Kesari: Colonialism, Martyrdom and Nationalism

STUTI SUHANI
School of Liberal Studies, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi

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This film review attempts to analyse the 2019 commercial chartbuster Kesari, an emotionally compelling war drama based on the events of the Battle of Saragarhi (1897). The movie was endorsed as an ode to Sikh martial values, painting a political conflict with predominantly religious overtones, while also being careful to make scattered mentions of syncretism. This review will examine how the movie can be seen as echoing the values of martyrdom and sacrifice for the nation within the larger contemporary milieu of a newfound emphasis on nationalist values.

Keywords: Kesari, war drama, Battle of Saragarhi, 36th Sikh Regiment, martyrdom, Sikh identity, Khalsa.

Since the past few decades, our socio-political order has been at an inflection point, bearing witness to a sustained rise in hyper-nationalism. Accordingly, Anurag Singh's *Kesari* is a cinematic celebration of "valour, bravery, and all those patriotic hashtag terms guiding Indian filmmakers since 2014".[1] The film attempts an in-depth depiction of the Battle of Saragarhi, a prominent narrative in popular Sikh memory of martyrdom, seen as one of the greatest 'last-stands' in military history. The fort had operated as an interim signal for post for the 36th Sikh Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel J Haughton in order to maintain the flow of communication between Fort Gulistan and Fort Lockhart on Samana Ridge during the Tiraha Campaign to quell the uprising in the North West Frontier Province (now in Pakistan).[2] The battle was fought on 12th September 1897 between 21 Sikh soldiers of the 36th Sikh

[1] Rahul Desai, "A Film That Is To History What War Is To Peace", *Film Companion*, March 21, 2019, https://www.filmcompanion.in/reviews/kesari-is-to-history-what-war-is-to-peace.

[2] Bikram Lamba, *Battle of Saragarhi Provides Some Excellent Lessons*, WordPress, n.d., 2022, 1, accessed June 16, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/86535751/Battle_of_Saragarhi_Provides_Some_Excellent_Lessons.

regiment and over 10,000 Afghan soldiers, during which the former managed to hold the fort for almost six hours.

In the words of Rahul Desai, the film "feeds the bloodthirst of 2019 by positioning the blood spilled in 1897". It is preceded by a shot of the Indian Government's Ministry of Home Affairs website titled '*Bharat ke veer* - dedicated to all the martyrs". The opening shot involves a narration sequence of the establishment of Ranjit Singh's empire in the 19th century, which is depicted as being established by "driving away the Afghans" (*Afghano ko bhagakar*). It depicts the coterie of Afghan *amirs* as a constantly pestering element attempting to capture the north-western region of *Bharat*.[3] This establishes the *longue durée* of the region as a landscape in turmoil within the first few minutes. It then goes on to show how the Anglo-Afghan conflict necessitated British reliance on Sikhs to tackle Afghans, as they were part of the only group that had successfully dealt with them in the past.

Within one year of the annexation of the Sikh state in 1849, Sikhs were being actively recruited into the East India Company's army, and the officers who had just fought the Sikhs "insisted on the Sikh recruits being *kesadhari*": only those Sikhs who looked like Sikhs were to be enrolled. This can be located within the broader colonial epistemology of constructing certain native ethnic groups as 'martial races'. It is well known that by the 18th century, Sikh warriors often chose a Khalsa identity, and it was principally as soldiers that Persian and British authors encountered these disciples of the Guru.[4] Unlike many of their conquered subjects who struck the British as superstitious and effeminate, the Sikhs were considered brave.[5] In the words of Captain R. W. Falcon, a Sikh was "manly in his warlike creed, in his love of sports and in being a true son of the soil; a buffalo, not quick in understanding, but brave, strong and true".[6]The movie also plays on the trope of the land as beloved, with the last shot of one sapling growing in an agricultural field feeding into

[3] The use of the term "*Bharat*" in the narration aligns with the rekindling of the nationalist debate around renaming the nation.

[4] Louis E. Fenech, "Martyrdom and the Sikh Tradition," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no.4 (October-December 1997): 624.

[5] Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 209.

[6] Captain R.W. Falcon, *Handbook On Sikhs: for the use of Regimental Officers* (Allahabad: The Pioneer Press, 1896), 1.

the construction of *Punjabiyat* as being largely associated with agrarian imaginations.

The initial shot of the movie introduces the protagonist, havaldar (constable) Ishar Singh, explaining the conflict between the Pathans and the British over Afghanistan to his colleague at the Samana Range. The doting simile used for this illustrated *'gora sahab'* (British) as the husband, and Afghanistan as the *'biwi'* (wife), follows along the classical trope of feminising the opponent in a conflict, while also acknowledging that the native soldiers, specifically the Sikhs, were mere pawns in a tussle from which they had nothing to gain. The movie portrays the Afghans as inherently rugged and barbarous, chanting religious slogans while beheading a woman, representing their utter brutality. It plays on the classical trope of Sikh soldiers saving a woman and protecting her from men of her own community. This narrative is drawn from the colonial discourse in which white men saw themselves as "saving brown women from brown men", as noted by Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?".[7]

There are several depictions of rampant racism within British troops against native soldiers. The protagonist's transfer to Saragarhi, understood to be a punishment posting, is also depicted as a symbolic humiliation at the hands of a British superior. It is historically established that Post-1857, Punjab had, to all intents and purposes, become "the garrison province of the Raj: not only was it home to the bulk of the soldiers of the Indian Army, resources were also generously expended for military purposes".[8] The colonial stereotyping of classifying certain communities as "martial" and others as effeminate established a dichotomy that persists in modern constructions of identity through "the process of radicalisation and gendering".[9] With heavy use of religious symbolism associated with the Khalsa and multiple sequences of religious war cries, the film heightens the valiant representation of Khalsa Sikhs. The war sequence has the background score of one of the most widely

[7] Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty, "Can The Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Carry Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 93.

