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Visual Narratives of Unity: Aesthetic Nationalism in Indian Cinema with Reference to Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Historical Set Designs

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Abstract

In a diverse nation like India, cinema has long served as more than entertainment, it is a powerful medium for shaping collective memory, cultural identity, and national sentiment. This paper examines the role of visual aesthetics, particularly set design, in fostering narratives of unity and nationalism within Indian historical cinema. Focusing on the work of much-admired filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the study explores how his National Award-winning films—Devdas, Bajirao Mastani, and Padmaavat—employ grand, meticulously designed visual spaces to suggest a shared sense of heritage and cultural pride.

Rather than offering direct political commentary, Bhansali's films subtly participate in the broader discourse of nation-building by celebrating India's diverse yet interconnected historical past. Through an analysis grounded in aesthetic nationalism and visual semiotics, this research highlights how elements such as architecture, spatial symbolism, and material culture are used to construct emotionally resonant and ideologically charged cinematic worlds. These visual narratives do not just reflect history—they reimagine and stylise it in ways that unify the viewer's perception of India as a culturally rich, cohesive entity.

By situating Bhansali's visual storytelling within the larger framework of media's role in nation-making, this paper argues that set design functions as a soft but significant force in shaping national identity. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how film aesthetics influence our engagement with history, unity, and belonging in contemporary India.

Keywords: Aesthetic Nationalism, Set Design, Indian Historical Cinema, Visual Culture, Nation Building through Media

Introduction

In a country as rich in culture and history as India, building a sense of national identity goes far beyond politics or administration. It's woven deeply into the everyday practices, traditions, and symbols that people connect with (Parasuraman, 2024). One of the most powerful tools in shaping this shared identity has been cinema. With its unmatched ability to reach across languages, regions, and social boundaries, Indian cinema has become both a reflection of our society and a force that shapes how we see ourselves, our stories, our struggles, and our sense of belonging (Gehlawat, 2019).

While political figures and history books may outline the framework of nationalism, it's visual media, especially films, that breathe life and emotion into those ideas. Since gaining independence, Indian cinema has played a quiet yet steady role in nurturing feelings of unity, cultural pride, and a connection to our civilizational roots (Smith, 2013). This isn't limited to films that wave the flag or make loud patriotic statements. Even historical dramas, mythological retellings, and period pieces contribute by reimagining the past in ways that resonate with modern audiences, helping us make sense of where we come from and who we are today (Sherfudeen et al., 2024).

In the rich landscape of Indian cinema, the work of Sanjay Leela Bhansali stands out

for his unwavering dedication to visual storytelling. Known for creating emotionally charged and visually stunning films, Bhansali doesn't just tell stories, he builds entire worlds (P. Roy, 2012). His historical dramas like *Devdas* (2002), *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), and *Padmaavat* (2018) go beyond traditional narratives. They immerse the audience in cinematic experiences that are as much about what we see and feel as they are about dialogue and plot. His films are deeply rooted in Indian aesthetics, blending history with imagination to create something both grand and emotionally resonant (Qureshi, 2018).

What truly sets Bhansali apart is his extraordinary use of set design. In his films, sets are never just beautiful backgrounds, they are integral to the storytelling (Arivanantham & Radhakrishnan, 2023). From majestic palaces with sweeping arches to intricately designed temples, from the energy of royal courts to the solidity of ancient forts, every detail is carefully crafted (Menon, 2025). These environments breathe life into the characters and reflect their inner worlds. Drawing inspiration from India's diverse architectural heritage, Bhansali's sets don't just recreate the past; they elevate it, offering a sense of cultural pride and identity that feels both historic and timeless.

While Sanjay Leela Bhansali's rich visual style is widely admired, the deeper role

his set designs play in shaping narrative and meaning hasn't received the attention it deserves in academic circles. Much of the scholarly focus on Indian cinema's role in nation building tends to revolve around themes, characters, or language. But film is, at its core, a visual and spatial medium and the way it looks and feels is just as important as what it says(Shabbir et al., 2024).

