



**What is to be commemorated? / Que faut-il commémorer ?**  
**Uses and Misuses of Political Commemoration in India: 20th-21st century/ Usages et mésusages de la commémoration en Inde, XXe-XXIe siècle**

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A fever of a new kind of political commemoration has overtaken India since the 1990s. In rupture with a colonial tradition that continued almost unaltered after independence, they have mobilized recriminations, political contestations and criticism of the state monopoly and engineering of national celebrations since 1947. They have introduced a new conception of historical memory that does not rest on a monolithic consensus but emphasizes the place and role of social or regional minorities. These groups propose their own interpretations and versions of the past in public statues and monumental parks. Equally, the Indian Diaspora is also claiming a niche in public space for visual acknowledgement of its specific historical experiences. The question of what is to be commemorated has become a political battle between the centre and state oppositions, which the Supreme Court is now expected to settle.

This public debate suggests that commemorations are no longer only about forging national identities or fixing national memory (A). They have become a ground where regional, community, urban identities and “social memories” of groups are reactivated and re-defined (B). For the first time since India’s independence, the door has opened to a free struggle for re-writing national narratives about the past from regional, communal and gender perspectives. Today the battle for a place in the commemorative landscape is about accommodating multiple, divergent voices in contrast to a state discourse that presents a consensual experience of the past. The idea of federalism and political decentralization is thus extended to the realm of historical memory introducing a democratic turn in India’s political culture and practices.

Besides generating spicy polemical exchanges in the press, the current uses and objects of commemoration reflect both changing configurations of power or personal positions and mirror emerging social preoccupations about community status and local roots rather than national imaginations and identities. Recent social, physical arrangements of political symbols like statues in public spaces confirm this trend. The pressure to democratize national commemorations from below announces a growing preoccupation with regional pasts and community identities. National memory is being splintered into multiple, even conflictual strains. Does this announce an alternative, more egalitarian national political culture ? Or does it, on the other hand sound the death knell of a common emotional identification with a national political tradition ?

**Commemorating the nation under colonial rule**

As the question of an Indian nation gained urgency in the political agenda in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it became essential for Indian nationalists to identify moments of national celebration and their content. But in a public space jealously guarded and occupied entirely by British political rituals and models, what indeed could the first generation of Indian nationalists commemorate? The

first experiences in forging a national memory around a pantheon of heroes or heroines drawn from history on the Western model, or gods and goddesses and monarchs within an indigenous political and cultural tradition, soon showed the pitfalls of reviving ancient memories or religious traditions to mobilize Indians around a future nation. Although India's past offered a plethora of well-known, illustrious emperors and an even greater number of battles and legendary heroes or heroines, they appeared too rooted in specific caste, regional and community traditions to hold much meaning beyond these boundaries, let alone carry a national appeal. The past was too conflictual, a veritable "burden", and historical memories still too strongly imprinted by a chronology of invasions, occupations and resistance to provide elements for national consolidation. This was highlighted in the first attempts at public mobilization in 1893 and 1897, in Maharashtra, seat of Brahmanical learning and culture. Here, the political project of mobilizing and bonding Indians from all over the country in a common patriotic sentiment around the Hindu god Ganapati or the Hindu Maratha warrior Shivaji had a limited success (C). This imagery was above all meaningful in specific religious or regional traditions, and worse, it was considered as the beginnings of a militant Hinduism that alienated Muslims who felt emotionally closer to the Mughal dynasties than to their Hindu opponents. Indeed, such public festivals designed to serve as national celebrations only acerbated communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims, further setting back the promotion of a national sentiment and weakening the already shaky and uncertain idea of an Indian national identity. Similarly, in eastern India, political protests drawing inspiration from popular Hindu religious imagery to represent the nation in the form of the mother (*Bharat Mata*) angered rather than drew Muslims to the national cause (D).

If the ancient historical past appeared as « a burden », the more recent past was no more useful in a process of national construction (E). In fact, the early nationalists were hard set to use India's historical record as a basis of a unified cultural and political coherence. The only significant event that had imprinted itself on public memory was the 1857 uprising against the British, alternatively termed « mutiny » or « national revolt » depending on the political vision of colonial history (F). Far from being remembered as a moment of Indian nationalist awakening with its heroes and martyrs, 1857 was a historical moment for British commemorations of imperial triumph, heroism, sacrifice and Indian cruelty (G). But if it inspired the colonial government to erect statues of fallen British soldiers, triumphant generals and public memorials in India (H), in contrast, Indians nationalists paid it little attention. From hindsight and the large-scale celebrations surrounding the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what has now been reinstated since the end of the 1980s as the "first war of independence", the Indian nationalists showed an indifference to the uprising at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But 1857 was paradoxically far too problematic an event to be used as a source of national commemorations by Indians. Firstly, because British sensitivity to this first serious threat would have invited the strongest reprisals of any move attempting to resurrect it as a heroic war of Indian independence. Clearly, no negotiation with the British government was possible on that subject. Secondly, 1857 had involved mainly northern India and some princely states. Large princely states like Hyderabad or some of the Punjab princely houses had supported the British and south India remained untouched by this wave of rebellion. This first anti-colonial uprising still carried a strong association with its military origins and nature and a royal leadership anxious to preserve its power and privileges rather than as a struggle for freedom and an expression of popular sovereignty. These were later constructions and interpretations.

