Political Aesthetics of the Nation: murals and statues in the Indian Parliament[i]

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Abstract

Through studying murals and statues in the Indian parliament, this article analyses the national aesthetic of postcolonial political elites and suggests that such installations are an important means of reading politics. The article focuses on how, through commissioning, installing and contesting this public art, postcolonial Indian elites narrate the nation, 'indigenize' colonial buildings, represent the changing character of Indian democracy and struggle over the various meanings of 'India'/the nation as well as over representing the shifts in its body politic. The article suggests that contestations over the readings of the nation through art allow us to ask important questions about politics.

Key words

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Introduction

> There is an aesthetic dimension in the political and there is a political dimension in art. This is why I consider that it is not useful to make a distinction between political and non-political art... Chantal Mouffe, 2007

Murals, statues and inscriptions adorn the Indian parliament – a colonial building that houses India's democracy. These commemorative pieces reach back and across India, narrating the national story on the one hand and indigenising colonial political space on the other. They tell a story of 'India that is Bharat[ii]' – its past glories, the struggles for independence, the leaders who led these and their aspirations, in artistic styles that represent different regions of the country. Why were these murals, portraits and statues commissioned? What did the postcolonial Indian political elites seek to represent through this art work? Why do they occupy the space that they do? And what do they tell us about the contemporary struggles over aesthetics[iii] and political meaning that continue to mobilise as well as agitate political actors. In this article I try and explore the relationship between postcolonial democratic practice and the 'narration of the nation' (Bhabha, 1990) as political aesthetics. I suggest that the performative, the spatial and the artistic allow us to ask important questions about politics and political institutions and their place in our past and present readings of national histories in three ways.

First, the political imaginaries produce both cognitive and affective responses which are expressed in terms of history, the present as well as future aspirations (Parekh, 2011; Anderson,1991; Brown, 2009). The excavation and representation of time is not innocent; social and political relations are reproduced through a variety of modes in specific spaces – narratives - verbal and written - ceremony and ritual, symbols, paintings and sculpture. Together this forms the aesthetics of politics as well as of power. Second, these imaginaries we can help us reflect upon the processes through which they become hegemonic – how the dominant modes of power reproduced and how are the marginalised kept outside the spaces of performance of power (Bourdieu, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991), in the shadows, 'out of place'. Through this process, "Art can offer a chance for society to collectively reflect on the imaginary figures it depends upon for its very consistency, it self-understanding" (Brian

Holmes, cited in Mouffe, 2007:2). Third, it allows us to ask questions about the palimpsest of multiple histories and imaginaries – representations of power are not stable; they are contingent. If the dominant political aesthetics reproduces consensus about the place of the powerful, critical aesthetics "foments dissensus, [it] makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure..." (Mouffe, 2007:3). The dominant political aesthetics are challenged in agonistic spaces (Mouffe, 2007) and are reconfigured as they travel over time. Through asking these questions about the manifestations of power, its everyday presence and re-presentation, we can analyse social relations and understand how these play out in our daily lives, which is where most of us experience politics.

Debating Aesthetics

In his book *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978) Marcuse argued from a critical Marxist perspective that while art must be viewed "by virtue of its aesthetic form, art is largely autonomous vis a vis the given social relations...art both protests these relations, and at the same time transcends them". My reading of political aesthetics takes this approach into account and is also informed by current debates focusing on in particular Bourdieu's attention to the reproduction of class societies through the distinctions that aesthetics reinforces (1984) and Ranciere's consideration of the promise of art – as a mode of equality in the Kantian sense (2004). While finding much of value in these debates, I am also aware that these theorists largely do not focus on a) the production of art and b) on the state-capital relation in this production – their focus remains the social and individual consumption of art. For Marcuse, authentic art represents the truth of the world as it is, for Bourdieu art is framed in and reproduces the distinctions of social class, and for Ranciere it holds the promise of agential equality in an unequal world. My approach while largely sympathetic to Bourdieu's understanding of distinction and open to Ranciere's promise of/for aesthetics, focuses on the production of art by/through the state and in so doing on how the readings of this art affect politics of reproduction of privilege as well as its contestation (Taylor, 2000). In my reading, the politics of liminality (Turner,1967) that art produces is underpinned by the context in which this liminal reading takes place – Time and place are both important here as are the social structures/relations of caste/class and state/capital. In this context I turn to some of the insights developed by postcolonial theorists trying to understand not only the role that art played in the political movements of independence but also how the form that art takes is framed by the histories of colonial inequality, nationalist aspirations and collective

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imaginaries of freedom (Chakravarty, 2000; Mitter, Guha-Thakurta, Sachs, 1983). I argue that these imaginaries are framed by privilege, seek to establish new parameters of modernity and in so doing affirm legitimacy of the postcolonial state even as they continue to show the palimpsest of colonial histories. I explore these themes through examining both the architectural space of the Indian parliament as well as the art – murals and statues – that inhabit this space. In doing so, I also acknowledge the work of Henri Lefevre, whose work on the production of space and reproduction of social relations (1991) is critical to understanding the placing of the murals and statues in the Indian parliament; he wrote "Change life! Change Society! These ideas lose completely their meaning without producing an appropriate space" (p. 59).