In Bhansali's historical films, set design is more than just decoration, it's a powerful storytelling tool. The architecture, the layout of spaces, the play of light and shadow, and the textures used on screen all come together to create a mood that evokes pride, unity, and a deep connection to cultural heritage. These visual elements, though not always overtly political, serve as subtle yet strong expressions of nationalism. They offer audiences a carefully crafted, emotionally resonant vision of India's past, one that celebrates honour, beauty, and resilience through every frame(Goswami, 2017).

This study suggests that Bhansali's set designs act as visual metaphors for national unity, quietly contributing to the symbolic process of cultural nation-building. His sets do more than just depict historical eras; they elevate them, offering an idealised, almost poetic vision of India's past. Through their harmony, grandeur, and attention to cultural detail, these cinematic spaces encourage viewers to connect emotionally with a shared

heritage and take pride in a dignified image of Indian civilisation (Sahu, 2018).

Research Objective and Scope

This research aims to critically explore how Bhansali's historical set designs contribute to visual narratives of unity and aesthetic nationalism. It looks beyond the surface spectacle of his films to interpret his art direction as a meaningful system of signs—a visual language rich in cultural significance. By closely examining the spatial and symbolic elements in the sets of *Devdas*, *Bajirao Mastani*, and *Padmaavat*, the study seeks to understand how these visual forms help build emotional and ideological connections to India's historical and cultural identity.

Importantly, this research does not suggest that Bhansali sets out to make nationalist cinema conventionally or deliberately. Instead, it argues that the immersive visual worlds he creates naturally echo broader narratives of Indian unity and pride. Through his lush, detailed reimaging of the past, Bhansali's films offer a cinematic language that subtly reinforces ideas of nationhood, one shaped through cultural richness, historical grandeur, and a deep sense of belonging.

Research Questions

To guide this inquiry, the study is structured around two central research questions:

1. How do Bhansali's historical set designs evoke a sense of national identity, unity, and cultural pride?
2. What symbolic elements, such as architecture, spatial organisation, and visual motifs, reflect themes of aesthetic nationalism?

Significance of the Study

By placing set design at the centre of its analysis, this research offers a fresh lens through which to view Indian cinema and its role in shaping cultural ideas of nationhood. It adds to the wider conversation on visual culture by demonstrating how aesthetics, especially the spatial and material choices within a film, can carry deep ideological meaning. In doing so, the study fosters an interdisciplinary conversation that brings together film studies, media theory, nationalism studies, and design aesthetics.

At a time when debates around national identity are closely tied to how history is represented and cultural values are portrayed, understanding how cinema visually constructs unity has become increasingly important. This research not only reveals the ideological dimensions of Bhansali's filmmaking but also makes a broader case for viewing art direction as a powerful form of cultural storytelling, one that speaks as much through space and design as it does through plot and dialogue.

Literature Review

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films stand as a testament to the power of visual storytelling, where every frame speaks volumes. Known for their intricate set designs and rich cultural symbolism, his movies are more than just a visual feast, they are immersive experiences. The sets in his films aren't just for show; they serve as integral parts of the narrative, expressing emotions and reflecting the cultural history of the story. Bhansali uses architecture, colours, and textures not merely to decorate but to define the world in which his characters live and breathe. This paper delves into how Bhansali's expert use of set design and visual aesthetics elevates the storytelling, deepening emotional connections and bringing cultural identity to the forefront in a way that pulls the audience into his cinematic world.

The Role of Colour in Set Design

Colour isn't just decoration in Bhansali's films, its emotion, culture, and storytelling all rolled into one. He uses colour with such intention that it often feels like its own character on screen. Take *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, for example. The recurring use of white isn't accidental, it's carefully chosen to represent purity, spirituality, and strength. At the same time, it stands in stark contrast to the harsh realities of Gangubai's life, creating a powerful visual tension (Matkar & Ghodake, 2024). This thoughtful use of colour captures the essence of Bhansali's style, where every

hue has a purpose and every frame speaks volumes.

