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INTERPRETING NATIONALISM IN RAKEYSH OMPRAKASH MEHRA'S *RANG DE BASANTI*

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Abstract: Discourse on nationalism has been much debated and problematised, and popular culture has played a considerable role in asserting or denying particular notions of nationalism. This paper intends to look at the representation and construction of national consciousness in Indian cinema by analysing Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra's movie *Rang De Basanti* (2006). The movie revisits and revises the national struggle of India by moving away from Gandhian pacifism to a fierce armed struggle, a more 'masculine' rendition of the struggle where a nexus is established between the extremist revolutionary 'hero' Bhagat Singh and contemporary youth.

Keywords: Nationalism, Youth, Violence, Cinema, *Rang De Basanti*, Rakesh Omprakash Mehra, Frantz Fanon

Rang De Basanti was released worldwide on January 26, 2006, to coincide with India's Republic Day. Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra wrote, produced, and directed the Hindi language drama film, with Rensil D'silva co-writing it. The movie belongs to the corpus of works that portray nationalism as constituting violence and depict violence as an integral part of national consciousness. The movie marks a departure from the conventional nationalist discourse in which nationalism is seen in the Gandhian vein of non-violence, epitomised in the civil disobedience and non-cooperation movements, and takes recourse to another significant thread of anti-colonial thought endorsed by Frantz Fanon. Fanon emphasises the role of violence in bringing together the people in the liberation movement against the colonial power. Violence is viewed as the last resort to fight the corrupt colonial authority, and Fanon writes that "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" (61). *Rang De Basanti* not only appropriates Fanon's argument with respect to the violence in the construction of nationalism but also makes an attempt at creating a symbolic wholeness, a sense of completeness by delineating a romantic relationship between the protagonist DJ (Aamir Khan) and Sue (Alice Patten), a British national. The romance becomes an agent of redemption for the humiliations and dishonour of the Indian men in colonial times.

In addition to dismantling and deconstructing the popular notions of nationalism, *Rang De Basanti* also re-constructs new notions about the concept. In Sue's documentary, all the four characters are taught about the alternate national struggle, and in the process, the audience becomes aware of a non-mainstream anti-colonial

freedom struggle. However, it is interesting to note that while all the characters are taught history but Ajay (R. Madhvan), the fighter pilot, is not told about the history, conveying that he need not be educated about nationalism since he is already a patriot (considering that he is in the Indian Air Force). The movie has some elements of nationalist cinema, however, at some points, it seems to problematise the projection of nationalism at the quotidian level. While on one level, the film is talking about the national identity, on another level, it makes it difficult to achieve that identity, making 'Indianness' an ever-evasive concept. This is highlighted through Sue, who, despite being a British national, comes up with a project on India's colonial struggle, pointing out the alienation of the modern youth with the concepts of nationhood and nationalism. The movie also plays on the dichotomy of nationalists and terrorists and blurs the difference between the two since both groups are indulging in violence resulting from state policies, oppression, and violence. It problematises the ideas about terrorism and nationalism since what is reprobated as terrorism initially is appropriated as patriotism later in the movie.

The nation presented in the film was conceived through freedom struggle and sacrifice, a nation that requires rekindling of its 'heroic' roots. Therefore, the movie seems to involve a double narrative, in the sense that at one level, there is the depiction of the revolutionaries before independence, and at another level, there is the journey of youth discovering the patriotism within themselves. Homi K Bhabha, in his essay "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," writes about the nation being imagined in two different ways, the 'pedagogical' and the 'performative', and there is interaction and friction between the two strands in the conception of a nation, where 'pedagogical' is the history that is taught and 'performative' is how one performs the Indian culture. Nation-building is best described as a dialogic narrative process, which is defined as a complicated rhetorical strategy of social reference in which the claim to be representative causes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address (Bhabha 297).

Therefore, it becomes difficult to associate and draw an analogy between the monumentalising national discourses, the perspective endorsed by those in power and the common notions of the nation as perceived in daily lives. It is at this place that national cinema comes to play an interesting role where on the one hand, it might serve the interests of the elite and the powerful and, on the other hand, it might cater to the ideas of the nation's ordinary people. On certain occasions, there is a confluence of the two roles where the perspective of the elite is sold as a 'national' perspective which gradually becomes the national perspective, the perspective of the ordinary people.