In the specific context of the Indian parliament, I seek to reflect upon the issues outlined above by focusing on three dimensions. First, in terms of space of/as aesthetics, I show how the British colonial state produces architecture to represent its changing power, as well as how nationalist politics indigenises old spaces and buildings. Second, I examine the aesthetics of nationalism and modernity in independent India through the murals in parliament, which convey this shift of power through a complex political meaning making from which we can read off the aspirations to modernity of the new nation; we note also the new legitimacy that is invoked in re-presenting a historical trajectory of development that is progressive and forward looking. Third, I examine the changing aesthetics of commemoration in parliament through the display of portraiture in parliament – both paintings and statues of the nation's leaders installed within its precincts tell us a different political story. Here we see particular forms of celebration of India's leaders, but also the contestations that these celebrations evoke. Issues of legitimacy play out differently here as various social groups challenge dominant narratives of leadership, seek spaces for 'their' leaders within the precincts of parliament and in so doing, reflect the changing political landscape of the country.

The space of/as aesthetics: the Indian parliament building

The Indian parliament is situated in New Delhi. It is a spatial reflection of the shift of power from the commercial interests of the East India Company to the sovereign interests of the British state after the crushing of the revolt of 1857. That the British government chose to build a new capital rather than adapt the already existing buildings of Mughal India also tells

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a story of how power played out in the context of colonialism. As Herbert Baker commented the architecture of this new capital, was to be "expressive of Britain's Imperial mission. It must not be Indian, nor English, nor Roman, but must be an Imperial Lutyen's tradition in Indian architecture" (cited in Singh, 2009:112). New Delhi was shaped by the needs of colonial government – represented by Government House and North and South Blocks - and reflected the shifts of power in India; the parliament was an afterthought, constructed in response to the growing nationalist movement which demanded institutional representation for Indians.

If imperial bodies occupied the space of government, the bodies that represented the aspirations of an Indian nation remained outside of this space of power until the independence of the country in 1947. Then the portals of Lutyen's Delhi opened and allowed in the new elites of independent India, who set about not simply occupying but indigenizing these old imperial spaces with new art and artifacts, new accommodations, rules, procedures and norms framing different spectacles of political power and of nation-building that preoccupied the nationalist government and its leaders. Some of the struggles for expressing the new nation as it took shape can be read off the murals, portraits and statues that were commissioned for parliament. Lefebvre's admonition that we take "into account localities and regions, differences and multiple (conflictual) associations, attached to the soil, to dwelling, the circulation of people and things, in the practical functioning of space" (cited in Brenner and Elden 2009: 360) opens our eyes to how the changing social and political relations in independent India find spatial reflection within its representative building, as new 'space invaders' (Puwar,2004) make demands for visual representation through portraits and statues of different bodies.

The new nation-state needed display in and through space. Manow has argued that "modern [parliamentary] democracy is not *post*-metaphysical but ...*neo*-metaphysical. All political power – and therefore also democracy – requires and produces its own political mythology" (2010:5). Political mythology as invented tradition has been particularly important to create the 'imagined communities' of the nation-state (Anderson, 1991). Ceremony and ritual contribute to this production of political mythology in and through political spaces such as parliaments (Rai, 2010). However, despite a nod in the direction of postcolonial nationalist parliaments, Manow focuses largely on the Christian (theological) traditions of Europe in his

work, which creates some tension in his argument about how the corporeal presence of monarchy continues to haunt the corridors of democratic institutions. I argue that state commissioned art and architecture provide us with important clues about the circulation of political power. While the palimpsest of British rule is evident in the rules and procedures as well as the architecture of the Indian parliament, the Indian state elites continue to narrate and stabilise visually their evolving story - through the indigenisation of imperial political spaces of the parliamentary building and through the state commissioned artwork. That these struggles over meanings and histories are ongoing is demonstrated by the contestations about the omissions and commissions of installation and commemoration of and around statues and portraits of national and party political. Such processes of narrating a new sovereignty is not specific to India as can be seen in the debates about parliamentary architecture in other postcolonial and transition states such as post-apartheid South Africa or post-transition Germany (Sachs, 1983, 1989; Waylen, 2011).