A succession of failed attempts from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to mobilize the past or tap religious imagery showed the nationalists that the past could not be collectively experienced. It led them in the 1920s to explore the immediate present as a common source of ideological inspiration and

foundation for the nation, through newly elaborated “modern” symbols of sovereignty, political rituals and anniversaries on the model of similar experiences of modern Western nations. In the next forty years, the future nation was celebrated through these newly designed symbols like the flag or the spinning wheel (*charkha*), elaborated and politicized under Gandhi’s careful direction and inserted in newly designed political ceremonies like Independence Day or Flag Day (I). These had the advantage of evoking no divisive memories, for they drew upon non-Indian political models, mainly American, rather than ancient Indian, Mughal or even current princely political rituals. On the contrary, they pointed to a future nation in the process of construction through current, combined sacrifices and struggles. They permitted fresh, personal political experiences to be drawn into a larger story of the Indian nation that was being mutually enacted and embedded in a collective memory.

Besides, commemorating the nation by raising public statues of Indian heroes or idols was ruled out (J). Under British rule, public memorials and statues mainly featured British monarchs and queens, British Indian viceroys and generals, often through a system of public subscriptions to which Indians were expected to contribute. A recent survey shows the massif and widespread implantation of these memorials, with 170 statues of the British in the Indian subcontinent (Llewellyn-Jones, 2007, p. 198). British zeal in this matter sometimes provoked Indians to protest. Thus the statue of Lord Lawrence (viceroy of India from 1864-1869) standing on the Lahore mall since 1887 was the target of a particularly strong agitation in 1923. The pose of the statue and the inscription « Will you be governed by sword or pen ? » was considered an arrogant claim to British supremacy and insulting to Indian national feeling (K).

The point of departure of the nation was thus located not in a nostalgic, distant past but in the present moment, which served as an immediate heritage, a bank of emotions, actions and sites to drawn upon and use as a reminder to all Indians of their common status, suffering and aspirations. Celebrations like Flag Day or Independence Day in the 1930s functioned as moveable sites of remembrance, reinforcing a united national commitment, exercising a decisive and powerful role in creating a community of sentiment, whilst at the same time transforming the nation into an intimate experience (Virmani, 2008, chapitre 6). Gradually, national celebrations acquired a pantheon of founding leaders as they focused on anniversaries of contemporary « great men » (Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s death anniversary, 1<sup>st</sup> August 1920, Gandhi and Nehru’s birth anniversaries, 2 October, 14 November). Place was made for the more unknown martyrs of colonial resistance like the Jallianwala massacre in Amritsar, Punjab, in 1919, when British troops had shot down a crowd of civilians peacefully assembled in a public park for an important religious festival. This list progressively lengthened through the 1940s to include other moments of celebration of specific groups, political symbols, concepts and political programmes: Political Prisoners day, Students’ day, Charkha Demonstration day, Civil Liberties day, National Unity day or Anti-Untouchability day.

To a great extent, these national rituals, designed to work as an “emotional regime”, compensated for the complete absence of nationalist statutory in a public space that was tightly controlled and where political meetings and public gatherings were closely scrutinized. In this climate, national anniversaries conducted with a minimum number of material elements that could be set up rapidly and dismantled equally fast, could escape the constraints to which more formal meetings were subjected. National celebrations in the colonial framework had to rely on what Nicholas Mansfield has called “mobile monuments” (L), which could range from the colours of the national flag, songs, photos of prominent national leaders, speeches or banners. Venues of demonstrations and rituals were constantly shifting. No permanent visible traces or inscriptions of these moments were left in

public space for indeed, the colonial monopoly of public statutory entirely eliminated Indians (M). This model of national commemoration focusing on the present moment, on modern symbols of sovereignty of the nation like the flag and on a pantheon of contemporary leaders would constitute the principal heritage of the new Indian Republic in 1947.

