

IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN0976-8165

# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

14 Years of Open Access

Vol. 14 Issue-I February 2023

Bi-monthly Peer-Reviewed e-Journal

DR. VISHWANATH BITE  
Editor-In-Chief

DR. MADHURI BITE  
Managing Editor

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **Rethinking the Past: Examining *Rang De Basanti*'s Advocacy of Moral Resilience and Revolutionary Transformations**

**Dr. Gobinda Banik**

Assistant Professor,  
Basirhat College, West Bengal State University,  
North 24 Parganas, India

**Article History:** Submitted-12/01/2023, Revised-11/02/2023, Accepted-12/02/2023, Published-28/02/2023.

### **Abstract:**

This study aims to investigate how the Hindi movie *Rang De Basanti* (2006) contributes to the strengthening of the moral fibre of the present day youngster and triggers their conscience to bring about revolutionary changes for the benefit and welfare of society. It's a dual-story film. One story is from colonial India, when freedom fighters like Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, Chandra Shekhar Azad, and others fought the British and were criminally prosecuted. Another is the story of a group of seemingly arrogant/bohemian educated contemporary Indian millennials who, although mostly jobless, are passionate about seeking justice for society from a corrupt Government/system. Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra artistically blends these two narratives together before symbolically removing the present-past division to spark the fire of conscience. The way India's independence fighters fought and withstood British torture in the guise of judicial procedures shows how we may harness our inner mental fire to fight back and achieve true freedom. The study enables the present audience to realize why it is important to investigate the past and what was/is the actual price of the freedom we take for granted today.

**Keywords: Freedom, Justice, Martyr, Resistance, Nonviolence, Nationalism, Youth activism**

### **Introduction**

The importance of the Hindi film industry in modern India cannot be overstated; it has a significant cultural impact on the country and frequently both mocks and replicates Indian society (Hasan, 2010). In other words, it is both a "mirror and a lamp", echoing Indianness to Indians at home and overseas while also moulding Indianness, as Samir Dayal phrased it (Dayal, 2015). Therefore, Hindi cinema may be seen, at least in part, as a reflection of the opinions of the general public and as one of the most significant forces in forming the perspectives of Indian citizens. One

may also argue that the films of India are the key sources for the development of Indian cultural and national ethos; since, as the most widely available form of entertainment, it clarifies what it means—or, more accurately, what it ought to mean—to be an Indian. In this way, Antonina ŁUSZCZYKIEWICZ (2019) argues that “Hindi cinema remains probably one of the main sources of information about India’s colonial history, if not the primary one” (ŁUSZCZYKIEWICZ, 2019, p. 125).

In *Rang De Basanti* (or RDB), “history becomes a window to understanding contemporary dilemmas” (Mehta, 2011, p. 300). On December 17, 1928, two gunmen from the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) named Bhagat Singh and Rajguru shot and killed J. P. Saunders (age 21), an assistant police superintendent. The retaliatory act, which was a direct response to Lala Lajpat Rai’s recent passing, was a crucial turning point in India’s anticolonial fight because it led to Bhagat Singh and two of his allies’ execution on March 23, 1931 (Singh, 2018).

*Rang De Basanti* is a strong political melodrama. RDB stands out from the majority of other ensemble narratives for young people because of its emphasis on patriotism, which is defined as love and fidelity to “one’s country, nation, or political community” (Sarkar, 2022, p. 273).

The film *Rang De Basanti* has a core social theme that encourages viewers to fight for what they believe in and to stand up for it. The significance of speaking up for what is right and taking action in order to bring about social change is emphasised throughout the film. Additionally, it promotes individuals to take responsibility for their acts and to allow themselves to be held accountable for the results of those actions. In addition to this, the film points out the efficacy of concerted effort and the significance of cohesiveness in working for a common objective.

### **Effects of *Rang De Basanti***

Pavitra Sundar (2014) writes that the movie *Rang De Basanti*, which was released internationally on January 26, 2006, on India’s Republic Day—became a box-office success right away. Within a week, it paid back the 5.5 million USD in making costs that were incurred, and it continued to set records for foreign collection. Numerous accolades, featuring awards and prizes for best film, best director, best music, best background sound design, and best lyrics, were bestowed upon it. More astonishing was the film’s cultural and political influence in India,

which became known as the “RDB effect”. Prior to its release, few Hindi films have encouraged middle-class city folk, especially the younger ones, to engage in political discourse and activism to such an extent. The Indian blogosphere was humming with appeals for civic engagement and talks on RDB (Dilip, 2008). For a brief period of time, candlelight vigils and protests similar to those in the movie were standard.

