. Karan himself is portrayed as a character with strong feelings, but deeply disillusioned regarding his role in life. And yet Sue sees potential in him. In another proleptic scene, he reads out the famous lines pronounced by Bhagat Singh at his trial for terrorist acts: 'freedom is my bride'. (Famously, Bhagat Singh refused to marry, the better to continue his struggle for armed revolution.) Karan breaks off reading, saying he doesn't think he can relate to these acts, and asks ironically, 'Who talks like that?'. But the motif of these lines gains significance in the course of the film, as Karan both *acts* them and then *enacts* them in the final scene at the radio station, when he is killed by the army under orders of the corrupt Indian state that has hijacked the 'true' nation.

As the characters learn their parts in Sue's film, national history and anti-colonial struggle are also being taught to the viewers. By making Sue British, the film conveys the problematic perception that the West has played and still plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of national pride among Indians. Just as Colonel McKinley is instrumental in presenting the historical narrative of Bhagat Singh through his diary (with the troubling implication that only the British can write adequate history), so Sue acts as a catalyst on the young Indians of the present-day story. The nationalist film project Sue presents to them, and which they gradually internalise to the point of becoming martyrs themselves by emulating Bhagat Singh and his confederates, is premised on very different values from the ones endorsed by a Gandhi-centred narrative of the nationalist movement. This narrative prizes a masculinised version of nationalism that valorises manly self-sacrifice and armed struggle, albeit as a last resort. In recuperating this narrative for present-day viewers, with its nationalistic and war-like theme (exemplified by the fighter pilot hero), the film plays on memories relating to visual culture: the series of films about the Indo-Pakistan conflict such as *Sarfarosh* and *Fanaa*, signalling the emergence of an Indian nationalistic identity in the post-independence period largely constructed on its difference from Pakistan. This is an aggressive nationalism which it seems can only be taught to them by an English film-maker: the call to 're-appropriate' Indian identity is perhaps particularly palatable to a disillusioned and cynical Indian middle class that feels it is high time to get rid of the corrupt political class that governs them and emulate the West more efficiently.

Significantly, Ajay, the heroic fighter pilot who has never made a secret of his own patriotism, is the only character among the five who does not play a part in Sue's film project, entitled *The Young Guns of India*. The implicit message is that he does not need to be educated about patriotism because he is already a patriot. As the film effects a form of

‘nationalist conversion’ on our heroes, it also stages a *mise en abîme* of the effect the movie is supposed to have on the ‘national’ viewer.

When the friends die at the police station, Ajay’s mother wakes from her coma. Conversely, Karan kills his corrupt father in the end: in other words, the nation needs to be purged of its degenerate parents. The film ends with a fade to white, with the words: ‘MiG fighter planes have served our country since 1964 and have been instrumental in winning us wars.’ The nationalist message is clearly couched in the language of war, with the implication that violence is justified when used in defence of the nation. The recuperation of violence as a method of constructing a national identity is used in an explicitly nationalistic sense, drawing rather confusedly on different revolutionary movements. The fact that Bhagat Singh was a Marxist is almost entirely glossed over in the film, except for one brief glimpse of him reading a book by Lenin while in jail, and his comment to Colonel McKinley that ‘One revolutionary is meeting another’. The film does not take into account Singh’s famous lines that ‘revolution to me is not the cult of bomb and pistol but a total change of society culminating in the overthrow of both foreign and Indian capitalism and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat’.<sup>23</sup> Bhagat Singh, actually a secular Marxist revolutionary influenced by Trotsky and Lenin, is divested of his radical and structured political message and is appropriated as a generic ‘national’ hero, a shining example for a disaffected Indian middle-class youth to urge them to fight corruption and change the nation. This film, far from supporting the dictatorship of the proletariat, presents a confused and simplistic reformist message aimed at its target audience, young middle-class Indians. The conventions of its genre, its heightened realism compared with other Bollywood films, its relative sophistication, and the clearly urban Westernised characters, are evidence that this film was produced for the middle class at home and abroad, with a concomitant lack of poor, illiterate or rural characters in the plot.

