Political Aesthetics of the Nation

Shirin M. Rai[a]

[a] University of Warwick, UK
Published online: 30 Jan 2014.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF THE NATION

Murals and Statues in the Indian Parliament

Shirin M. Rai

University of Warwick, UK

. . . .

Modernity

murals

parliament

**political
aesthetics**

power

statues

. . . .

*This essay argues that aesthetic approaches to studying politics can allow us to
read politics in more nuanced ways. Through the study of murals and statues in
the Indian parliament, it is suggested that the politics of art and the art of politics
are conjoined. In particular, the essay examines the ways in which the
postcolonial Indian state reproduces the discourse of nationalism and modernity
through its production of a nationalist aesthetic and how the consumption of this
aesthetics results in struggles over meaning-making and its legitimacy.*

Introduction

1 *Bharat* is the
Sanskrit name for
India in Indian
classics.

Murals, statues and inscriptions adorn the Indian parliament. They tell a
story of 'India that is Bharat'[1] – its past glories, the struggles for
independence, the leaders who led those struggles and their aspirations, in

. . . .

artistic styles that represent different regions of the country. But why were these murals, portraits and statues commissioned? And what do they tell us about the contemporary struggles over aesthetics and political meaning that continue to mobilize as well as agitate political actors? In this essay I explore the relationship between postcolonial democratic practice and the 'narration of the nation' as political aesthetics (Bhabha 1990). I suggest that political aesthetics allow us to ask important questions about politics and political institutions and their place in our past and present readings of national histories in the following ways. First, the political imaginaries represented in and through these murals and statues produce both cognitive and affective responses which are expressed in terms of history, the present and future aspirations (Anderson 1991; Brown 2009b). The excavation and representation of time are 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, through these imaginaries we can reflect upon the processes through which they become hegemonic – how the dominant modes of power are reproduced and how the marginalized are kept outside the spaces of performance of power (Bourdieu 1984), in the shadows, 'out of place'. Third, they reveal 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 and are reconfigured as they travel over time. Together, they allow us to ask questions about the manifestations of power, its everyday presence and representation. 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

Debates on aesthetics have been based largely on or in contestation with Kant's approach to the subjectivity and universality of judgement of taste. For Marcuse (1978), authentic art represents the truth of the world as it is; for Bourdieu (1984), art is framed in and reproduces the distinctions of social class; and for Rancière (2004), 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 Rancière'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). I also acknowledge the work of Henri Lefevre, whose work on the production of space and reproduction of social relations (Lefevre 1991) is critical to understanding the placing of the murals and statues in the Indian parliament. 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 imaginaries of freedom and modernity (Brown 2009b; Mitter 1995, 2007; Guha-Thakurta 1992; 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 struggle with the palimpsest of colonial histories that refuse to fade away entirely. However, they are also contested, reshaped and even ignored as new civilizational debates evolve. I explore these themes by examining both the architectural space of the Indian parliament and the art – murals and statues – that inhabit this space.

In the specific context of the Indian parliament, I 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 an imperial aesthetic through architecture, as well as how a nationalist aesthetics indigenizes old spaces and buildings. Second, I examine the aesthetics of nationalism, modernity and legitimacy in independent India[2] re-presenting a progressive trajectory of development. Third, I examine the changing aesthetics of commemoration in parliament through the display of portraiture in parliament. 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.

2 While attempting to contextualize my argument by examining briefly the artistic forms in play in colonial/ nationalist India, my concern here remains the 'story' of the postcolonial elite imaginary of nation-building.

The Space of/as Aesthetics: The Indian Parliament Building

3 For a fascinating account of the struggles between the Bombay and Bengal schools of art to win contracts for decorating these buildings, and the politics attendant upon these, see Mitter (2007).