Imagining the nation, inventing its traditions, representing identities
Bhabha notes that "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye" (1990:1). Focusing the eye, however, involves casting the spotlight on and leaving in darkness different images, materials and memories. The imaginings and representations of the Indian nation before and after independence tell an interesting, if predictable, story of the creation of a nation, where traditions are invented, pasts recovered and futures presented to a new emerging citizenship (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Below, I discuss the imaginations of postcolonial Indian elites as they looked forward to leading India - a modern, self-reliant economy and polity and a self-conscious actor on the international stage - through examining parliamentary murals, statues and commemorations,

India came into being in a moment of openness, which allowed new possibilities to take shape but also one of closure, where the boundaries of the two countries, partitioned from one, were congealed, citizen(ships) created and subjectivities given shape. To be Indian, rather than a subject of Empire, or of religion - Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian (Isaai) - had to be transitioned in the wake of a bloodbath that was the Indian partition. It did so through what the Indian political elites termed 'nation-building' - a project that encompassed both the firming up of hegemonic political and cultural discourses through constitutional and legal arrangements, as well as economic and militaristic infrastructures that allowed the knitting

together of disparate populations into one stable political entity- the independent nation-state. As the new republic took shape, marking it in public spaces was an important mode of translating freedom into material moments for the nation's citizens – changes to the names of streets, removal of some and installation of other statues and public art, emphasising both/some familiar public ceremonies and creating and staging new ones – through all this the nation was performed, given authoritative sanction and legitimized. History and authority go hand in hand; to bring them together the architectural materiality of the parliamentary building needs to be subverted by turning our gaze from the Doric columns and imperial inscriptions to images of nationalist leaders and India's past, its struggles for self-determination and imagining of its bright future. As Walzer has pointed out, "Politics is an art of unification; from many, it makes one. And symbolic activity is perhaps our most important means of bringing things together, both intellectually and emotionally..." (1967:194).

But what of the ordinary citizens, the subalterns of independent India, in whose name independence was demanded, fought for and secured? Did the making of nations, translated in and through its public buildings and the discourse of nationalism, speak of and to the subaltern? Spivak has paid attention to the conditions of impossibility of retrieving subaltern voice, "arguing not that the subaltern 'should not speak', but rather that a self-reflexive and critical scholarship should seek 'to mark the place of that disappearance with something other than silence'" (Spivak 1988:306; Mathur, 2000). While the parliament, as it emptied of colonial bodies and portraits, ceremonies and rituals, marked the place of new aspirations of the people of India, it simultaneously echoed with new silences. These themes of presence and absence can be viewed in the commissioned murals and statues in the parliamentary precincts.

The aesthetics of nationalism and modernity: the narrative structure of the murals
In 1951, a Planning Committee was appointed to commission murals to decorate parliament. It was chaired by the Speaker, G.V. Mavalankar and included prominent MPs, scholars, archaeologists, historians:

> The Committee drew up a detailed plan to decorate the corridor on the ground floor of the Parliament House with 125 panels (size 11'.9" x 4'.11/2") and 46 motifs, at an estimated cost of Rs. 3 lakhs… In order to execute the plan, an Artists Sub-Committee consisting of well-known artists, historians, archaeologists and archaeological

chemists was appointed in 1954. This Sub-Committee laid down a detailed and systematic procedure for getting the panels painted by selected artists in the country[iv].

Figure 1: The outer corridor of parliament in 1947 before the installation of the murals and now

Thus far, 59 panels have been completed and displayed in the outer corridor on the ground floor of the Parliament House. It takes about forty five minutes to view the murals - from Gate Five we turn right and do a 'parikrama' (circumnavigation) invoking the feeling of being in the 'temple of democracy', as Nehru called the parliament. The outer corridor is rather dark and when I first saw the murals, there was no light above the murals making it difficult to see their detail as in many places security arrangements mean that scanning machines and guards block access to them[v]. Under each is a brass plate - not very clean, although bright enough for the lettering to be legible - that tells us the title of the mural, the name of the artist and the name of the 'supervisor' of the artist, a senior figure from the specific 'gharana' or school of art in whose style the painter has worked. The busy, dusty and ill-lit corridor that houses the murals undermines the purpose of the murals as evoking liminal reflection on the nation.

The official parliamentary website explicitly asserts a link between culture, history and representation of the nation through these murals:

> The practice in India of decorating public places, temples and palaces etc., with paintings and murals has come down to us since time immemorial. These pieces of art are symbolic of the life, culture and traditions of the people... they are reminiscent of the great civilisations and empires that flourished in India in the past and of the great kings, warriors and saints who by their efforts glorified this land of ours... It was natural, therefore, that the architects of modern India should have thought it fit to decorate the modern temple of democracy, *i.e.* the Parliament House, with paintings depicting great moments in the history of this country and to try to revive in some measure the glory that was 'India'[vi]

Art and artifacts in parliament can thus be read as a symbolic consolidation; as the narration of the nation of elite imaginaries (Bhabha, 1990). What is retained, excised, transformed and indigenized tells us of what resonates with the postcolonial India.