Meghana Dilip (2008) in her thesis very briefly narrates the story of RDB. In *Rang De Basanti* (Color me Saffron), a British filmmaker of Caucasian descent named Sue McKinley comes to India to create a documentary about the heroic independence warriors of India, including Chandrashekar Azad, Sukhdev, Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Ashfaqullah Khan. To bring the story of these rebels to life, she chooses a diverse group of Indian actors to perform their parts. Laxman Pandey, played by Atul Kulkarni, is a Hindu nationalist with political ambitions. He is deeply invested in the struggle for freedom and sees the role of the freedom fighters as a way to express his own beliefs. Daljit Singh, also known as DJ, played by Aamir Khan, is a Punjabi man who is a former university student. He is portrayed as uninterested in life outside the campus, but through his portrayal of the freedom fighter, he finds a new sense of purpose. Aslam, played by Kunal Kapoor, is a sensible Muslim. Sukhi, played by Sharman Joshi, is a jolly person. He is portrayed as someone who is always looking for a good time, but finds a deeper meaning in the struggle for freedom. Karan, played by Siddharth, is a wealthy individual who thinks of moving abroad. He is portrayed as having a strained relationship with his father, but through his portrayal of the freedom fighter, he discovers a newfound respect and admiration for his father’s homeland. Soha Ali Khan portrays Sonia, a young activist who is betrothed to Lt. Ajay Singh Rathod (Madhavan), a brave aviator.

At first, the friends’ group finds it difficult to relate to the personas they play on film. Mehra can contrast the idealism of the past—represented by the freedom fighters—and the scepticism of the present—represented by the portrayal of the friends—in the film-within-a-film format. The main protagonists begin to adopt the ideals of India’s ground-breaking warriors while Sue keeps working on the documentary. At some point during the film’s production, the guys realise they are enthralled by the zeal of the characters they portray. They gradually come to understand that the actors they depict on screen are not all that different from their own lives and that the same conditions that once troubled the revolutionaries still affect today’s youth.

Previously, the British Empire played the villain; however, modern politicians are now taking up this position. As the characters merge into one another, the gap in time between the two ages quickly begins to disappear. The passing of their close friend Ajay, who dies like a hero by crashing his MiG plane (based on a true story of our country) into a bare area rather than striving to protect himself. Rather than honouring his sacrifice, the Indian Government has cast him in the role of a naive rookie pilot, hoping to deflect attention away from the details of the buying of faulty MiGs of Russia. The loss of Ajay and the bureaucratic fraud they experience in their efforts to prove him not guilty, shock the friends, who are already crushed by Ajay's death. They are consequently compelled to rebel against the State. They seize the All India Radio station by force when the Minister is honoured as a patriot, and during the broadcast, they tell the entire truth to the nation. In spite of their willingness to submit and face the results of their actions by getting arrested, an anti-terrorist team shoots them instantly to death. They died tragically as a result of trying to clean up the system by taking matters into their own hands.

### **Historical References**

The movie *Rang De Basanti* shows the Indian freedom struggle in a manner that is both realistic and significant. The film showcases the youngsters of India as they take up the cause of the liberation struggle. The motion picture demonstrates not only how important it is to fight for freedom following a nonviolent path, but also how important it is to collaborate with others in order to accomplish a common objective. The movie serves as a potent reminder of the significance of the Indian freedom struggle and the sacrifices that were made for it, and it does so by depicting those sacrifices on screen.

The account of British crime and punishment against Indians and the violent activity they inspired is the secondary storyline of the movie. As Sundar (2014) suggests, this historical thread is critical to our understanding of recent events, but it is presented in a jumbled, compressed form that assumes that the viewers are familiar with the history of the national politics of India. Sue's cinematic concept is based on the following historical occasions which are unerringly pointed out by Pavitra Sundar (2014):

“ the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, which left approximately 1000 Indians dead and several more injured;

the Kakori train robbery of 1925 in which revolutionaries of the Hindustan (Socialist) Republican Association (HSRA) intercepted cash headed for the British treasury in Lucknow;

the 1928 boycott of the Simon Commission, the all-British committee tasked with proposing changes to the colonial governance structure;

the violent suppression of the Simon Commission protests, particularly in Lahore where Lala Lajpat Rai was gravely injured (the Indian National Congress leader succumbed to his injuries soon thereafter);

retaliatory actions undertaken by Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekar Azad, and other comrades to avenge Lajpat Rai's death, including the killing of a police officer named John Saunders later that year, and the bombing and leafleting of the Central Legislative Assembly in 1929; the imprisonment and torture of the radical activists; and, finally,

the hanging of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev in 1931.” (Sundar, 2014)

In the movie, Sue's documentary footage from India under British rule during the 1930s runs parallel to the central plot and crosses it at pivotal points during the telling of the story. The movie's denouement shows a fusion of history and contemporary times, reinforcing the notion that nationalism persists, and individuals must take action in line with their professed beliefs for change. RDB is more than just another patriotic movie, according to Hindi cinema critic Dr. Chakravorty; it also functions as an illustration of political, ethical, and societal allegory. Chakravorty writes “By blending history along with the nationalist struggle, idealism, and humanitarianism along with contemporary politics, religious fundamentalism, and the lack of social responsibility, Mehra provides us with a mirror to look inwards and think about the way we live and the choices we make” (Chakravorty, 2006).