The Indian parliament in New Delhi 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 gestures at the importance of an imperial aesthetic to securing British presence in the Indian landscape; 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 Lutyens' tradition in Indian architecture' (Baker in Singh and Mukherjee 2009: 112).[3] New Delhi was shaped by the needs of colonial

government, represented by Viceroy's Government House and administrative buildings, and the North and South Blocks; the parliament was an afterthought, constructed in response to the growing nationalist movement which demanded political 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 new elites of independent India set about not simply occupying but indigenizing these old imperial spaces with new rules, procedures and norms, as well as a new aesthetics framing different spectacles of nation-building. 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' (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.[4]

4 That such processes of narrating a new sovereignty are not specific to India 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; 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 predictably elitist, story of the nation. Below, I discuss the representations of postcolonial imaginations of Indian elites – as traditions are invented, pasts recovered and futures presented to a new emerging citizenship (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) – 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 and citizen(ships) and national subjectivities given shape. To be Indian, rather than a subject of Empire or member of a religion, had to be transitioned in the wake of a bloodbath that was the Indian Partition through what the Indian political elites termed 'nation-building'. This encompassed both the firming up of hegemonic political and cultural discourses through constitutional and legal arrangements, and the economic and military infrastructures that allowed

the knitting together of disparate populations into one stable political entity – the independent nation-state. The postcolonial Indian state tried to resolve a paradox that had haunted the nationalist struggle: 'how to be modern and Indian' (Brown 2009a:1); to reach forward and back to build a new political imaginary for a new nation. History and authority go hand in hand; marking the nation in public spaces was an important mode of translating freedom into the everyday materiality of citizenship – changes to the names of streets, removal of imperial and installation of new public art (Cannadine 2008), emphasizing both/some familiar public ceremonies and creating and staging new ones – through all this the nation was performed, given authoritative sanction and legitimized. As Walzer (1967: 194) 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'.

But what of the ordinary citizens in whose name independence was demanded, fought for and secured? 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 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.

Two aspects of this aesthetic project need to be emphasized. First, the process of commissioning the murals was highly centralized – the establishment of a committee chaired by the Speaker and including luminaries from the worlds of politics, history and art, showed the importance placed on telling the 'right' story about India. Second, the form that the murals took was revivalist rather than modernist – Indian 'orientalist' style of the Bengal School was preferred over the modernist/realist traditions that had also developed during the late colonial period. Thus, these murals in themselves do not reflect the struggles between revivalism and modernism that, for example, were characteristic of other aesthetic fora, such as architecture (Brown 2009a). Rather, their message of nationalism and modernity is supported by the Indian revivalist aesthetics.

Commissioning the Murals

G. V. Mavalankar, the Speaker of the first parliament, travelled through Europe in 1950 and was impressed by the representation of history in the

parliaments he visited: this political aesthetic functioned to educate the visitors to these institutions and created an inspirational 'atmosphere' for new MPs to work in: 'nothing is before their eyes … except … traditions and the greatness of their nation' (Parliament Secretariat 1953: 1). He set up a Planning Committee in 1951; members included the Archaeological Adviser and the Central Asian Antiquities Museum Superintendent and the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University. Later, a subcommittee was established to examine the issue of decorating parliament (Parliament Secretariat 1953: 5–6);[5] it met five times – on 20, 21 and 26 November and 3 and 10 December 1952 (Parliament Secretariat 1953: 6).[6]

The 'Report of the Planning Subcommittee on a Scheme of Decorating the Parliament House, New Delhi,[7] finds that although the Speaker was inspired by western parliamentary aesthetics, India had its own history of decorating public buildings – 'was India always backward in this respect? The answer is a definite "No"'; it was the loss of patronage to the arts under British rule that had obscured the history of artistic excellence, as evidenced in the Ajanta and Ellora and Elephanta caves (Parliament Secretariat 1953: 2). It was the responsibility of the government of independent India to patronize art, 'both at the Centre and in the States … if Indian art is to be kept alive and its healthy growth assured' (Parliament Secretariat 1953: 3). The subcommittee rejected western styles in architecture and art as 'products of the Art and Engineering schools … run on Western lines' during British rule and celebrated 'pioneers like Havell, Coomaraswamy, Abanindranath Tagore', who made 'bold attempts for the revival of traditional art'. Citing Havell – 'a great national art affords a revelation of national thought and character' – the report concluded that 'the carefully selected subjects of mural … art executed by the well-known artists and sculptors of India, would … help [the visitors to parliament] to purify their thought, advance their knowledge of the glorious past of their country' (Parliament Secretariat 1953: 3). The state and the artists were thus to work together to help forge modern and proud Indian citizens through representing the country's heritage in art.