In a society where the gaps between the rich and poor are so visible, it is significant that just as *Rang de Basanti* was perceived to be a film for a ‘multiplex’ audience, those entrusted with ‘saving’ the nation from corruption were a select few: the young Indians with access to higher education. They are the ones who must ensure that the state is re-appropriated by its rightful owners: the middle class. Aarti Wani argues that ‘corruption is the major problem discussed by the ideologues of neo-liberalisation who see it as a hurdle in the efficient working of market policies. And yet, when thousands of farmers commit suicide, they do so not because of corruption but because of the too efficient implementation of neo-liberal policies.’<sup>24</sup> The legend of Bhagat Singh is not exactly de-politicised, but is made available as a very specific form of politics to ‘those who are seen as outsiders and in need of cooption. Students must give up their cynicism and help improve the system or their despair may drive them to self-destruction like the youngsters in *Rang de Basanti*.’<sup>25</sup>

### THE ‘RDB PHENOMENON’

*Rang de Basanti* provoked a visceral and unforeseen response among young Indians, prompting journalists to speculate that patriotism had

23. Cited in Reeta Sharma, ‘What if Bhagat Singh had lived?’, *The Tribune*, online edition, 21 March 2001, available at: <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2001/20010321/edit.htm#6>

24. Aarti Wani, ‘Uses of History: *Rang de Basanti* and *Lage Raho Munnabhai*’, *Monthly Review Zine*, 12 February 2007, available at: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/wani120207.html>

25. Ibid

again become fashionable. Commercially the film did extremely well, though predictably it earned its highest revenues in the multiplexes of the large urban centres like Delhi and Bombay. But it was the public response it engendered that made the film stand out from others; it sparked forms of middle-class activism from people who had never previously shown any interest in politics. Demonstrations for the 'Jessica Lall case' were held at India Gate in Delhi, against the unfair acquittal of the son of a prominent politician who had shot dead a model at a socialite's party. Apparently, these demonstrations were based on a similar scene in the movie. In their coverage of the event, the media used images from *Rang de Basanti*, according to the film's official website.<sup>26</sup>

The issues taken up by the 'RDB generation' were matters significantly related to their own class interests: in addition to the Jessica Lall case, many took to the streets to protest against quotas in university places and government jobs for those who belonged to 'scheduled castes', namely people belonging to castes traditionally excluded from access to higher education and well-paying secure positions. The film also had a significant impact on diasporic youth audiences, apparently inspiring the production of a play, *Under the Influence*, by the writer/director Kamal Sunavala. The play 'revolves around a young boy from an affluent South Mumbai family living in England, who watches *Rang de Basanti* during a visit to India and it changes his life forever'.<sup>27</sup>

Music plays a pivotal role in amplifying the nation-forming sentiment in film. Of course, songs and dance sequences are a structural part of the Bollywood film genre, helping to propel plot development. 'Many films would lose their narrative coherence if the songs were removed.'<sup>28</sup> The music played during the military funeral of Ajay has a 'nation-forming' function in this sense – through a facile attempt to transform the spectator's emotional response to the death of a character into a more 'public' emotion associated with patriotic feelings. The use of music in *Rang de Basanti* favours an electronic, modern and deliberately 'commercial' sound; for example, when the revolutionaries are being led to the scaffold, the soundtrack is 'urban' and hip hop.

Most commentators of *Rang de Basanti* found the finale either disappointing or not a 'practicable' course of action for a generation who might want to change the nation for the better – it was not felt to be in line with the otherwise uplifting message of the movie. The stark difference in the sort of nation, and the sort of politics being portrayed in the two films, is symbolised by the difference in the crowd scenes in *Rang de Basanti* and *The Battle of Algiers*. Crowd scenes in *Rang de Basanti* are signified by a middle class standing in for the nation at large, while the crowd in *Battle of Algiers* stands in for the Algerian people as a whole, but with a main focus on the poor inhabitants of the kasbah of Algiers. In the fabula of the two narratives, both films 'end' with the revolutionaries/freedom fighters dying at the hands of the police or colonial officers, though *The Battle of Algiers* features a sort of epilogue or coda that portrays the spontaneous and peaceful uprising of the Algerians. In terms of the plot structure, *The Battle of Algiers* is composed as a flashback from its beginning, namely the scene in which Ali La Pointe is waiting in his secret hideaway together with the other freedom fighters as Colonel Mathieu prepares to blow them all up. The death of the freedom fighters is crucial to the spirit of both films, because the underlying

26. <http://www.rangdebasanti.net>

27. Aniruddha Guha, 'Play It Again, Son!', *DNA*, 28 September 2007, available at: [http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/salon\\_play-it-again-son\\_1124157](http://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/salon_play-it-again-son_1124157)

28. Ganti, *op cit*, p 80

motif is ritual sacrifice to ensure the enduring vitality of the nation and to serve as an example to other would-be citizens.