It was not individual imaginations that were poured onto the 'masonite boards', but official histories that took shape in these murals. The murals are not the products of the genius of the individual artists - they are 'jobbers' working in specific art styles:

> "The artists selected for painting the murals have been divided into different zones and each zone is under the change of an honorary Artist Supervisor who is also a member of the Artists Sub-Committee. The Artist Supervisor guides and supervises the work of the artists in his respective zone. Each panel passes through three stages, *i.e.* colour sketch, pencil cartoon and final painting on masonite board. The work was to be approved at every stage by the Artist Supervisor and the Artists Sub-Committee, particularly by the historian members of the Sub-Committee"[vii]

Reflecting the urban bias of the Committee, four schools of art are predominant – Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay and Baroda. Out of forty three artists employed to paint the murals, only two are women and one is a parsi (Zohrastran) male; Hindu upper caste labour predominates. These painters are the unsung heroes of this enterprise – working under supervision of both senior artists and of committee historians, their labour for the nation does not make their reputations as artists. Social hierarchies mark their place as artisans rather than artists (see Guha-Thakurta, 1992 and Mitter, 1995:142).

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So, what is the story that these murals tell? I would suggest that these murals depict the idea of 'India that is Bharat' through two narratives: one, of forging the nation, though recounting a specific history - invoking myth and/as history; remembering and forgetting historical moments; reshaping its diverse political landscape and re-configuring gender relations as well recovering India's 'democratic past' to secure its place as a modern democratic state. Second, they tell the story of cementing the legitimacy and accountability of the new nation through state building, where two particular facets are invoked - multicultural secularism and India's international profile. I will comment on each of these below.

Forging the nation – Myth is central to constructing the origins of any nation; it ties the past with the present, the mythic with the real, religious with secular. Panel 1 depicts 'The seal of Shiva as Yogi showing the Indian ideal of meditation. Also Bull and Unicorn From Mohenjodaro'(3rd Millennium B.C.)[viii]. Here mythology meets history to show the start of cosmic time and historical time. Despite the fact that "It was only from the 1860s that the name Bharatavarsha, in the sense of the whole subcontinent, found its way into the popular vocabulary(Jha:6), the development of the ancient Hindu imaginary of Bharat and the evidence that historical research produces of an 'Indian civilization' then are seamlessly elided[ix]. This elision shows in panels 3,4 and 5, where scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are reproduced as part of the historical narration of the nation. History and mythology thus mix in this mode of representation of India and Bharat, and are given equal status.

The recovery of the idea of India goes hand in hand with the representation of historical evidence of excellence of Indian philosophy and statecraft as well as its tolerance of difference in several murals. Figures of gods and religious leaders from all the significant religions of India[x] are represented in these murals. These reflect the particular form that secularism was to take in India – multicultural and largely non-integrationist (although other than Islam and Christianity most religions often are 'covered' by the capacious umbrella of Hinduism, through religious personal laws). It allows for the state to recognize (through 'gazetted holidays' on festivals of all major religions, through depictions in state sponsored art) various religions and to ensure that all are given constitutional parity (through equal access to fundamental rights of Indian citizens). Panel 45 (Figure 2), for example depicts the court of Akbar, with his 'seven jewels' – musicians, advisers, philosophers from both Hindu

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and Muslim communities; a medieval 'government of all the talents'[xi]. Similarly, Panel 20 depicts Kanishka's Buddhist council (1 century AD) described as "the age of the mingling of different cultures Zoroastrian, Buddhist and Brahmanical. Also showing Kanishka's casket and different coin types illustrating Hindu, Buddhist and Zorastriann divinities"[xii].

Figure 2: Akbar, Todarmal, Tansen and Abul Fazal, Faizi and Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khana

Representations of Indian statecraft are accompanied by the absence of representations of Indian colonial humiliations. Not a single mural depicts the oppression of the Indian people[xiii] – there are no scenes of the massacre of Jalianwala Bagh on 13 April, 1919, for instance, but the murals do depict resistance to the almost absent oppressor through images of heroic leaders of the nationalist struggle. In these murals Indian leaders are agents of their destiny rather than victims of colonial rulers. Mural No. 59 depicts the leaders of the Great Revolt of the 1857, Rani Laxamibai of Jhansi and Tantia Tope, in valorous poses, while Panel No.115 shows Gandhi's Dandi March in 1930 against introduction of tax on salt (see Figure 3), Panel No.117[xiv] , depicts the hoisting of the national flag at the Red Fort on 15 August, 1947 – India's independence day and Panel No.124, last in the series, shows the Indian National Army led by Subhash Chandra Bose who fought with the Japanese against the British in Burma.

Figure 3: Dandi March, 1930

Other than the presence of the Dandi Marchers in Mural No. 115, also absent are the Indian people – subaltern faces, bodies and acts are folded into the iconography of heroism of elites,

effect and affect celebrating the power of Indian leaders to challenge colonialism, to recover from its depredations with honour and with history intact, with the nation facing forward towards the future.