After an inspection of the walls in parliament, the subcommittee decided that the murals should be 11 ft 9 ins x 4 ft 1½ ins. It considered three different methods of producing murals – fresco, tempera and marouflage – and decided to opt for tempera, where the murals are painted directly on a prepared wall. The other two styles were rejected for different reasons – fresco because of lack of expertise available in India and marouflage[8] because of the effect of the climate on the canvas upon which marouflage murals were painted (Parliament Secretariat 1953: 7). A 'list of the 124 panels were prepared incorporating all the suggestions of the members made … [by] the subcommittee' (Parliament Secretariat 1953: 6). The announcement of the project and this list of proposed subjects for the murals

5 Note the absence of any Muslim members of the committee.

6 Interestingly, none of the important revivalist artists were included in the committee, although they were given commissions to paint the murals.

7 I am grateful to Shri Ravindra Garimella, Director of the Parliament Secretariat of the Lok Sabha, for obtaining a copy of this report for me; it has until now not been studied.

8 This style was used 'in decorating Committee Room No. I in the North Block of the Central Secretariat under the guidance of Gladstone Solomon', erstwhile director of the J. J. School of Art, Bombay (Parliament Secretariat 1953: 7).

inevitably evoked a public response, questioning the inclusions and exclusions of history to be visualized: 'it has overlooked some deserving episodes from Indian history … While Chandragupta Maurya has been given his proper place, his gifted Minister Chanakya seems to have been forgotten' (Mohite 1955); 'The committee … has completely ignored the great epic of the Mahabharat … At least two scenes should be included … Lord Krishna's discourse with Arjun about the Gita; and Bhishma Pitamah lying on a bed of arrows' (Choudhary 1955).

Fifty-nine panels were completed and displayed in the outer corridor on the ground floor of the Parliament House.

> The artists selected for painting the murals have been divided into different zones and each zone is under the charge of an honorary Artist Supervisor who is also a member of the Artists' Subcommittee. 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' Subcommittee, particularly by the historian members of the Subcommittee. (http://www.164.100.47.132/LssNew/our%20parliament/par12.htm; accessed 20 December 2013)

Out of forty-three artists employed to paint the murals, only two were women and one was a Zohrastran male; Hindu upper-castes predominated. Many painters and their supervisors selected for this project (Ukil, Mukherji and Bendre) were influenced by the modernist abstract tradition, but the panels do not reflect this. Rather, the panels represent traditional modes of Indian painting – a Mughal painting style to depict Akbar's court, for example, or the revivalist aesthetic of the Bengal School in Panel 4, showing the establishment of Ramrajya. Similarly, while nationalist artists such as the sculptor Karmarkar were inspired by subaltern subjects (Mitter 2007: 156), the murals do not reflect this concern for and inspiration from 'the local poor'. As the Report emphasizes, the selection of the themes of the murals was carefully made to inspire citizens and representatives by 'depicting the outstanding episodes in the nation's history' (Parliament Secretariat 1953: 4); the state wished to make an aesthetic bridge between India's ancient culture and its emergent identity as a modern nation-state; what is retained, excised, transformed and indigenized holds clues about elite imaginaries and aspirations. The artists could not give free rein to their imaginations; this evoked criticism from some: 'What do you want the murals to do? Romanticize the past? Flatter the present? … why do you have to impose … on the artist? … Why don't you leave him free to do as he pleases?' (Adib 1957: 6). For many painters involved in this project, the recognition of the new state and its patronage was also at stake. Many of the artists and supervisors

led colleges of art in metropolitan cities (Paniker, Barada's older brother Sarad Ukil, Bendre), where postcolonial visuality and aesthetics took form.

