

The Spectre of History in “New” India: Contemporary Trends in Indian Documentary and Popular Cinema

Jyotsna Kapur
Southern Illinois University

The predominant image one sees of India these days, both in the U.S. and India, is that of a “new” India, one that is breaking away from the past (or at the very least, seamlessly integrating the past into a shining brand new globalized nation). The country’s filmmakers, however, both popular and independent, seem strangely preoccupied with the past. In the last decade a number of films have made the investigation of history itself (not to be confused with historical reconstruction) a primary subject of focus and content.

The use of history can range from the reactionary, to the nostalgic, to the progressive. This latter use attempts to redeem the unrealized and repressed liberative dreams of the past that lurk under the realities of the present. This brief essay centers on filmic examples of this progressive use of history, i.e., on those critical representations which denaturalize India’s turn towards neo-liberalism by showing that the present moment is not one in which history is erased; rather, it is one in which history has returned with a vengeance, rubbing the face of the nation’s rulers in the class character of the Indian nation state.¹

Novelty, not history, is the core seduction of contemporary consumer culture. It is the defining spectacle of “the age of spectacle,” as Guy Debord has characterized post-World War II capitalism in the affluent nations. The message from late 20th century media screens, shopping malls, and ever-changing technologies is that we live in a radicalized state of motion in which the past is persistently dissolving into the future.

The Indian state formally and conclusively joined this trend in 1991 when it initiated the policy of structural adjustment, falling in line with IMF and World Bank dictates to start deregulating key sectors of the economy. Since then, various ruling coalitions have started to package the nation as a friendly stop for

global capital. In the nature of all marketing campaigns, this effort has led to developing the nation as a brand. The coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) termed their brand new image of India as “India Shining”; the present Congress Party-led coalition under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, the same leader who had originally presided over the 1991 “reforms,” prefers the even more explicit term, “Brand India.”² The shift from a nation to a brand represents a politics of governance that has moved away from even the pretense of serving citizens to fashioning, instead, an image of the nation.

The promise of building a “new” India is the key to naturalizing neo-liberalism because to oppose it would be to call upon the fate of the dinosaur. “We in India wish to see you engaged in India’s great adventure of building an India free from the fear of war, want and exploitation,” Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reiterated recently in an address to Indians living outside India, inviting them, “to be active participants in this saga of great adventure and enterprise.”³ In the U.S., this “great adventure” is presented as a seamless move from the long-prevalent Orientalist imagery of India as an exotic Other to a labor source for the global information technology industry. For instance, in recent images from the covers of *News-week*, *Wired* and *Time* magazines, the new and the old are enmeshed, representing the wishful construction of a happy, feminized work force eager to service the demands of the “new” global market place.



The Empire Remembered

It is against this tyranny of the new that a preoccupation with history appears as a critical force. One of the recurrent themes of contemporary Indian cinema is that globalization is not a new experience of India. In speaking of India’s colonial history and of the history of India’s victory over colonialism in 1947, Randhir Singh, former Professor of Political Theory in the University of Delhi, has remarked, “Our globalization then also had a name, imperialism, and we struggled against it, precisely because its structural logic meant the accumulation of wealth in England and poverty in India.” Now India is being “globalized again,” he continues, “this time through a largely voluntary submission of India’s rulers,” who are opting out to be junior partners in the global capitalist system.⁴ It is this critique of the contemporary manifestation of globalization—illuminated by the beacon of India’s hard-fought victory over imperialism, the historical manifestation of globalization - that has found expression in a number of recent Indian films.

War and Peace

Anand Patwardhan’s *War and Peace* (2002, India) is the most compelling non-fiction work on India today. The film reflects on the correlation between India’s increasing militarization and its growing jingoistic nationalism based in Hindu fundamentalism; it presents these two factors as major contributors to a divisive politics of a state that has welcomed collaboration with global capital through the turn to neo-liberalism.