Gender has been a recurring foundational motif in nationalist discourse and performance. This is not surprising as colonial characterisation of the uncivil peoples in need of Western civilisation's gifts of civility often centred on the 'treatment of women' in colonised cultures as Mill's oft-cited words show: "The condition of women is one of the most remarkable circumstance in the manner of nations. Among rude people women are generally degraded, among civilised people they are exalted" (cited in Jose: 159). While social reform was considered a priority by all post-colonial elites, it was also emphasised that the "essential distinction between the social roles of men and women in terms of material and spiritual virtues must at all times be maintained" (Chatterjee, 1989: 243). This produced tensions of modernity that are visible in the murals in parliament – the figures chosen to represent Indian women sit well and comfortably in the nationalist discourse of postcolonial modernity. They challenge the constructed traditions which were so effectively used to legitimise colonial subjection. Far from being oppressed and awaiting rescue, Indian women are shown in these murals to be defenders of family and kingdom in Rani Jhansi (Panel 59), , educated and creative and leading a life outside the traditional family norm in the poet Meera (Panel 63) and the philosophers Gargi and Maitrayee (Panel 6, see Figure 4)[xv].

Figure 4: the first Congress of Indian philosophers convened by King Janaka.

The women in these murals stand in for the Indian political elite's capture of the discourse of gender equality without disturbing gendered social relations – another representation of what Sanjay Joshi has called 'fractured modernity' (2001).

Legitimacy and Accountability in State-building – The legitimacy of independent India rested on its post-partition secularism, democratic institutions and rule of law. But wrapping these concepts around the idea of the nation created tensions, which were largely papered over in these murals. Panel 4 shows the establishment of Ramrajya[xvi] (see Figure 5) – the rule of the Hindu god Ram. Ramrajya is regarded by Hindus as the age of *dharma*, of accountable, benign monarchy and a period of norm setting for familial relations. Ram is the ideal son and king - roles for which he sacrifices his marital happiness by sending into exile his wife so that his subjects might not bring his judgment into question.

Figure 5: Establishment of Ramrajya

Is the presumption in this mural that all citizens of modern India must aspire to this ideal? In a multi-religious India is this depiction of statehood seems discordant at a time when the wounds of the partition on the basis of religion were fresh. In Panel 5 we have Manu the Hindu law giver described as 'the first law giver' – also the one who legitimized the caste system and the subordination of women to male family members. The point here is not the substance of Manu's laws, but the fact of them – that Indian society was a civilized, law abiding society for centuries before the rise of western power. Reclaiming the right to rule thus builds on deep historical foundations.

Recovering a democratic past as well as an enlightened one, there are other panels that represent marginal/tribal groups (Panel 3)[xvii], philosophical gatherings (Panel 6) and kings in conversation with religious monks. Despite Gandhi's struggles against caste oppression and of Ambedkar's rejection of Hinduism, there are no murals that depict the violence of caste based exclusions that mark Hindu society or these struggles against it. Instead, we have formal encounters of benign sovereigns and supine subjects (Panel 3)[xviii].

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Finally, statehood needs recognition not just of the citizens but also of the international community. The murals depict flourishing trade and state relations between India and the wider world. There are murals that depict Asoka sending emissaries abroad to spread the word of Buddha (Panels 14 and 15)[xix], foreign ambassadors to courts of Indian princes (Panel 18), a map to show India's trade relations with various Asian countries through the ages (Panel 27), trade delegations from China (Panel 28). There are other panels depicting Indian courts as cosmopolitan state/spaces, where intellectuals, philosophers, travelers and traders mingled and paid homage (Panels 31, 33 36 and 37).

Figure 6 (a) Asoka sending out missions to different countries. Asoka, monks and the Greek Kings (3rd Century B.C.) (b) Asoka's Buddhist Council.

This sense of India's place in the world needed to be retrieved if India was to gain a place on the international arena as a mature democracy, with a voice that resonated with a history of global links. Nehru in particular was self-consciously outward looking, seeking always to place India at the heart of debates raging in the post-war international arena, as evidenced in his role in the Non-aligned Movement.

If legitimacy of the Indian state was depicted through images of good and gracious rulers and India's historical international links, then other panels present India as a historical democracy (Panel 35, Figure 7)[xx].

Figure 7: Gopala elected King by the People (9th Century A.D.)

Washbrook has argued that the Indian elites received a complicated legacy of governance from the British: "Democratization now came to refer to that slow process whereby ruling elites co-opted into the functioning of the state successive layers of 'sub-elites' who were to prove their 'responsibility' by providing consensual support for the judgments of their masters" (2001:84). The nationalist story of state formation then rightly attracts the critique that the Subaltern Studies School of Indian historiography has mounted against the discipline. Ranajit Guha argued that historiography had dealt with "the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion" (cited in Prakash, 1994: 1478). The subaltern is absent from the narrative structure of the murals, even though their bodies inhabit some of the paintings of the later freedom struggles.

Reviewing the murals, no one can be in doubt that they attempt to retrieve Indian historical achievements as well as postcolonial national ambitions for the future. These murals invoke the particularity of Indian democracy, secularism and legitimate statecraft. And yet they are silent about colonial and caste oppression and everyday democratic struggles.

If the murals tell a visual history of India, so do the various statues and inscriptions that dot the Parliamentary precincts – the form is different but the themes of forging the nation, democratic legitimacy and India's role in the world remain stable. But what we also notice through political practices surrounding these statues is the contestations over the changing nature of Indian polity and its representation in parliament; this is my focus in the next section.