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 them, making it difficult to see their detail, as in many places security arrangements mean that scanning machines and guards block access to them.[9] 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 artist. The busy, ill-lit space that houses the murals undermines their purpose as evoking liminal reflection on the nation.

9 I believe the murals have just recently been illuminated; I was told on my last visit that together with other incentives, my letter to the Speaker had had effect.

The Narrative Structure of the Murals

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. First, of forging the nation, through invoking myth and/as history; remembering and forgetting historical moments, reshaping its diverse political landscape, reconfiguring gender relations, and recovering India's 'democratic past' to secure its place as a modern democracy. Second, they tell the story of the legitimacy and accountability of the new nation through state-building, where two particular facets are invoked: multicultural secularism and India's international profile (Brown 2009b).

Forging the nation

10 http://www.164.100.47.132/LssNew/our%20parliament/Folder29.pdf (accessed 20 December 2013).

11 There is a vigorous debate on how this elision is reflected in Hindu nationalist thinking and politics in India. See Jha (2006).

Myth is central to constructing the origins of any nation; it ties the past with the present, religious with secular. Panel 1 depicts 'The seal of Shiva as Yogi showing the Indian ideal of meditation. Also Bull and Unicorn From Mohenjodaro' (third millennium BCE).[10] Here mythology meets history to show the start of cosmic 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 2006: 6), the development of the ancient Hindu imaginary of Bharat and the evidence that historical research produces of an 'Indian civilization' are seamlessly elided in the murals.[11] In Panels 3, 4 and 5, 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. As the murals are painted in the revivalist mode, there is also no aesthetic disjuncture that disrupts this elision.

The recovery of the idea of India goes together with representations of the excellence of Indian philosophy and statecraft, as well as India's tolerance of difference, in several murals. Figures of gods and religious leaders from all the significant religions of India are represented in these murals.[12] These reflect the particular form that secularism was to take in India – multicultural and largely non-integrationist. It allows for the state to recognize (through 'gazetted holidays' on festivals of all major religions, for example) various religions and to ensure that all are given constitutional parity through equal access to fundamental rights of Indian citizens. Panel 45 depicts this multicultural approach through the court of Akbar, with his 'seven jewels' – musicians, advisers, philosophers; a medieval 'government of all the talents' irrespective of religion.[13] Similarly, Panel 20 depicts Kanishka's Buddhist council (first century CE), 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 Zoroastrian divinities'.[14]

Representations of an enlightened statecraft are accompanied by the absence of representations of Indian colonial humiliations. Not a single mural depicts the oppression of the Indian people[15] – there are no scenes of the massacre of Jalianwala Bagh on 13 April 1919, for instance, but several murals depict anticolonial resistance through images of heroic leaders of the nationalist struggle. In these murals Indian leaders are agents of their destiny rather than victims of colonialism. Panel 59 depicts the leaders of the Great Revolt of 1857, Rani Laxamibai and Tantia Tope, in valorous poses, Panel 115 shows Gandhi's Dandi March in 1930 against the introduction of a tax on salt,[16] and Panel 117 depicts the hoisting of the national flag at the Red Fort on 15 August 1947, India's independence day. Other than the presence of the Dandi Marchers in Panel 115, also absent are the Indian people – subaltern faces, bodies and acts are folded into the iconography of the 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 forwards towards the future.

Gender has been a recurring foundational motif in nationalist discourse. This is not surprising, as colonial characterization of the uncivil peoples in need of western civilization's gifts of civility often centred on the 'treatment of women' in colonized cultures, as Mill's oft-cited words show: 'The condition of women is one of the most remarkable circumstances in the manner of nations. Among rude people women are generally degraded, among civilized people they are exalted' (cited in Jose 2000: 159). While

12 Except Islam, perhaps because of its iconoclastic ideology.

13 http://www.parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/intro/pan45.htm (accessed 20 December 2013).

14 http://www.164.100.47.132/LssNew/our%20parliament/par12.htm.