At the heart of both films is not so much a rejection of non-violence as an indication that violence is the only viable alternative in a situation in which the coloniser uses a disproportionate amount of force. However, in the case of *Rang de Basanti* there is also an explicit rejection of the Gandhian form of nationalism. Gandhi's message was premised on *satyagraha* or 'soul-force', commonly known as passive resistance, and on *ahimsa* or non-violence. He argued that only through these peaceful means could decolonisation and the successful overthrow of the coloniser occur, because to employ what he calls 'brute force' would be to Europeanise the struggle.<sup>29</sup> *Rang de Basanti* contextualises the story within Punjabi and Sikh culture, traditionally associated with martial valour and virility. *Rang de Basanti* means 'the colour yellow' which symbolises sacrifice and courage; 'dye my clothes in saffron yellow' was sang by Bhagat Singh and his associates when they entered the courtroom on trial for their revolutionary actions.<sup>30</sup>

Bhagat Singh was a Sikh from the Punjab, and in this area, together with Bengal, revolutionary violence was most prevalent, in a masculinist nationalism distinct from the 'feminine' method of struggle associated with Gandhi. The historical narrative of independence presented in this film as the 'roots' of Indian nationhood differs starkly from the Nehruvian–Gandhian version. It draws on folk heroes of Indian nationalism, the revolutionaries of the Punjab, largely forgotten by official nationalist historiography and contemporary Indians, though the film suggests the memory of them still persists at the level of oral narrative. Early on in the film, DJ's mother recalls how a Sikh travelled all the way to England to kill General Dyer, who was responsible for the Amritsar massacre.

The role of historical memory, triggered by visual culture, is central to an understanding of the film's impact on its audience. The use of sepia tones to depict the 'historic' sections of the narrative not only assigns it a meaning associated with the national past and its memorialisation but also indicates the real. What happened to Bhagat Singh and his confederates, it is implied, simultaneously expands and explodes the confines of the fictional narrative, and presents itself as India's 'real' history with Bhagat Singh as the ideal subject of this history. The black and white of Sue's film also acts as an aide-memoire to the viewers, reminding them of the first black-and-white Hindi film on Bhagat Singh, *Shabed* (1965). While this film presents itself as entirely 'historical', *Rang de Basanti* skilfully weaves together Bollywood-style fiction with a nod to such nationalist epics that belong to the past of Indian film-making. The product is a film that reads as the 'reconstruction' of an Indian historical essence, the true patriotism of Bhagat Singh, but in fact is effecting a form of neo-nationalism for the cinemagoer. The conservative message of *Rang de Basanti* is further highlighted by the fact that the two women of the story, Sue and Sonia, who start off as feisty independent characters, slowly fade into the background as their male friends become 'freedom fighters'.

*Rang de Basanti* places anti-colonial nationalism within the justificatory context of political violence. The triggering of viewer empathy is used in constructing this justification, which forges a link between violence and the national-popular, though ultimately *Rang de Basanti*

29. M K Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed Anthony J Parel, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997

30. Chandra, *op cit*, p 250

fails to present a suitably convincing rationale for its representation of armed struggle. This failure is linked to issues arising from genre: it is not so much the case that commercial cinema is unable to present a truly emancipatory or radical political message, but rather that since Indian independence in 1947 Bollywood cinema has traditionally served the interests of the rising middle class, while drawing on a mass audience from all social classes. While *The Battle of Algiers* presents a revolutionary version of the national-popular, *Rang de Basanti* presents a conservative notion of it. The enduring quality of *The Battle of Algiers* in contrast to *Rang de Basanti* is due to its success in linking ethics to aesthetics in a convincing representation of violence, which it creates by drawing on a more structured and articulate political narrative and on a more varied social and cultural demographic for its audience.

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