You see a similar richness in *RamLeela*, where colour is inspired by *rasa theory*—an ancient Indian concept that focuses on evoking emotions through sensory experiences(Croteau, 2023). The film bursts with vibrant reds, deep blues, and delicate pastels, painting a world that's emotionally charged and visually unforgettable. It's not just about making the movie look beautiful; it's about pulling the audience into a world where they can *feel* the passion, conflict, and culture in every scene.

Cultural Motifs and Symbolism in Set Design

Bhansali's films don't just tell stories—they celebrate India's rich and diverse cultural heritage through every frame. His attention to traditional motifs and architectural influences gives his sets a soul of their own. In *Padmavat*, for instance, the grandeur of Rajasthani architecture takes centre stage. The elaborate carvings, majestic arches, and ornate patterns aren't just for show—they help ground the characters in their cultural context, making the setting feel both authentic and emotionally powerful (Kumari, 2024). These visual elements speak volumes about the pride, tradition, and strength of the world his characters inhabit.

Guzaarish, on the other hand, takes a more understated but equally thoughtful

approach. Here, Bhansali weaves together Gothic and Indian styles, creating a unique aesthetic that mirrors the main character's internal struggle and search for meaning(Pachouri, 2024). The result is a deeply personal, introspective world that blends East and West in a way that feels both intimate and expansive. This ability to mix cultural elements so seamlessly shows Bhansali's gift for crafting a visual language that feels deeply Indian yet universally resonant.

The Representation of Landscape in Bollywood Cinema

In many Bollywood films, landscapes often serve as beautiful backdrops—but in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's work, they go far beyond that. In his storytelling, the landscape becomes a living, breathing part of the narrative(Rashmi & Jain, 2024). It's not just about where the story takes place; it's about how that setting makes the audience *feel*. Whether it's the dusty streets of Gujarat or the regal forts of Rajasthan, these places stir up emotions and help convey the deeper meaning behind the story (Mishra, 2018).

Bhansali uses landscapes almost like an extension of his characters. He seems to understand their inner worlds so well that the surroundings begin to mirror their emotions, desires, and conflicts. The visuals of mountains, palaces, deserts, or city lanes aren't just there for visual appeal—they act as

metaphors, helping to build the narrative and enrich the emotional layers of the film (Mishra, 2018). Through this thoughtful use of space, Bhansali invites the viewer into a world where every corner, colour, and texture say something about the people who inhabit it.

Critical Approaches to TV and Film Set Design

Scenic design in film and television often doesn't get the attention it deserves. It's usually treated as part of the overall miseen-scène or dismissed as mere decoration—especially in TV, where it's sometimes seen as just “wallpaper.” But in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films, set design plays a far more important role. His sets aren't just about creating a beautiful scene; they help tell the story. They shape how we feel as viewers and add emotional and thematic layers to the narrative (D'Arcy, 2018).

Bhansali brings together elements from history, symbolism, and storytelling theory to craft sets that do more than look good—they *mean* something. Every detail, from the architecture to the props, carries significance. His use of visual metaphors and cultural symbols not only enriches the narrative but also helps us understand the characters on a deeper level. Watching a

Bhansali film isn't just about following a plot; it's about being drawn into a world where the surroundings speak as powerfully as the dialogue (D'Arcy, 2018).

Methodology

This research takes a qualitative, interpretive approach—one wellsuited for exploring the symbolic and aesthetic layers of set design in Indian historical cinema. It focuses on understanding how Sanjay Leela Bhansali's visually rich film environments act as metaphors for unity and cultural nationalism.

To do this, the study adopts a case study method, concentrating on three of Bhansali's most visually and thematically significant historical films: *Devdas* (2002), *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), and *Padmaavat* (2018). These films were chosen because of their intricate set designs, historical narratives, and strong cultural impact. Each provides a vivid visual landscape through which ideas of national identity, unity, and cultural pride are brought to life.