The aesthetics of commemoration: portraits, statues and emblems

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In the Central Hall hang twenty three portraits of 'distinguished Indians' of which only one is that of a woman – the only woman Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Only one of the portraits is of a Dalit leader – Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, national leader, India's first Law Minister and a key member of the Constituent Assembly and a stalwart of the movement of the lower (Backward) castes in India. In addition, there are forty eight statues and busts of important national leaders and parliamentarians. "There are also 12 gilded emblems on the wall of the Hall representing the 12 Provinces of undivided India"[xxi]. These 12 states have now become 28. Around these portraits we have the performance of 'Floral Tribute Functions': "Twenty-four Floral Tribute functions were held to pay homage to the freedom fighters and eminent personalities whose portraits are placed in the Central Hall"[xxii].

These portraits and statues and emblems, like the murals described above, reflect India's political history – of nationalist struggles, of the postcolonial state and its office holders, and of change from a 'one party dominant' to coalition governance. They also reflect inclusions and exclusions of Indian politics. Some of these exclusions have been challenged through the ceremonial and ritualistic aspects of performance in parliament. Below I discuss two political contestations around this portraiture – 1) the installation of a portrait of Savarkar and 2) the representation of Bhagat Singh as a peasant rather than as a recognizably modern romantic figure. Both the figures are non-Congress figures, but one – Bhagat Singh – is a romantic nationalist who was executed by the British on charges of terrorism, and the other – Savarkar – was the Hindu nationalist leader of the Jan Sangh, now Bhartiya Janata Party(BJP) and Rashtriya Swam Sevak Sangh (RSS).

When BJP, the party in government in 2003 proposed that Savarkar's portrait should hang in the Central Hall together with the other nationalist leaders, there was a general outcry against it. While BJP considers Savarkar as a "great patriot", Congress and most other Left parties point to Savarkar's "alleged association with the assassins of Mahatma Gandhi, his mercy petition to the British rulers at the height of the freedom struggle and his support for two nation theory of Jinnah" (People's Democracy, 2003). However, despite this opposition, it later emerged that representatives of the Congress and CPM had not objected to this proposal at the meeting where the decision was taken. According to Congressman Shivraj Patil, who was present at the committee meeting: "'It is true we did not object then because we did not object to many other portraits being put up. Meetings such as these rarely see disagreements

on such matters'"(Jha, 2003). Notions of civility then operate when MPs meet away from the public gaze – norms of behaviour in small committees differ from the cut and thrust evidenced in the Chambers. Despite this complication, Congress and the Left Parties asked the president not to attend the installation function and "request[ed] the president A P J Abdul Kalam to reconsider his decision to attend the unveiling function...[and when he didn't] he was greeted with the boycott of entire opposition" (ibid). The symbolic importance of these ceremonies of commissioning and installation of portraits can also be gauged from the story of Najma Heptullah, the then Vice-Chair of the Rajya Sabha (the upper house) and a long time Congress MP[xxiii]. Her attendance of the installation ceremony, in defiance of her party's wishes, was widely read as reflecting her unhappiness at being overlooked by the Congress leadership as a candidate for Presidency. The censure that she received within the Congress for disregarding the party's boycott of the event, eventually led to the defection of Mrs. Heptullah from Congress to the BJP – a coup for the latter, as Heptullah comes from an important Muslim Congress family.

Figure 8: Statue in parliament and the more recognizable photo of Bhagat Singh

The controversy regarding Bhagat Singh reflects a different complexity of representation through political art. When the statue was unveiled – 80 years after Bhagat Singh dropped a bomb onto the floor of Parliament House's Central Assembly Hall on April 8, 1929 to *"make the deaf hear"* – his family was disappointed. The controversy emerged over three issues. First, the issue of recognition - "Millions of Indians identify him with his hat, much like Mahatma Gandhi is identified with his glasses and stick," said Jagmohan, who has done extensive research on Bhagat Singh". Some citizens wrote to the Speaker of Lok Sabha to

protest against this 'flabby, fat' figure that was unrecognizable as Bhagat Singh (Lal)" (http://www.zeenews.com/news462637.html; see Figure 8). Second, was the issue of representation - "…the statue is made in a way to depict him more like a regional leader. By showing him in 'Pagari,' [turban rather than the familiar trilby] the present leaders are trying to classify him on regional and communal lines. It is just divisive politics," Jagmohan said" (Ibid.). Finally, there was the controversy over the event installing the statue; the Communist Party of India (Marxist) MPs boycotted the event because they felt that the offer of Bengal CPI(M) to fund the statue was rejected by parliament in order to erase the ideological links between the party and Bhagat Singh (Hindustan Times). However, a section of the Sikh community obviously saw this representation as telling a 'hidden story', one that recovers Bhagat Singh from an atheist, modernist tradition to a religious, spiritual one and in so doing places his 'martyrdom' within the sacral boundaries of Sikhism rather than nationalism (SikhiWiki). The controversy continues as the Punjab based Tribune newspaper reported on March 23, 2010 when there was no official commemoration of Bhagat Singh's martyrdom, while another leader, Rammanohar Lohia's birth anniversary was marked by the Prime Minister and the Speaker and other MPs.