[8] Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State: The Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849-1947* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 20.

[9] Vishal Sangu, "Lost in Translation: How Colonialism Shaped Modern Sikh," *Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions* 24 (2023): 126.

quoted hymns of Guru Gobind Singh: *"deh shiva var mohe,"* which is seen as speaking of the spiritual battle within oneself. The movie serves as a rousing statement of heroic endurance and bravery, which continues to feed into the Sikh identity as well as the larger nationalist construction. This version of nation-building, along the lines of religious hyper-nationalism, "is directly dependent upon religious antagonism or on the construction of fundamental orientations through opposition to the 'Other'."[10]

A major historical loophole in the narrative is the painting of the Mughals and British in the same light as foreign exploiters, remaining completely ignorant of the intricacies of colonial rule. The film "features a proto-freedom fighter taking on a proto-Taliban force."[11] Throughout an explicitly detailed depiction of the battle, the umpteen number of Afghan soldiers are shown using unethical methods of attack in the name of jihad (religious warfare), and displaying hostility towards Sikh 'infidels' *(kafirs*). The Sikh soldiers, on the other hand, are depicted in sharp contrast, as benevolent in their approach towards the enemy and practicing skilled warfare tactics. The film comes off as a cinematic attempt to negotiate with the historical reality of the Sikhs being allies of the British imperial project during the period under discussion. There are multiple invocations of the idea that rather than 21 British soldiers, 21 Sikhs fought bravely and chose death. It is essential to note that irrespective of class, caste, community, and creed, a person who defies hegemonies and in the process lays down their life is eulogized in Punjab, owing to their 'frontier consciousness'.[12]The film pleads the Sikh case by emphasising that they fought - not for money, nor for the British, nor themselves, but for the *shahids* (martyrs), their *'kaum'* (community), and the 'Guru'.

It is for this reason that the protagonist removes the headgear of the uniform and wears a *kesari* (saffron) *pagdi*—the colour of *shahidi* (martyrdom). This historically inconsistent depiction introduces "a dose of contemporary

[10] Louis E Fenech, "Contested Nationalism: Negotiated Terrains: The Way Sikhs Remember Udham Singh 'Shahid' (1899-1940)," *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (October 2002): 838.

[11] Nandini Ramnath, "Kesari Movie Review: Akshay Kumar flexes his vocal cords in underwhelming ode to bravery", *Scroll*, March 21, 2019, https://scroll.in/reel/917358/kesari-movie-review-akshay-kumar-flexes-his-vocal-cords-in-underwhelming-ode-to-bravery.

[12] Ishwar Dayal Gaur, *Martyr as Bridegroom: A Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi: Anthem Press, 2008), 24.

militant nationalism into the film".[13] In the last sequence of the battle, Ishar Singh strips off the insignia of the British army, reemphasising the fact that he martyred for his community rather than in service of the imperial cause. As per Ramnath, the film clearly attempts to "put a revisionist religious spin on the willingness to lay down their lives for the imperial master." One can analyse the film in light of Louis Fenech's argument that the trope of martyrdom has a certain flexibility and political utility that makes it useful for the effective mobilisation of ardour across various ideological terrains. The movie's evocative dialogues and soul-stirring music heighten the cinematic emphasis on the great sacrifice that it narrates. However, the screenplay is somewhat inconsistent, with a plodding first-half, springing to life only in the latter sequences. While the production design, costumes, and location transport the audience to the late 19th century, "the movie's religious tint and inability to see the battle as a territorial conflict between colonial subjects and colonisers place it firmly in the present."[14]

It was not very well received by cinema critics, being seen as a "dull movie about a memorable standoff". Critics largely felt that the movie did not do justice to its source material, losing perspective of the event it narrates. Having said that, it successfully fed into the contemporary milieu of hyper-nationalism, becoming a major commercial success, grossing at ₹2088 million worldwide. While the past decade has witnessed a plethora of biopics and war films—from *Sardar Udham Singh* to *Uri: The Surgical Strike*—none of them utilise the tropes of Khalsa Sikh martyrdom and colonial identity constructions in order to serve the contemporary atmosphere of rampant religious nationalism as evidently as *Kesari* does.

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[13] Ajit Duara, "Kesari Movie Review", *Open*, March 22, 2019, https://openthemagazine.com/cinema/kesari-movie-review/.

[14] Ramnath, "Kesari Movie Review: Akshay Kumar flexes his vocal cords in an underwhelming ode to bravery."

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