The primary method of data collection in this study is visual scene analysis. Key scenes from each film are carefully selected for their spatial richness, narrative importance, and symbolic depth. The analysis looks closely at elements such as architectural

forms, spatial layout, color schemes, lighting, textures, and iconographic details. Special attention is given to how characters move through and engage with these spaces, and how the design choices help express

cultural values, emotions, and ideals related to Indian unity and heritage.

For interpretation, the study relies on symbolic and spatial analysis to explore how visual motifs convey deeper ideological meanings. It also includes comparative

Visual Elements in Indian Cinema: Cultural and National Identity



Figure 1 Code Book for Visual Elements

reflections with historical references to better understand how Bhansali balances creative imagination with cultural memory—crafting visual worlds that feel both artistically striking and deeply rooted in shared historical identity.

Analysis and discussion

Case Study:

Devdas (2002)

In *Devdas*, Sanjay Leela Bhansali reimagines the opulent world of early 20th-century Bengal as a stylised cinematic space that visually conveys themes of cultural

continuity and emotional unity. The grand haveli where Paro lives, with its expansive courtyards, intricately carved wooden balconies, and rich religious iconography, becomes more than just a setting. It stands as a symbol of collective identity, deeply rooted in tradition and devotion (Creekmur, 2007).

One of the most striking moments, the Durga Puja sequence, brings this symbolism to life. With its symmetrical compositions, bold use of reds and golds, and carefully choreographed rituals, the scene blends spirituality with architectural beauty to evoke a powerful sense of shared heritage. Here, the

set doesn't just frame the action, it becomes an emotional landscape that mirrors both personal turmoil and broader cultural values (Mukherjee, 2011).

As the characters move through these carefully designed spaces, the audience is drawn into a world where Indian aesthetics are not only celebrated but preserved. Bhansali's visual storytelling creates a kind of nostalgic nationalism—where architecture, ritual, and visual detail come together to form a symbolic space of belonging, resilience, and cultural pride. In doing so, *Devdas* reflects a vision of India that is unified through its traditions, its artistry, and its emotional depth (Dobhal, 2016).

Bajirao Mastani (2015)

Bajirao Mastani weaves a vivid portrayal of IndoMaratha history through spaces that blend visual beauty with deeper political meaning. The Shaniwar Wada palace—brought to life with sweeping arches, gold-dorned chambers, and a striking fusion of Hindu and Islamic design elements—serves as more than just a royal setting. It becomes a powerful symbol of unity in diversity. This architectural fusion mirrors the film's central theme: the culturally charged, yet deeply human love story between the Maratha Peshwa Bajirao and the Muslim princess Mastani (B. Roy, 2018).

Bhansali uses colour, lighting, and spatial symbolism with precision, especially

in emotionally charged scenes like the Ganesh Utsav celebration or the tense court assemblies. These moments are not just visually striking, they help tell a story of India as a pluralistic civilisation, where differences coexist and even enrich each other. Through symmetry, intricate detailing, and thoughtful scene composition, Bhansali transforms the palace into more than a backdrop; it becomes a living, breathing space that reflects the film's emotional highs and political undertones (Bhansali, n.d.).

In this world, architecture reacts to love, conflict, and change, embodying the values of inclusion and cultural fusion. Bhansali shows that nation-building in cinema isn't only about what is said, it's about what is seen and felt. Through his artistic set design, the idea of a diverse yet united India is not just imagined, it's constructed, experienced, and brought vividly to life (Ajaonkar & Talule, n.d.).

Padmaavat (2018)

In *Padmaavat*, Bhansali creates a striking contrast between two very different spatial worlds: the disciplined, sacred order of Rajput Chittorgarh and the dark, chaotic excess of Alauddin Khilji's Delhi. The design of Chittorgarh Fort, with its balanced stone architecture, grand ceremonial halls, and sacred spaces, stands as a powerful symbol of honour, tradition, and cultural purity. The elevated temples, the precise alignment of

characters during rituals, and the glowing interplay of fire against white stone all work together to evoke a feeling of transcendent unity and spiritual strength (Singh, 2022).