> "Shaheed Bhagat Singh's towering 18-feet bronze statue in the Parliament looked lonely today …No official commemoration of the same was held and no intimation published in the bulletin for parliamentarians... Secretariat officials cited conventions to defend the lapse: 'The convention is to hold commemoration ceremonies for leaders whose portraits hang inside the Central Hall. No functions are held for those whose statutes are installed. There are about 40 statues. If we hold functions for each, there will be too many functions.' Enquiries by The Tribune, however, reveal that Dr BR Ambedkar is a clear exception to the norm of "no commemoration events in front of statutes." (The Tribune).

A footnote to this discussion is that the Committee on Installation of Portraits, Statues of National Leaders and Parliamentarians in Parliament House Complex headed by Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar has recommended that no more statues could be installed in Parliament in future holding the view that it is already over-crowded with high profiled figures[xxiv]. In a multiparty, multiethnic, religious and linguistic country like India, then the politics of portraiture is a sensitive arena; it is also an arena where politics is played out as well as where it is shaped.

Aesthetic Reception: the influence of architecture and art

We have as yet not focused on one question –who was the intended audience of this art? Was it the people who visit parliament every year[xxv]? As I have pointed out above, the murals are not displayed to catch the attention of the visitor. Mostly, visitors are hurried along the long corridor, with scarcely a pause to reflect upon these paintings; the narrative structure of this enterprise is not reflected upon by those that guide this particular audience. While the murals are largely neglected, because of the rituals attached to the portraits of leaders and the stake that political parties have in celebrating their own, statues and paintings of leaders continues to have resonance in Indian politics. Contestations over the rituals surrounding the selection, commissioning, artistic merit and celebration of this portraiture continue to pepper the Indian press and through these report the wider political life, sometimes creating small crises, as in the case of Savarkar and Bhagat Singh, over which parties clash. For those that work within the parliamentary precincts, paying attention to these statues and portraits, murals and inscriptions in parliament, could be seen as the "emotionally and symbolically charged signs of club membership rather than the statutes and objects of club." (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1999: 11). In this sense, these portraits are symbolic of wider political and even civilisational struggles in the modern nation-state.

If, as reception theory posits, a text needs a reader, a performance a spectator and art a viewer and that those that receive also interpret, but within boundaries of imagination set by the text, performance or art, then the historical narrative constructed through indigenizing imperial architecture, installing murals, statues and portraits can also be seen as an act that is mobile, stretched, challenged and struggled over. To ignore the intended message, to turn one's back on it, to walk past it without stopping to look can be a subversive act of 'reading'. Such challenges to as well as the shoring up of the authorial voice depend upon the extent to which the audience are able to or wish to be complicit in the reading; the codes of narrative need recognition or rejection if the spectator is to interpret text, performance or objects (Kate Davy, 1986).

In my study of the architecture and art in Indian parliament, however, there is another story of reception – one of overlooking, forgetting, 'wallpapering' of political art such that the grand narratives authored through the murals in particular and through most statues and portraits,

while forming a backdrop to politics, impinge less and less on the struggles of the present. As India opens its doors to the world as a neoliberal success story, the grand narratives of Asoka's Buddhist peace emissaries and of post-independent India's role in the non-aligned peace movement become palimpsestic at best – India's place in the world remains a critical concern of the state, but the terms of its opening up to the world become entirely different. Today's leaders and spectators rush past the earlier careful enunciation of India's aspirations – civilizational, economic and boundary securing – towards new horizons of neoliberal success. In part this neglect or normalization is the success of the vision of the state-commissioned work displayed in parliament; on another level, however, it is also a challenge to that early vision.

My point here is that the changing politics of the state/author as well as the spectator is constantly being reconstructed such that earlier layers of meaning get reinterpreted, rejected or simply not registered in the current debates, concerns and performances of power; that even the solidity of architecture and materiality of art become evanescent when viewed through the interpretative lens of the spectator. The fact that the Committee set up by the Speaker to review the commissioning of art in the Indian parliament has decided that 'enough is enough', that this representative space can take no more commissioned statues and portraits, perhaps is also an admission of defeat – the gaze of the spectator is turned away from these objects of state's vision of modernity and power; this disregard is a democratic challenge to grand narratives of the state.