The film begins with the personal, an opening in which Patwardhan narrates, over archival footage of Gandhi’s assassination, the story of his birth into a Gandhian family, with one uncle a Gandhian and the other a socialist, both imprisoned in British jails for their anti-colonialism. The film ends with the global,

incorporating footage of the September 11 attacks in the US and over whose images are spoken Gandhi's prophetic words about the dire consequences of an arms race: "If there is a victor left, the very victory will be a living death for the nation that emerges victorious." Thus, having begun from a personal stance, recounting history as it is



War and Peace: Gandhi with a small child

written into one's own family and lived experience, the film has taken us into the public sphere to traverse the globe in a narrative that presents globalization as a continued feature of world history. In this journey, we circle a history of imperialism in which Empires, for all their developments in weapons and surveillance, cannot escape the vengeance and violence of the one world we all inhabit.

Continuous Journey

Ali Kazimi's *Continuous Journey* (2005, Canada) takes as its starting point the historical events surrounding the 1914 voyage of the *Komagata Maru*, a ship carrying Indian emigrants bound for Canada. The passengers, mostly Sikhs, were confined to the ship in Vancouver harbor for two months before finally being turned away by Canadian immigration authorities on the basis of racist exclusionary laws. The passengers attempted to return to Calcutta, but upon their arrival, they encountered British colonial authorities who herded them to a nearby location called Budge-Budge for re-transport. In the ensuing clashes with the police, dozens of the passengers were felled by British bullets.

The film unfolds as a deeply personal reflection on the crisscrossing of imperialism in people's lives, its global reach, and the similarly widespread opposition to it. Investigating the reasons for his obsession with the Vancouver harbor, Kazimi narrates in the film's opening:

...maybe, because this is where the history of India and Canada

violently collided; maybe, because few knew that people like me were shut out for decades; maybe, because I see this harbor as a crime scene haunted by its ghosts; and finally, maybe, because I am trying to understand how I fit in.

The film revisits this chapter from Indian and Canadian history to give voice once again to the radical dreams of those on the ship; to those ashore who tried to help them and challenged the Canadian authorities on their behalf; and to those who were organized under the banner of the Ghadr (Revolution) party, an anti-colonialist group whose actions traversed India, Britain, Canada, and the United States.

Performing the Archive

These reconstructions of the past are not just simplistic exercises in showing things "as they really were." Rather, they make visible the act of articulating history, showing it as a way to "seize hold of memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."⁵ The danger is the erosion of the past. Patwardhan and Kazimi reconstruct the past through oral interviews which they juxtapose ironically against official records.

Patwardhan juxtaposes interviews with the villagers who have had to bear the consequences of the radioactive fallout from nuclear tests with the callous denial of these by Raja Ramana who led the tests, showing him up as a sort of Nero playing the fiddle amidst the ruins.

Left with little but a few scattered pictures of those aboard the *Komagata Maru*, filling out their histories turns into a central quest for Kazimi's editing and cinematography. The camera stares piercingly at the newspaper photos, defiantly animating them, making them



War and Peace: Raja Ramana at the piano

move against the backgrounds of blue sky or water; the direct and intense look of Gurdit Singh, the organizer and financial backer of the emigration attempt, speaks to the viewer when, in a passing moment, his eyes are animated to blink; changing camera angles profile the stranded men as heroes standing against the sky; close-ups of clenched fists and proud, turbaned heads turn the Other, the anonymous generality of the newspaper photo, into the Hero.

Mangal Pandey

In *Mangal Pandey* (2005), Ketan Mehta boldly utilizes the traditions of popular Indian cinema to draw the historical figure of Mangal Pandey as remarkably relevant today. Mangal Pandey, a sepoy in the British army is recorded as having fired the first shot



Continuous Journey: Gurdit Singh aboard the *Komagata Maru*

against the British in the series of armed rebellions against the East India Company that took place in 1857. The film openly claims its artifice, showing itself to be a legend rather than an accurate historical record, by building in motifs common to Indian cinema such as *dosti*, or a deep friendship, between Pandey and a British officer that is put to the test by an Empire that is increasingly turning away from a certain measure of racial intermingling towards apartheid. The film begins by showing Pandey fighting as a sepoy serving the East India Company in Afghanistan, making a parallel between the divide and rule politics of 19th century colonial policies and our very own times in which the rulers of India and Pakistan vie with each other to appease the U.S. The greed of the East India Company, its logic of making profit via commodification and exploitation, and the role of the soldier—all are put to question. The themes of racism and greed appear as well to offer critique of the U.S.-led war against Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Mangal Pandey: Racism puts friendship to the test