On the other hand, Khilji's Delhi is depicted as a shadowy, asymmetrical realm of moral and cultural otherness, marked by excess and disorder. The hauntingly choreographed Jauhar scene serves as the emotional and spatial climax, where architecture, ritual, and collective grief

intertwine to form a powerful nationalist image of resistance and sacrifice (Kang, 2023).

Through his use of space, Bhansali does more than recount history—he visually mythologises sacrifice as a shared ideal for the nation. In this vision, the fort becomes far more than a mere fortress; it transforms into a symbolic guardian of Indian identity, purity, and unity.

Content Analysis:

Code	Devdas (2002)	Bajirao Mastani (2015)	Padmaavat (2018)
CULTSPC (Cultural Space)	Durga Puja courtyard scene with symmetrical rituals and vibrant religious iconography	Holi celebration in the royal court; Ganesh festival procession	Rajput rituals before battle, royal kitchen, and communal dining scenes
ARCHUNIF (Architectural Unity)	Grand family mansion with symmetrical columns, open courtyards, and traditional wooden textures	Balanced design of Shaniwar Wada court; harmonious blend of light and spatial geometry	Uniform symmetry in Chittorgarh Fort; arched gates and fortress layout
SYMBHER (Symbolism of Heritage)	Traditional Bengali motifs (e.g., Durga idol, temple bells, wooden pillars)	Maratha swords, Tulsi Vrindavan, rangoli designs on palace floors	Rajput warrior shields, temple bells, flame urns, Rajasthani textile motifs
FUSARCH (Fusion Architecture)	Limited fusion, mostly traditional Bengali elite interior design	IndoIslamic elements: arches, Persian carpets, Mughal jharokhas in Hindu space	Rajasthani fort architecture with IndoPersian arches, Mughal court sets for Khilji
SACRSPC (Sacred/Resistance Spaces)	Devdas' death scene near the temple; symbolic retreat to spiritual space	Mastani's prison cell and final confrontation scene	Jauhar chamber, temple halls before mass sacrifice, heavily charged spatial symbolism
COLORNARR (Colour as Narrative Device)	Red and gold for passion, devotion, and social stature; white for grief	Warm golds and reds for power, love; muted tones for conflict scenes	Red flames and white garments in Jauhar; blueblack for Alauddin's court
CHARSPC (Character–Space Dynamics)	Paro confined in ornate interiors; Devdas walking through empty corridors	Mastani alone in vast palace halls; Bajirao pacing the court in battle planning	Padmavati ascending temple steps; Khilji intruding into Rajput spaces
RITUALVIS (Ritualized Visuals)	Puja performances, communal singing, processions	Processional dance in "Pinga"; synchronised war preparation scenes	Jauhar sequence choreographed as a spiritual ritual; collective prayer scenes

Table 1 Data of Visual Elements

Bhansali's films use cultural spaces and architectural unity to visually celebrate a shared heritage and collective identity across diverse historical settings. By weaving symbolism drawn from regional motifs and blended architectural styles, his work highlights the rich pluralism of India's cultural fabric. Sacred and ritualized spaces underscore themes of moral strength and collective sacrifice, while carefully chosen color palettes and the way characters move through these spaces add layers of emotional and ideological depth. Together, these visual strategies craft compelling stories of unity and nationalism, brought to life through Bhansali's masterful set design.

Findings

Set Design as Visual Architecture of Unity

Across *Devdas*, *Bajirao Mastani*, and *Padmaavat*, Bhansali masterfully uses spatial aesthetics like symmetry, communal spaces—courtyards, palaces, temples—and processional layouts to evoke a strong sense of visual unity. These carefully crafted environments highlight shared traditions, family bonds, and cultural rituals, reinforcing the idea of togetherness within India's rich cultural diversity. By repeatedly showcasing communal settings, especially during religious festivals and public ceremonies, Bhansali creates a cinematic world that reflects and celebrates India's collective identity.