15 Not all elites shy away from the humiliations and violence of colonization, of course. Sachs notes of 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: n.p.).

16 http://www.parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/intro/pan115.htm (accessed 20 December 2013).

social reform was considered a priority by all postcolonial elites, it was also emphasized 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 legitimize 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).[17] 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 (2001) has called 'fractured modernity'.

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 – the rule of the Hindu god Ram.[18] 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 his wife into exile so that his subjects might not bring his judgement into question. Is the presumption in this mural that all citizens of modern India must aspire to this ideal? In a multi-religious India this depiction of statehood seems discordant at a time when the wounds of Partition on the basis of religion were fresh. In Panel 5 we have Manu the Hindu lawgiver described as 'the first lawgiver' – 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 harnessing them to suggest that Indian society was a civilized, law-abiding society for centuries before the rise of western powers. Other panels represent marginal/tribal groups (Panel 3),[19] philosophical gatherings (Panel 6) and kings in conversation with religious monks, which 'recover' a democratic past as well as an enlightened one. Despite Gandhi's struggles against caste oppression and 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

17 http://www.parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/intro/pan6.htm (accessed 20 December 2013).

18 http://www.parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/intro/pan4.htm (accessed 20 December 2013).

19 '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), symbolizing the meeting of the Aryan and Austric cultures' (http://www.164.100.24.209/newls/mural%20pan/pan3.htm; accessed 20 December 2013).

20 For an alternative reading of subaltern art through the work of 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', see Dube (2010: 153).

21 http://www. parliamentofindia. nic.in/ls/intro/pan14. htm (accessed 20 December 2013).

22 http://www. parliamentofindia. nic.in/ls/intro/pan35. htm (accessed 20 December 2013).

supine subjects (Panel 3).[20] Reclaiming the right to rule thus builds on deep historical foundations of the civilized Indian state.

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),[21] 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) and trade delegations from China (Panel 28). There are other panels depicting Indian courts as cosmopolitan states/spaces, where intellectuals, philosophers, travellers and traders mingled and paid homage (Panels 31, 33, 36, 37). Nehru in particular was self-consciously outward looking, seeking always to place India at the heart of debates raging in the postwar international arena, as evidenced in his role in the non-aligned movement.

If the legitimacy of the Indian state is 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).[22] Washbrook (2001: 48) has argued that 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 judgements of their masters.' 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, remain stable. But what we also notice through commemorative practices surrounding these statues is the contestation over the changing nature of the Indian polity and its representation in parliament; this is my focus in the next section.

The Aesthetics of Commemoration: Portraits and Statues

The Planning Committee to supervise the decoration of parliament also considered the placement of statues of national leaders 'to fill up the 50 or more niches on the ground and first floors of the Parliament House … Some of the leaders could also be shown in oil paintings in the Central Hall' (Parliament Secretariat 1953: 7–8). 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, Indira Gandhi. Only one of the portraits is of a dalit leader – 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. Around these portraits are performed '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.'

These portraits and statues also reflect India's political history: of nationalist struggles, of the postcolonial state and its stabilization of particular histories, and of the challenge to this stabilization through 'other' political narratives and interpretations. I discuss below two political contestations around this portraiture – the installation of a portrait of Savarkar and a statue of Bhagat Singh. Both are non-Congress figures, but one – Savarkar – was the Hindu nationalist leader of the Jan Sangh (now Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)) and of Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) and the other – Bhagat Singh – is a Sikh nationalist who was executed by the British on charges of terrorism.

When the 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 the BJP considers Savarkar as a 'great patriot', the Congress and most Left parties point to Savarkar's 'alleged association with the assassins of Mahatma Gandhi … and his support for the two-nation theory of Jinnah' (People's Democracy 2003). However, despite this opposition, it later emerged that representatives of the Congress and Communist (CPM) parties had not objected to this proposal at the meeting where the decision was taken. According to Congressman Shivraj Patil: '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). Norms of civility in small committees thus differ from the cut-and-thrust evidenced in the Chambers. Despite this complication, Congress and the Left parties urged President Abdul Kalam not to attend the installation function and when he didn't 'he was greeted with the boycott of the entire opposition' (People's

Democracy 2003). The symbolic importance of the commissioning and installation of portraits can also be gauged from the story of Najma Heptullah, then vice-chair of the Rajya Sabha (the upper house) and a longtime Congress MP. Her attendance at 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 the presidency. The ensuing censure that she received 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.