Lage Raho Munnabhai

In *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (Rajkumar Hirani, 2006) Munnabhai, a small time conman, conjures up visions of Gandhi in his bid to win the love of young woman radio broadcaster who wants to do a show on Gandhi. As he learns more about Gandhi in his bid to impress the woman, Munnabhai starts to see present day India as a betrayal of Gandhi’s sacrifices, including his martyrdom. The irony of a Gandhi, who is so out of place in today’s



Lage Raho Munnabhai: Gandhi appears to Munnabhai

idea, is premised upon our recognizing that, in its claims of “newness,” India is leaving some core values behind, including its very foundations in anti-colonialism.

Rang De Basanti/Color me Saffron

Perhaps the most sophisticated articulation of the past as living in the present, both in form and content, is *Rang De Basanti/Color me Saffron* (Rakhyesh Omprakash Mehra, 2006). The film opens on a young British woman’s quest to make a film based upon her grandfather’s journals, which recount his experiences as a British jailor who presided over the execution of the Indian anti-colonialist, socialist Bhagat Singh and his comrades, Rajguru and Sukhdev. Denied permission by the BBC to realize the project, she lands in India on her own and, through her friendship with a young Indian woman, casts a group of young men and women in her film. As they take on their film roles,

these young people progressively turn into the historical figures they set out to perform, making those historical struggles still necessary and urgent today. This transformation is rendered powerfully as, in flashback and flashforward, the past and the present meet.

This insistence on history, its inescapable consequences, and its presence in our personal lives and memories, stands in sharp contrast to the postmodern reduction of history, to use Fredric Jameson phrase, into a “costume show.”⁶ Japan scholar Chalmers Johnson has suggested that an understanding of the “larger historical context” is needed in order to see the underpinnings of war and empire in today’s world.⁷ In fact the widespread befuddlement with which the citizens of the U.S. saw the September 11 attacks, literally as something dropped from the skies through the evil actions of a few evil men, betrayed a fundamental lack of historical knowledge about the actions carried out by the U.S. as a global power and the historical experience of pain of most parts of the globe. Perhaps, what these films do best is to speak the truth to the new Empire by reminding it and its opposition of the history of an older one. “Time remembered” as W. H. Auden said, “bears witness to time required.”⁸

Endnotes

¹A brief description such as this will not allow me to go into the contradictions and nuances

of such representations.

²See, Jyotsna Kapur, “India Inc.: The Nation on Sale in the New Empire,” *State of Nature*, Summer 2006. <http://www.stateofnature.org/indiaInc.html>

³“Inaugurating a Three-day Congregation of Indian Diaspora, ‘Pravasi Bharatiya Divas’ (PBD) on Sunday in the Capital,” Press Trust of India, Sunday, January 7, 2007 (New Delhi).

⁴Randhir Singh, “Of Nationalism in India: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” *Mainstream*, August 14, 1999, pp. 32-33.

⁵Hannah Arendt (ed.), “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 255.

⁶Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press), 1991.

⁷Chalmers Johnson, “Iraqi Wars,” adapted from *The Sorrows of Empire: How the Americans Lost Their Country*, (New York: Metropolitan Books), 2004. <http://www.antiwar.com/orig/johnson1.html>, January 10, 2003.

⁸The Dark Years in W. H. Auden. *Collected Short Poems: 1927-1957*. New York: Vintage Books. 1966. 177.

Jyotsna Kapur is cross appointed with the departments of Cinema & Photography and Sociology, Southern Illinois University. She is the author of *Coining for Capital: Movies, Marketing and the Transformation of Childhood* (Rutgers University Press, 2005), which relates the widespread “growing up” of children in contemporary American cinema to capitalist expansion, the invention of children as consumers and withdrawals of social benefits from children and families. Her research and teaching interests include documentary and ethnographic film, the Japanese and German New Wave, Indian cinema, postmodernity and globalization of media industry, and critical theory based in Marxism, socialist-feminism, and race.



Rang de basanti: DJ, a contemporary turns into the revolutionary, Chandrashekhar Azad



Rang de basanti: The contemporary Siddharth turns into the historical Bhagat Singh