The story alternates between two different time periods: the film Sue created with a vintage aesthetic, drawing inspiration from her grandfather's recollections, and the plot that centres around student performers' cast as martyrs in the film-within-a-film, whose personal lives are drastically affected by the lingering memories of selflessness and sacrifice from the fight for national independence (Sarkar, 2022). An odd coequality forms between the actors' developing political knowledge and the martyrs' patriotic commitment as the past incidents influence and shape their current existence. It is most clear in the “male melodrama” subplot with Muslim student Aslam and Hindu patriot Laxman, who, in Sue's historical narrative, represent Ashfaqulla Khan (a

Muslim Pathan) and Ramprasad Bismil (a Brahmin), respectively. Despite coming from working-class families, both students are able to overcome racial tensions; thanks to their common admiration for Khan and Bismil's commitment to the nation. The final scene of RDB ends with Aslam and Laxman embodying a powerful image of joint sacrifice, reminiscent of the ultimate sacrifice made by the real-life past legends they depict (Sarkar, 2009; 2022).

The film demonstrates that the fight for independence is not merely an event that took place in the past but is rather a continual and ongoing process. As a result of the friends' participation in the fight for independence, they gain a better understanding of the significance of patriotism as well as the necessity of collaboration in order to accomplish a shared objective. This is made clear in the scenes in which the friends participate in rallies against the Government and the moment in which they get together to build a plane in honour of Ajay. Both of these scenes show the friends working together.

### **Fight with Corruption**

Shailendra Kumar Singh (2018) argues that the issue of corruption in this movie does not directly result in poverty or unemployment for the general public. Contrarily, it has to do with MiG fighter planes, which have a high rate of destruction caused by defective components, resulting in the death of the pilots. Particular attention is paid by Mehra to the youthful inhabitants of urban areas who possess education but exhibit feelings of disappointment in 21st-century India. The following quote from Neelam Srivastava is very pertinent in this situation and Singh quotes: 'The subtitle of the film, "A Generation Awakens," refers to a very specific one: the urban university-going middle-class youth of India' (Srivastava, 2009, p.705).

The minister of defence openly accuses Lt. Ajay Singh Rathod of faulty flying. However, realizing the importance of taking control of the media narrative surrounding the MiG-21 incident, the protagonists see the need to act when the state honours the late minister with the nation's highest civilian award, hailing him as a heroic martyr who sacrificed his life to battle terrorism. (Sarkar, 2022, pp. 275-276).

Moreover, Sarkar (2022) interestingly suggests that the character of Mrs. Rathod, portrayed by a legendary star of 1960s Bombay cinema, brings to mind the powerful figure of Mother India,

a symbol of nationalism that has been reinforced throughout the 20th century through various forms of cultural works.

### **Criticism**

Although, *Rang De Basanti* has drawn both praise and criticism for its concepts and depiction of historical events. One major critique is that the movie romanticises and oversimplifies the fight for independence, and fails to portray the complexities and violence of the time authentically. The movie's depiction of the connection between the past and the present is another subject for criticism. Some critics have claimed that the movie's usage of flashbacks and parallel stories is imprecise and confusing. Others have objected to the movie's message, which implies that today's youth are unaware of the hardships and sacrifices made in the past and that they must draw lessons from history to create a more positive tomorrow.

The film has nonetheless drawn criticism for departing from conventional Indian cinema, idealising Indian youth, and lacking realism. The film's departure from conventional Indian cinema is one of its key criticisms. With its use of a hip-hop soundtrack and emphasis on young people, the movie takes a modernistic approach to Indian filmmaking. This has been viewed as a break from typical Indian cinema, which is frequently anchored in tradition and places an emphasis on relationships and family values.

### **Youth Activism and Nonviolent Resistance**

*Rang De Basanti* has been criticised, yet it has also been praised for its performances and its social activism, and patriotic themes. The ensemble cast of the movie, which includes Aamir Khan, Siddharth, and Soha Ali Khan, has received a lot of praise for its potent and subtle performances. In addition, many audiences have responded favourably to the movie's appeal for young people to engage in social and political problems.

Thus, in a very brilliant way, the movie is able to successfully address several other important issues. The significance of education as well as the power it bestows is another theme that is explored in the film. The friends are now in a position to grasp the significance of education and to make the most of the opportunities it provides them as a result of their newly acquired knowledge. They develop a deeper comprehension of the problems at hand and become more informed as a result of their participation in rallies and protests. They are able to become more

self-reliant and influential members of their communities as a direct result of the knowledge they have gained.