The controversy regarding Bhagat Singh reflects a different complexity of representation through political art. When the statue was unveiled – eighty years after Bhagat Singh dropped a bomb onto the floor of Parliament House's Central Assembly Hall on 8 April 1929 to 'make the deaf hear' – his family was disappointed. A controversy emerged over three issues. First, the issue of recognition of the person: 'Millions of Indians identify him with his hat, much like Mahatma Gandhi is identified with his glasses and stick.' Some citizens wrote to the Speaker of Lok Sabha to protest against this 'flabby, fat figure that was unrecognizable as Bhagat Singh' (Zeenews.com 2008). Second was the issue of representation as a national leader – 'the statue is made in a way to depict him more like a regional leader. By showing him in "Pagari" [a turban rather than his familiar trilby] the present leaders are trying to classify him on regional and communal lines. It is just divisive politics' (Zeenews.com 2008). Third, there was the controversy over the installation event. CPM MPs boycotted it 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 2008). However, a section of the Sikh community obviously saw this representation as telling a 'hidden story', one that recovered Bhagat Singh from an atheist, modernist tradition to a religious, spiritual one and in so doing placed his 'martyrdom' within the sacral boundaries of Sikhism (SikhiWiki 2005). The commemoration controversy continues; the Punjab-based *Tribune* newspaper reported that there was no official commemoration of Bhagat Singh's martyrdom, while another political leader, Rammanohar Lohia, had his birth anniversary marked by the Prime Minister and the Speaker and other MPs:

> 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 [the dalit leader] Dr B. R. Ambedkar is a clear exception to the norm of 'no commemoration events in front of statues'. (The Tribune 2010)

Aesthetic Reception: The Influence of Architecture and Art

We have not yet focused on the audience for this public art. The Speaker had sought to educate as well as to create a conducive working environment through commissioning the murals and statues. On tours of parliament, visitors are hurried along the lengthy corridor with scarcely a pause to reflect upon these paintings; the narrative structure of this enterprise is not reflected on by the security personnel who guide them. However, because of the stake that political parties have in celebrating their own, the performance of commemorative rituals before statues and portraits of leaders continues to have resonance and the Indian press continues to report on them, sometimes creating small crises, as in the case of Savarkar and Bhagat Singh, over which political parties clash. For those who 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 the club' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1999: 11). In this sense, these portraits are symbolic of wider political and even civilizational 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, murals, statues and portraits in the Indian parliament 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 is able or wishes to be complicit in the reading; the codes of narrative need recognition or rejection if the spectator is to interpret text, performance or objects (Davy 1986).

In my study of the aesthetics of the Indian parliament, however, there are stories of reception that include an overlooking and forgetting of the state-produced murals, together with affective contestations over commemorative statues and events around them. The grand narratives produced through the murals, 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 production of the state's autobiography, suggesting an unbroken line between Asoka's Buddhist peace emissaries and of post-independent India's role in the non-aligned peace movement, for example, become palimpsestic at best. 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. On the other hand, the contestations over commemorations show how the changing nature of Indian politics – from one dominated by the Congress Party that claimed its place as the nationalist movement delivering independence to the country to a multi-party, identity based politics that allows for different, less privileged bodies to inhabit parliament – is represented as well as challenged through a new political aesthetic. 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 Speaker Kumar to review the commissioning of art in the Indian parliament decided that 'enough is enough', that this representative space can take no more commissioned statues and portraits, perhaps is also an admission of defeat (Indian Express 2010) – the gaze of the spectator is turned away from these objects of the 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 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, 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 (receive) 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. In this, my approach is different from those scholars who have focused on the transformative potential of art (Marcuse 1978; Rancière 2004), as well as from those who have argued that aesthetics represent as well as reproduce power (Bourdieu 1984). Through this reading of political aesthetics in the Indian parliament, I suggest that both in its production and consumption, its message and the form that the message takes, the politics of art as well as the art of politics are conjoined.