Conclusion

When reviewing the purpose of 'invented traditions' Hobsbawm and Ranger alert us to three different types: a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups…b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behavior." (1999: 9). I would suggest that all three are present in the story of the commissioning of and display of the murals, paintings and statues in the Indian parliament. When I review the narrative structure of the murals, the inscription and the statues and portraits in the Indian parliament, it becomes clear that these are important elements of the transition from colonial to postcolonial public life, from nationalism to state-building and from one party dominance to coalition politics in India. What is also important

to note is that this narrative structure is constructed and imposed (commissioned) by India's postcolonial elite, of the leaders of a modern and independent country with ambitions for a place on the world stage. These are not subaltern imaginaries. Most of the murals and all of the portraits and statues portray a sense of reviewing, reaching out for, representing India's past to frame India's future – the legitimacy of independent India rests on the ways in which its past is invoked as much as it does on what its political elites do to address its problems here and now.

In this essay I have attempted to show that aesthetic approaches to studying politics can allow us to read politics in different ways (Bleiker, 2009). As outlined in the introduction, while many scholars have sought to understand how we consume political art, my attempt has been to show how this art is produced – by state and non-state actors, through commissioning, interpreting and challenging art and its installations. Similarly, while some scholars have focused on the transformative potential of art (Marcuse, 1978; Rancier, 2003) I have shown how the impulse of the state is to reproduce its power through inscribing power relations in and through art and aesthetics. In this sense, I have argued with Bourdieu that aesthetics represent as well as reproduce power, but I have also shown that this reproduction is always contingent and contested – either through turning their back on political art or by challenging it, the audience asserts its relative interpretative autonomy. In analyzing this contradictory nature of political art, I seek to get away from a more simplistic approach to political aesthetics by suggesting that both in its production and consumption, its message and the form that that message takes the politics of art as well as the form that art takes matter.

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[ii] Sanskrit name for India in Indian classics.
[iii] For a discussion about aesthetics as the relationship between the given and its interpretation, see Rancier, 2009, *Critical Inquiry* 36 (Autumn).
[iv] (http://164.100.47.132/LssNew/our%20parliament/par12.htm; Accessed July 27, 2010)

[v] Field notes: DATE. I believe that the murals have just recently been illuminated; I was told on my last visit (the parliament was closed so I could not enter the building) that together with other incentives, my letter to the Speaker had had effect.

[vi] http://164.100.47.132/LssNew/our%20parliament/par12.htm; Accessed July 27, 2010.

[vii] http://164.100.47.132/LssNew/our%20parliament/par12.htm; Accessed March 19, 2011

[viii] http://164.100.47.132/LssNew/our%20parliament/Folder29.pdf , Accessed 9.1.2012

[ix] There is a vigorous debate on how this elision is reflected in the Hindu nationalist thinking and politics in India. See Jha, 2006.

[x] Except Islam, one supposes because of its iconoclastic ideology

[xi] http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/intro/pan45.htm; Accessed 9.1.2012

[xii] http://164.100.47.132/LssNew/our%20parliament/par12.htm

[xiii] Not all elites shy away from the humiliations and violence of colonisation, of course. Sachs notes in the murals commissioned by the Mozambiqan leadership after independence: "Even evil is granted its magnitude; the villains are not puny, easily scoffed at, but equal in size to those they are torturing, so that they give to the suffering of the people its true dimension, and to the ultimate triumph of the struggle its true scale" (1983; no p.no.).

[xiv] http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/intro/pan115.htm; Accessed 9.1.2010

[xv] http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/intro/pan6.htm; Accessed 9.1.2012

[xvi] http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/intro/pan4.htm; Accessed on 9.1.2012

[xvii]"two scenes from the epic Ramayana. The first one depicts the compassion of Valmiki with the quotation *"nishada"* etc. The other depicts the meeting of Rama and Guha (King of Nishadas), symbolising the meeting of the Aryan and Austric cultures" (Parliament of India, http://164.100.24.209/newls/mural%20pan/pan3.htm).

[xviii] See Dube, 2010, for an alternative reading of subaltern art through the work of a Dalit artist Savindra Sawarkar's canvas entitled *Foundation of India*, where the artist puts at the centre of his imaginary of India the caste oppression that can only be challenged through "political and religious solidarity among the hierarchically divided lower-castes, challenging Hindu hegemony" (p. 153).

[xix] http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/intro/pan14.htm; Accessed 9.1.2012

[xx] http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/intro/pan35.htm; Accessed 9.1.2012

[xxi] http://164.100.47.132/LssNew/our%20parliament/par11.htm; Accessed July 28, 2010. Lutyens had wanted these in Government House and felt bitter about Baker's success in securing these for parliament (Singh, 2009).

[xxii] VII. PARLIAMENT SECURITY SERVICE 54. PARLIAMENT SECURITY OFFICE [PH, PHA AND PLB]

[xxiii] Field Notes: February 2006

[xxiv] India Today, 4.04.2010; http://indiatoday.intoday.in/site/Story/91189/LATEST%20HEADLINES/No+more+statues+and+portraits+in+Parliament.html; Accessed 26 April, 2011

[xxv] – "5432 visitors witnessed the proceedings of Rajya Sabha:…4978 visitors witnessed the proceedings of Rajya Sabha from Public Gallery during the year 2009" (Public Works Committee)