The value of nonviolence in the process of achieving freedom is another theme that is explored in the film. It is clear that the friends feel strongly about the issue at hand, but at the same time, they are demonstrated to be realistic and conscious of the repercussions of engaging in violent behaviour. They are aware that the use of violence will only result in other acts of violence and that the only way to attain freedom is via nonviolent resistance and peaceful demonstrations.

Moreover, the film emphasises the importance of embracing other modes of activism and drawing attention to the need to break away from traditional methods of protesting. The five close friends have decided to use their talents in cinematography, music, and graffiti as a form of political protest against the Government and to attract attention to the cause of the martyrs. The movie demonstrates how the power of social media can be harnessed to reach out to the general public and to bring about change that is both genuine and long-lasting.

The movie also serves as a potent reminder of how important it is to learn about and respect the customs and traditions of people from different backgrounds. Even though the five best friends originate from diverse parts of the world, they nevertheless manage to find common ground in their pursuit of justice. Here the audience finds how people who come from diverse cultures and traditions can band together to fight for the same cause. The film is an energising and motivational reminder of how important it is to have a sense of purpose in life. The five close friends are united by their shared aspiration to effect positive change in the world and advocate for what is morally sound.

## **Conclusion**

Parvinder Mehta unerringly argues that the “incidents from pre-independence Indian history of the 1930s are recalled in an attempt to articulate and represent them; subsequently, the post-independence contemporary incidents demand a more nuanced re-articulation of that history” (Mehta, 2011, p. 300). “*Rang De Basanti* indeed returned patriotism to popular discourse, conjoining anti-colonial struggles with postcolonial political challenges” as Bhaskar Sarkar (2022) rightly remarks. The outcome of the film is that the group of friends is successful in accomplishing their objective of making a difference. They have not only impacted their own lives

but also the lives of those who are closest to them in significant ways. They have also become an example of the power that can be wielded by the youth conscience to bring about meaningful social change.

Thus, the film *Rang De Basanti* emphasises the significance of the youth conscience as well as the ways in which it may be utilised to bring about positive change. The film inspires young people to get politically engaged and to raise their voices to speak out against injustice by using the characters' personal experiences as a springboard for the narrative. The movie very meaningfully highlights the significance of education as well as the ways in which it can be utilised going beyond all narrow prejudices against any caste or creed to give individuals more agency and bring about constructive societal change. In the end, the movie serves as a reminder that young people do have the power to make a difference, and that their voices are not futile; but the way they should take violent or nonviolent is open to question. However, the final message is clear - if one can dream it, one can do it.

#### **Works Cited:**

Chakravorty, M. “*Rang De Basanti: A generation Awakens*”. 2006. Retrieved from [www.nripulse.com](http://www.nripulse.com) Accessed on April, 15th 2007.

Dayal, Samir. *Dream Machine. Realism and Fantasy in Hindi Cinema*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 2015, p. 1.

Dilip, Meghana. “*Rang De Basanti – Consumption, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere*” (Master’s thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst), 2008.

Hasan, D. “Talking Back to ‘Bollywood’: Hindi Commercial Cinema in North-East India”, *South Asian Media Cultures. Audiences, Representations, Contexts*, edited by S. Banaji , Anthem Press, 2010, pp. 29 - 50.

Łuszczkiewicz, Antonina. “Dealing with the Colonial Past. The Image of the British Rule in India in 21st Century Hindi Cinema”. *Politeja-Pismo Wydziału Studiów Międzynarodowych i Politycznych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego*, vol. 16, no. 59, 2019, pp.123-138.

Mehta, Parvinder. “Predicaments of history and mimetic agency: Postcolonial return, repetition and remediation in *Rang De Basanti*”. *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2011, pp. 299-311.

Rethinking the Past: Examining *Rang De Basanti's* Advocacy of Moral Resilience and Revolutionary Transformations

Sarkar, Bhaskar. "Rang De Basanti 2006". *Lexicon of Global Melodrama*, edited by Paul H., Marak S., Gerund K., and Henderson M., transcript Verlag, 2022, pp. 273-277.

Sarkar, Bhaskar. *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2009.

Singh, Shailendra Kumar. "What awakens the nation? The figure of the revolutionary in Inquilaab, Krantiveer and *Rang de Basanti*". *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol.16, no. 1, 2018, pp. 89-100.

Srivastava, Neelam. "Bollywood as National(Ist) Cinema: Violence, Patriotism and the National-Popular in *Rang De Basanti*." *Third Text*, vol. 23, no. 6, 2009, pp. 703–16.

Sundar, Pavithra. "Of radio, remix, and *Rang De Basanti* : Rethinking history through film sound". *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/RangDeBasanti/index.html> Accessed on 09th Jan. 2023.