

BOOK RECEIVED AND REVIEWED

Picturing the Nation: Iconographies of Modern India

Edited by Richard Davis



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Nationalism has been one of the most debated, contested and discussed concepts within the precincts of Indian history and society. Issues of nation, national identity and nation-building have served as recurrent topics in public discourse in India well over the past century. The basic source of the huge compendium of literature pertaining to the theme 'nationalism' in India has been mainly the "written sources". This "over-reliance by historians on written sources" has naturally led to an exclusivist and elitist understanding of the narrative of Indian nationalism. But interestingly, the esoteric nature of nationalism in India has also expressed itself through myriad vehicles of expression ranging from posters, movies and paintings to mobile display of ideologies like processions (coming under the rubric of visual iconography). This stress on "visual imagery" has helped to reach out to the strata of Indian society beyond the ken of literacy. This vast non-elitist Indian society has recorded their perception and values with the help of visual iconography. *Picturing the Nation* explores visual representations of India from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries. It offers the readers native versions of imagination and analyses of the same. As stated above, literature on visual imagery and its relationship with nationalism has been sparse.

This edited volume is an analytically precious and academically rich text which will surely plug this gap to a considerable extent and at the same time stimulate scholars to come up with many more such works. Broadly speaking, the book provides an indepth and holistic analysis of the close interaction between the two juxtaposed areas in India, nationalism and culture in its various forms. This anthology focuses on the idea of nationhood that circulates in public sphere in India, especially through visual articulation. In the words of the editor, "this volume embodies a revisionist historical agenda". In other words, the book successfully tries to capture the dynamics of formation of national identity and consciousness with the help of imagery in different forms from the late nineteenth

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to the late twentieth centuries. Consciously differing from writings where imaging the nation is a predominantly based on the written word and the verbal, this book presents a visual history of nation-building in Modern India."

It contains eight essays by scholars of erudition in their respective fields along with ample illustrations considering a plethora of visual modes including chromolithographs and films, official icons, architecture, and cultural displays. All the articles try to convey the message that visual iconography plays a fundamental role in imagining nationhood. The contributors enframe the imagining of the nation with the aid of visuals and symbols. The trend gains importance in the context of wide spread illiteracy in India during the time that is discussed in the book.

In the comprehensive introduction, editor Richard H. Davis, apart from giving out a thematic layout of the book and bird's-eye view of the incorporated articles, analyses how visual articulation of the Indian nation has taken place in different forms. To his credit, Davis reminds us that there cannot be a single "official state iconography" and that "the imagery produced there adapts itself to diverse consumers and varied purposes".

In the first essay, Sumathi Ramaswamy lucidly analyses the presence two different strands of "mapping" India. One in the form of a geo-scientific cartography and the other is the "somatic" cartography in where the image of Bharat-Mata is spread across the perceived national space of India which were necessarily not co-terminus with the geo-scientific map or with the prevailing political dynamics. Such "somatic" representation through invocation of "Mother India" was used to give arouse devotion and sense of sacrifice among the people. Figuring the nation as a deity appeals to Indian devotionism, and portraying it as a female subconsciously urges male viewers to regard the nation "as a vulnerable woman who needs their protection and as a mother who has to be rescued through heroism and sacrifice." The 'Tamittay' figure was used in Tamil Nadu for similar reasons.

Christopher Pinney's essay looks at the body in conjunction with the bomb. He stresses on the characters of Bhagat Singh, a leftist revolutionary not averse to use violence to fulfill his aims and that of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, an extremist Congress leader. Pinney tries to show that a "single voice or a single body" is capable of setting of incidents of great ramifications. While Tilak attempted to challenge the very foundational possibility of translation, Bhagat Singh through "mimicry" tried to dismantle the classificatory differences on which the British rule was established. The article could have been more interesting in the absence of unnecessary jargon.

Ajay Sinha's analysis focuses on Binode Bihari Mukherjee's large mural titled 'Medieval Saints' painted in 1947, in the Hindi Bhavan of Rabindranath Tagore's Vishva Bharati University at Shantiniketan. Sinha argues that the famous mural of Mukherjee was meant to convey some thing more than the mere allegorical representation of "India's incipient nationhood". Sinha showed remarkable scholarly prowess to grasp such an abstract subject.

Sandria Freitag's essay analyses the content and style of Indian Islamic posters in pre and post-Independence India and try to figure out how they are located in the matrix of a overly Hindu-ised socio-political environment. Freitag, very relevantly states as to how the images represent the constant interaction or even friction that the Indian Muslim face by belonging to the "two circles". One

circle representing the “religious community” and the other representing the “shared Indian national community”.

Catherine Asher provides a detailed account of how the above stated “two circles” interact in the urban setting of Jaipur in Rajasthan state of India over the last two hundred years. The inherent tension between the Hindus and Muslims in Jaipur has had a profound impact on the Muslim edifices and architecture in Jaipur. This communal tension in turn has also precariously made the Muslims in Jaipur unstable socio-politically and roving between the Indian national circle and the religious community (Islamic) circle.

Kajri Jain, focuses on the theme of calendar art mainly in the post1947 era and depicts as to how despite the presence of a overtly secular ideology and dispensation during the Neheruvian era, there was always a captive market of “devotional ethos” as manifested through the calendar prints of gods from the Hindu mythological pantheons alongside leaders of national and regional standing. This inherent “ethos” subsequently was used effectively by the Hindu Right to construct their version of “cultural nationalism” to contest Nehru’s vision of Indian statehood.

On the whole, this collection will arouse interest in readers precisely because all the contributors attempt to situate the nation-building exercise in India at a distance from the theory and practice of nation-building in the West.

Christina Brosius’s essay provides an insight into the mindset of two artists along with their creations. These artworks and both the artists are totally dedicated to the creation of a “visual imagery of Hindu nationalist groups”. Asher further shows how the Hindu-right in post-independence India and particularly during the 1990s tried to engineer a national community with the help of these imageries to fulfill a particular political objective.

In the last essay Raminder Kaur concentrate on the Hindu Right's imaginings of an exclusively Hindu state in the festival pageantry involving Ganapati Puja in Mumbai and Maharashtra. The author excels in analyzing the “iconographies of power” on display during the Ganapati to visualize imageries from the past and also to depict issues from contemporary socio-political landscape both national and regional. The overt objective to such visual representations is to deepen the ideological moorings of the Hindu Right among both the elite and more importantly the non-elite mass. However, at times some of the thoughts in the writing appear repetitive.

A bonus for both the discerning scholars and the readers is the rich repertoire of illustrations accompanying every essay. There are pictures some of which are rare. These illustrations themselves drive home the importance of visual imagery in the analysis of nation-building process. A special gratitude is due for all the persons/sources concerned who allowed their illustrations to be published in the book.

Lastly, the concerned academic field should thank the editor and the contributors for producing such an anthology which commendably covered a virgin area both horizontally and vertically.

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