Acknowledgements

References

Adib (1957) 'Life and letters: art by the square yard', *Times of India*, 14 June.

Anderson, B. (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.

Baker, H. (1944) *Architecture and Personalities*, London: Country Life.

Bhabha, H. K. (ed.) (1990) *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge.

Bleiker, R. (2009) *Aesthetics and World Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, London: Routledge.

Brenner, N. and Elden, S. (2009) 'Henri Lefebvre on state, space, territory', *International Political Sociology* 3(4): 353–77.

Brown, R. M. (2009a) *Art for Modern India 1947–1980*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Brown, R. M. (2009b) 'Reviving the past', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 11(3): 293–315.

Byron, R. (1931) 'New Delhi, the individual buildings', *Architectural Review* 69: 1–30, http://www.architectural-review.com/home/ar-archive/ar-1931--january-essay-new-delhi-the-individual-buildings-by-robert-byron/8605009.article (accessed 19 December 2013).

Cannadine, D. (2000) 'The Palace of Westminster as palace of varieties' in C. Riding and J. Riding (eds) *The Houses of Parliament: History, Art, Architecture*, London: Merrel.

Cannadine, D. (2008) 'Where statues go to die', http://www.http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7196530.stm (accessed 19 December 2013).

Chaman Lal (n.d.) 'Bhagat Singh's statue in parliament: disturbing questions', http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2008/october/remebering%20bhagat%20singh.html (accessed 19 December 2013).

Chatterjee, P. (1989) 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in K. Sangari and S. Vaid (eds)*Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, pp. 233–53.

Choudhary, N. S. (1955) 'Murals: to the editor, "Times of India"', *The Times of India (1861–current)*, 3 February, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Times of India.

Cope, R. L. (n.d.) 'Housing a legislature: when architecture and politics meet', http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/pubs/pops/pop37/c08.pdf (accessed 28 March 2011).

Davy, K. (1986) 'Constructing the spectator: reception, context and address in lesbian performance', *Performing Arts Journal* 10(2): 43–52.

Dovey, K. (1999) *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*, New York: Routledge.

Dube, S. (2010) *After Conversion: Cultural Histories of Modern India*, Delhi: Yodha Press.

Goodsell, C. T. (1988) 'The architecture of parliaments: legislative houses and political culture', *British Journal of Political Science* 18(3): 287–302.

Gopal Jayal, N. (ed.) (2001) *Democracy in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Guha-Thakurta, T. (1992) *The Making of a New Indian Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Hindustan Times (2008) http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/333951.aspx, 27 October.

Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. O. (1999) *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Indian Express (2010) 'No more statues and portraits in parliament', *Indian Express*, 4 April, http://www.indianexpress.com/news/nomorestatuesandportraitsinparliament/599794/ (accessed 19 December 2013).

Jha, D. N. (2006) 'Looking for a Hindu identity', http://www.stopfundinghate.org/resources/DNJhaHinduIdentity.pdf (accessed 4 January 2014).

Jha, N. B. (2003) 'Cong's dilemma over Savarkar's portrait', *Times of India*, 27 February, http://www.articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2003--02--27/india/27264646_1_d-savarkar-portrait-party-chief-whip.

Jose, J. (2000) 'Contesting patrilineal descent in political theory: James Mill and nineteenth-century feminism', *Hypatia* 15(1): 151–74.

Joshi, S. (2001) *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Lefevre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith, Oxford: Blackwell.

Marcuse, H. (1978) *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Boston: Beacon Press.

Mathur, S. (2000) 'History and anthropology in South Asia: rethinking the archive', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29: 89–106.

Metcalf, T. R. (1989) *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mitter, P. (1995) 'Western orientalism and the construction of nationalist art in India', *Oxford Art Journal* 18(1): 140–3.

