

Rang De Basanti from India: Revolution in the air?

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Rang De Basanti, directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra

Few Indian films have sparked more controversy than the recent *Rang De Basanti*, directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra. As a cultural phenomenon, as well as a cautionary tale, the film deserves some critical attention.

The story initially follows the efforts of a young British woman who goes to India to make a movie about Bhagat Singh. This remarkable historical figure fought against British imperialism by violent means and was hanged for it in 1931. This important episode has always been marginalized by Indian nationalist historiography because it grated against the prevailing political memory about the struggle for independence—part Gandhian non-violence, part Nehruvian political moderation and “realism.”

For a political class desperately trying to persuade itself and others that it has settled its accounts with imperialism and social conflict, Singh remains a very uncomfortable subject. The fact that the film calls attention to him is the first of many signs that at least in some ways it works against the current.

In the story, the energetic and inspired British female director is faced first with the producers’ refusal to fund the project—“Gandhi sells, but these revolutionaries...” She is then discouraged by the absence of serious candidates for the various parts, and more importantly by the fact that the Indian youth appear to be utterly uninterested in the story.

Eventually, she finds her actors in the college scene, in an unlikely group of young loafers and pranksters. As they participate in the project, these friends begin to understand its significance, and to appreciate their own national history of struggle against injustice. These lessons are brought home for good when a common friend dies as a result of governmental corruption. Determined to do something about it, the actors eventually take drastic measures that parallel Bhagat Singh’s story, leading to escalating violence and a tragic end.

At a first glance, and leaving aside for a moment its artistic merits, the film appears to be the expression of some healthy social and political instincts. In many ways, it sets itself in direct opposition to the common sense of the current “India Shining” period. As the country switched to an export-driven economy, one of its most regrettable imports has been the whole industry of American-style hucksterism and self-

improvement. The officially sanctioned myths in contemporary India revolve around selfishness and careerism under the guise of entrepreneurial initiative. To its credit, the film strives to encourage an entirely different set of values.

In one of the opening scenes, we see Bhagat Singh in his prison cell, reading one of Lenin’s books. When the guard comes to take him to the gallows, Singh laments the interruption of this meeting between “one revolutionary and another.” Against the background of a culture that has taken up the cult of Jack Welch and Bill Gates, this scene is so flamboyantly untimely that it is difficult to interpret it as an accident.

At least at some level, there is something significant at work here. And it is even more significant because the film appeals directly to middle class youth, the ideal and at least in some respects actual driving force of the new Indian consumerism and entrepreneurship. Again, leaving aside its artistic merits, *Rang De Basanti* calls into question their selfishness and passivity and makes a case for something higher: something in the order of a spiritual renovation to be found in political commitment and activism.

Moreover, while Bollywood’s products are more often than not commercial failures, *Rang De Basanti* enjoyed a tremendous success at the box office. It had the highest-ever opening week and now stands as the second highest grossing film of the past decade.

Because the film has become such a popular phenomenon, Indian intellectuals who are committed to the status quo could not afford to ignore it. Kanti Bajpai, an eminent Indian academic, felt compelled to harshly criticize the film in the mainstream press, denouncing its politics as dangerous and writing that “if this is a clarion call to the Indian public...we should be worried.” Even more significantly, the film triggered some vicious attacks against movie theaters by Hindu fundamentalists, and was subsequently pulled from all theaters in the state of Gujarat.

These elements add up to something—the film evidently did touch a nerve. But this has more to do with the mounting contradictions of Indian society than its cinematic qualities. This is a nation in which tens of thousands of impoverished farmers are committing suicide as capitalists, old and new,

accumulate unprecedented wealth. The reappearance of revolutionary themes is a nearly physiological necessity, and the hysterical reaction against this is just as predictable. Considered as a whole, *Rang De Basanti* reflects some of the obvious social contradictions in a mechanical and unthinking way. All in all, as a film, however, it is a disaster.

The development of the characters is terribly contrived. The group of students predictably comes to represent the unity of the various ethnic and religious populations of India. The good secular Muslim and the BJP thug first argue, then somehow come together to fight for a better India. The British woman, fascinated with Indian culture and history, falls in love with the naïve native, whom she eventually helps to forge into a hero. Such things are not simply unconvincing. By now they are trite as well, since we have seen them before in *Lagaan*, an earlier and much better film featuring the same protagonist.

The politics animating the film, moreover, are confused and reflect a shallow and unthinking populism. The main problem with Indian society turns out to be “corruption”—an analysis shared by middle-class moralizers and the IMF alike. After killing a defense minister, taking armed possession of a radio station, and more generally following the revolutionary path of Bhagat Singh, the spokesperson of the group encourages the Indian youth to do something, get involved. Incredibly, among other platitudes, he suggests that they should “join the police force.”

One does not know whether to laugh or cry here. What is clear is that the artists involved have not even begun to think through the questions raised by their subject. One could even suspect that they have thought about them all too well. It has been reported that to pass the severe Indian censorship board, and more generally to reassure the establishment, the director held a private screening for the Indian Defense Minister. Confronted by anti-democratic restraints, the artist may well have to reach unpleasant but necessary compromises. This sort of direct hobnobbing with the highest authorities, however, is not an encouraging sign.

At times, *Rang De Basanti* even replicates some of the “India Shining” gloss it ostensibly criticizes. The scene showing the British director’s sparkling and spacious university lodging will appear as a piece of science fiction—as startling a visual as that of the Starfleet Academy in San Francisco (in *Star Trek*)—to those familiar with the housing infrastructure of Indian campuses.

The problems with the film are not simply a question of content, but of form as well. Even granting that the filmmakers’ instincts are genuine and healthy—and we believe this to be the case—the standard formula characteristic of the Bollywood film has asserted itself over them. One does not wish to place formal conditions for developing a good film—to fight a formula with a different one. But the fact is that in the Indian context, formal conditions, of a distinctly rigid and unhelpful sort, are already in place, and most filmmakers

follow them either consciously or through the working out of a sort of artistic inertia. Satyajit Ray used to fulminate against these conditions in the late 1940s, and little has changed since.

The Bollywood formula favors not the development of a particular genre, but a broad, and usually interminably long pastiche encompassing disparate elements of comedy, drama, romance and action. Moreover, films are typically punctuated by several song and dance routines. This is not the kind of story that is suited for either. The whimsical moments, the comedic breaks, the dance numbers here are deflating and inappropriate.

The film reaches its dramatic climax when one of the students delivers his political address to the nation from the radio station they seized at gunpoint. His fate sealed, a somber look on his face, the young man pulls back from the microphone...and the DJ calls for a musical interlude! This way, one more song is smuggled into the film. Beyond specific examples of such blunders, the more general problem with the Bollywood formula is that it makes it difficult to put anything into focus in a serious and sustained manner.

It is in this sense that the film, far from going against the current, drifts merrily with it.

Telling the story of Bhagat Singh, and doing so against substantial political pressure required a conscious break by the people involved in *Rang De Basanti*. As we have discussed recently, Aamir Khan, the most important artist involved in the project, has recently taken a courageous political stand and demonstrated the will and inclination to make difficult choices. We have commended him for it. If the point is to produce serious art, however, an additional kind of break is required at the level of form. Here the obstacles may be less dangerous in a physical sense, but they are no less imposing. We wish him well in this undertaking as well.



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