At this juncture, the movie *Rang De Basanti* becomes relevant since, at the convergence of the two roles of national cinema, the movie, on the one hand, seems to be simultaneously dismantling and deconstructing the notion of nationalism in the common perception while also conforming to the politics of nationhood and nationalism. In this context, the subtitle of the movie, "A Generation Awakens," becomes relevant because the term 'generation' is ambiguous and refers to a certain class of Indian society. The subtitle of the movie stresses the relationship between the citizens and their nation with filial characteristics and tries to forge bonds between the different generations, thereby making these bonds fundamental to national unity. However, there is always a hint that 'nation as a family' is a bourgeois notion where the middle class is seen as the saviour of the nation, inheriting nationalism in its entirety.

The four characters in the movie belong to the middle class, although to different castes and religions, to bring in more diversity and make the film representative of Indian youth. However, it falls into a trap by restricting itself to just the Indian middle class and shares the woes of the middle class in the form of unemployment and disillusionment with the political system of the state as well as the nation. *Rang De Basanti* assumes a retrogressive stance by emphasising the middle class, considering it as a panacea for all social evils and disparities, and thus, negating any possibility of an alliance between different classes. It appears that the message of the movie is that there resides a nationalist feeling in the Indian middle-class youth, the inheritors of Bhagat Singh's will, which can bring about a change in the regime, and make a nation free from the corrupt political class.

The movie also touches upon the influence of other countries in imagining a nation and nationalism since the movie begins with the rejection of Sue's idea of making a film about the extremists. The British perceive the Gandhian principles as the only recognisable ideals of Indian nationalism and, therefore, the only ones bound to 'sell' in film-making. This particular view of the Indian freedom struggle will also cater to the Western audiences by meeting the Oriental expectations of Indians being peaceful by nature. In doing so, the film appears to emphasise the role the British played in formulating the monolithic concept of nation and nationalism. In this context, it is essential to point out that Sue initiates her entire project after reading her grandfather's diary, accentuating the importance of the British in coming up with national narratives. For these reasons, the projection of nationalism in monolithic terms by its citizens as well as the Western world becomes exclusionary and problematic since it leaves some sections looking for validation from the larger society.

Rang De Basanti is more than a patriotic picture, according to Hindi film critic Dr Mala Chakravorty: it is a "moral, social, and political parable." She asserts that Mehra offers a mirror to look inwards and think about the way one lives and the choices one makes by merging "history with the nationalist struggle, idealism and humanitarianism with contemporary politics, religious fundamentalism, and a lack of social responsibility." Consequently, audiences, particularly young people, who experienced daily life in India in the manner represented in *Rang De Basanti*, believed the film to be a slice of their own existence. The movie also sends a clear message that being inattentive to what is going on in the country, especially in public life, is neither patriotic nor correct.

In the context of rising transnationalism, *Rang De Basanti* addresses the rise of nationalism among the Indian youth. According to Ulka Anjaria and Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, *Rang De Basanti* is part of a genre of youth films that examine the anxieties of youth, postcolonial demands for world-belonging, and generational differences in modern urban Indian culture. The film's title, *Rang De Basanti*, implies, according to Simona Sawhney, the colour of spring, which is also the colour of sacrifice and resignation. Behind the relationship of spring with renunciation may be the belief that sacrifice is only feasible in youth or the springtime. As a result, youth symbolises a range of options, from delinquency to creative deviance, rebellion to conformity, alienation to strong participation in the era's spirit. Youth is a jumble of opposing forces, and *Rang De Basanti* invokes these dynamics as well as suggests its myriad possibilities.

The political and social engagement that followed the release of *Rang De Basanti* in real life and on the internet allowed Indian youth to not only publicly declare their identity as active citizens but also to show off their individual efforts to participate in India's public arena. This social and political engagement had a favourable impact on India's political system, resulting in policy reforms such as an urgent call for judicial reform. As a result, the active citizenship seen following the release of *Rang De Basanti* not only served to enlarge the public sphere but also reinvigorated democracy in India.

Rang De Basanti ends with a note on the MiG fighter aircrafts: "MiG fighter planes have served our country since 1964 and have been instrumental in winning us wars." The ending of the film talking about wars espouses the nationalist message of violence being necessary for making a nation and protecting it. Therefore, the film ends with violence being appropriated as a means of constructing and inventing national consciousness and identity. The film's climax marks the faint lines between the present and past, punctuating the idea that nationalism is a thing of the past, dead and gone, but a thing that needs to be appropriated in the present context.

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