Symbolism of Cultural Nationalism through Architecture

Bhansali's set designs richly incorporate architectural styles, artifacts, and decorative motifs drawn from India's diverse cultural heritage. By consistently highlighting regionspecific elements—Bengali influences in *Devdas*, Maratha traditions in *Bajirao Mastani*, and Rajput aesthetics in *Padmaavat*—he brings out cultural uniqueness while weaving them into a broader story of Indian pride. This approach echoes Benedict Anderson's idea of the “imagined community,” where Bhansali envisions the nation through vividly detailed, historically grounded spaces that reflect a shared cultural spirit and unity.

Aesthetic Fusion as a Metaphor for Pluralism

The blending of Hindu, Islamic, and regional architectural styles—particularly evident in *Bajirao Mastani*—goes beyond creating visual grandeur; it tells a deeper story of inclusivity. These fused spaces embody Bhansali's broader message that India's strength lies in unity through diversity. This idea resonates with the nationalist vision of cultural pluralism and reflects Sardar Patel's postindependence dream of bringing the nation together without wiping out its many distinct identities.

Sacred and Resistance Spaces as Sites of Moral Nationalism

In all three films, sacred spaces like temples, shrines, and ritual chambers are visually elevated as powerful sites of emotional strength and moral conviction. In *Padmaavat*, for example, the Jauhar chamber becomes more than just a physical space—it transforms into a symbol of collective resistance and sacrifice, embodying a deep sense of nationalism. Through these settings, Bhansali creates a form of spiritual nationalism where devotion, honor, and identity are expressed through powerful visual storytelling rather than words.

Colour, Ritual, and Spatial Choreography as Narrative Tools

Bhansali skillfully combines set design with color theory and ritualized movement to stir deep emotional responses. Scenes like the Durga Puja in *Devdas* or the Ganesh festival in *Bajirao Mastani* carefully choreograph characters within grand, symbolic spaces to evoke feelings of unity and belonging. The visual language—often dominated by rich reds, golds, and whites—strengthens nationalist emotions by linking characters closely with these meaningful environments.

Far from being just beautiful backdrops, Bhansali's set designs act as powerful ideological tools that build and reinforce visual stories of unity, aesthetic nationalism, and cultural identity. Through architecture, color, ritual, and spatial

arrangement, his historical films bring to life a vision of India that is culturally integrated yet spiritually diverse—mirroring the kind of unity political leaders like Sardar Patel worked to achieve in reality.

Conclusion

This study has delved into how Sanjay Leela Bhansali's historical set designs serve as powerful visual tools for expressing cultural nationalism and unity. Through a detailed analysis of key scenes from *Devdas*, *Bajirao Mastani*, and *Padmaavat*, the research uncovered recurring visual themes—like symmetrical architecture, sacred ritual spaces, meaningful color schemes, and blended cultural aesthetics—that come together to create a rich cinematic narrative of national identity. In each film, the set designs do more than shape the story's world; they send a broader aesthetic message celebrating the diversity and complexity of India's social and cultural landscape.

By turning ideological values into rich spatial and symbolic visuals, Bhansali's films show how visual storytelling plays a subtle but powerful role in nationbuilding. The physical settings become more than just backdrops—they extend the characters' emotions and political visions, connecting past and present, myth and history, identity and imagination. Through this visual language, the audience isn't just watching a

story; they become part of a shared cultural memory.

The implications of this research reach across media studies, cultural politics, and cinematic arts. For media scholars, it offers a fresh way to analyze how space and design carry ideological meaning in film. For cultural theorists, it highlights how popular cinema can both reinforce and reshape national stories. For filmmakers and art directors, it emphasizes the power of production design as its own language—one that shapes public perception beyond just dialogue and storyline. Ultimately, Bhansali's visual worlds are more than lavish spectacles; they are thoughtfully crafted ideological spaces that reflect and help sustain the vision of India as a diverse yet united nation.

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