Mitter, P. (2007) *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-garde, 1922–47*, London: Reaktion.

Mohite, V. A. (1955) 'Murals: letter to the editor', *Times of India*, 4 February.

Mouffe, C. (2007) 'Artistic activism and agonistic spaces', *Art and Research* 1(2): 1–5.

Parliament Secretariat (1953) 'Report of the planning subcommittee on a scheme of decorating the Parliament House', New Delhi: Parliament Secretariat.

People's Democracy (2003) 'Opposition boycotts Savarkar portrait function', *People's Democracy* 27(9), http://www.pd.cpim.org/2003/0302/03022003_savarkar.html (accessed February 2011).

Pinney, C. (1997) 'The nation (un)pictured? Chromolithography and 'popular' politics in India, 1878–1995', *Critical Inquiry* 23(4): 834–67.

Prakash, G. (1994) 'Subaltern studies as postcolonial criticism', *American Historical Review* 99(5): 1475–90.

Puwar, N. (2004) *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, Oxford: Berg.

Puwar, N. (2010) 'The Archi-texture of parliament: flaneur as method in Westminster', *Journal of Legislative Studies* 16(3): 298–312.

Rai, S. M. (2010) 'Analysing ceremony and ritual in parliament', *Journal of Legislative Studies* 16(3): 284–97.

Rancière, J. (2004) *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. G. Rockhill, London: Continuum.

Riding, C. and Riding, J. (eds) (2000) *The Houses of Parliament: History, Art, Architecture*, London: Merrell.

Ridley, J. (1998) 'Edwin Lutyens, New Delhi, and the architecture of imperialism', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 26(2): 67–83.

Saalfeld, T. and Müller, W. C. (1997) 'Roles in legislative studies: a theoretical introduction', *Journal of Legislative Studies* 3(1): 1–16.

Sachs, A. (1983) *Images of a Revolution*, Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House.

Sangari, K. and Vaid, S. (eds) (1990) *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

SikhiWiki (2005) 'Bhagat Singh's statue in Indian parliament', http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Bhagat_Singh%E2%80%99s_statue_in_Indian_Parliament (accessed19 December 2013).

Singh, M. and Mukherjee, R. (2009) *New Delhi: Making of a Capital*, New Delhi: Lustre Press.

Spivak, G. C. (1988) 'Can the subaltern speak?' in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London: Macmillan, pp. 271–313.

Stamp, G. (2000) '"We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us": Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and the rebuilding of the House of Commons', in C. Riding and J. Riding (eds)*The Houses of Parliament: History, Art, Architecture*, London: Merrell.

Taylor, V. E. (2000) 'Recalling modernity: aesthetics before the abyss', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 14(2): 411–20.

The Tribune (2010) 'Parliament gives Martyrs' Day a miss', *The Tribune*, 24 March, http://www.tribuneindia.com/2010/20100324/main7.htm (accessed 19 December 2013).

Turner, V. (1967) 'Betwixt and between: the liminal period in rites de passage', in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 93–111.

Verghese, B. J. (1955) 'Depicting history of India in murals in parliament', *Times of India*, January 22.

Virmani, A. (2008) *A National Flag for India: Rituals, Nationalism and the Politics of Sentiment*, New Delhi: Permanent Black.

Walzer, M. (1967) 'On the role of symbolism in political thought', *Political Science Quarterly* 82 (2): 191–204.

Washbrook, D. (2001) 'The rhetoric of democracy and development in late colonial India', in G. Jayal (ed.) *Democracy in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 36–49.

Waylen, G. (2011) 'Building new democracies: symbols and space', paper presented at the Gendered Ceremony and Ritual in Parliament Conference, London, 29 October.

Wright, M. (1983) '*Indian Summer: Lutyens, Baker and Imperial Delhi*: a review article', *Town Planning Review* 54(1): 106–10.

Zeenews.com (2008) 'Family unhappy over Bhagat Singh's statue in parliament', http://www.zeenews.com/news462637.html (accessed 19 December 2013).