### **From resistance to consensus**

Whereas in the frame of imperial rule, commemorating the nation had been an act and politics of resistance, in independent India, it became a manifestation of state power in the public space, legitimizing a specific genealogy of the nation and presenting a history of concord and unity. Three national holidays, Republic Day (26 January), Independence Day (15 August) and Gandhi's birth anniversary (2 October) were established by the new Republic to celebrate contemporary events rather than a distant mythical past: the application of the constitution, India's nation status and one of the leading actors in this journey, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Gandhi's presence in this triad provided a human lineage to the nation-state narrative of the freedom struggle as a celebratory, unifying, consensual account of the birth of the Indian nation. Additions made over the years in the commemorative field consolidated this vision, although from 1947 to the end of the 1980s, control and restraint rather than commemorative zeal characterized national policy. Indeed, the major shift from contestation of imperial rule to the consolidation of central rule over the states and their populations was more sober and minimalist than spectacular and exuberant. The Nehruvian state did not, as could be expected from a nation that had just shaken free from imperial control after 190 years, indulge in a spurt of construction of memorials or monuments to immortalize the freedom struggle for future generations.

From the perspective of the state, re-enacting and recalling moments in the birth of the nation offered lessons in patriotic fervour to a nation under siege since its inception and still threatened by further balkanization on the model of the Partition in 1947. The freedom struggle was, to use Ernst Gellner's notion, fixed as the "navel" of the Indian nation, but as Gellner also pointed out, a navel performed no further function (N). This was undoubtedly the case with the Indian freedom struggle. The overwhelming place it continued to occupy in public space and memory was also due to Nehru's intimate conviction that hankering back to a remote, distant past in India's case would mark the death signal of its passage to modernity. Nehru had written at some length on the subject during in his work *A Discovery of India*, in his imprisonment terms from 1942-46 and once in power he actively rejected attempts to dig up past memories or myths (O). He was critical of a nostalgic remembering of the past, considering it an impediment to the growth of a scientific temper and India's much needed social and economic development. India's ancient historic civilisation though a significant element of her singularity and proof of her endurance was not matter for unquestioning self-satisfaction and complacency. The future, he was convinced, lay in present action (Virmani, 2002, p. 103-105). In power, he remained true to these convictions. India's history, and especially the colonial record offered ample proof of the destructive consequences of incessant manipulation of the past, its constant re-appropriation and reinterpretation to suit different objectives, whether of the British, the Hindus or the Muslims. On the other hand, the anti-colonial struggle represented a dynamic, largely united movement of collective action and struggle. In 1957, addressing a seminar on architecture, Nehru reiterated the need for Indians to liberate themselves from the stasis of history and turn resolutely toward modernity, freeing the country from the weight of tradition. To Le Corbusier, the Swiss architect engaged in the construction of the new city of Chandigarh in the Punjab and looking for a sign « exclusively dating from a hundred or a thousand years ago », Nehru's government only answered in terms of « industries, science and

technology” »(Prakash, 2002).

The view that too great an attention to regional histories could lead to the eventual disintegration of the nation weighed heavily on post partitioned India. The rise of an independent state of Pakistan was felt to be precisely the outcome of consolidation of community outlooks, antagonistic to a broader national view. K. M. Munshi, member of the Constituent Assembly in 1946-50, pointed out that « communities often looked upon their past from different angles... Hindus looked up to Rana Pratap and Shivaji as their heroes; the Muslims admired Mahmud Ghazni and Aurangzeb; in this antagonistic outlook lay the seed of Pakistan ». He emphasized that « The common memory, though limited, which we now share in India is that of... freedom struggled for and won in the present » (Munshi, 1959, p. 8).

Still, for a country that prided itself on its ancient culture, civilization and history, some references to history were inevitable. Certain concessions could be made and the closest to a consensual model was found in the Buddhist emperor Ashoka Maurya (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.). His symbol of the wheel (*Chakra*), signifying both eternal law and continuous motion, was both sufficiently ancient and futurist. In 1947, the Constituent Assembly decided to put it in place of the Gandhian spinning wheel that was on the national flag since 1920. India’s Muslim heritage too was acknowledged by setting the stage for Independence Day in Red Fort, a 17<sup>th</sup> century fort complex constructed by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and later taken over as headquarters of the British Indian army. Here, from the ramparts, the prime minister delivered his or her speech to the nation. The tradition, inaugurated by Nehru in 1947, emphasized the centrality of the Mughal heritage in the Indian Republic. At a deeper level, it drew the contemporary political ritual close to a religious and medieval political practice of “Darshan” where the monarch appeared before the people to listen to their complaints and give them a hearing.

Just as these Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim traditions were integrated in the ceremonial of contemporary rituals of the Indian Union, so too some imperial monuments and memorials were annexed for a national history. At Kanpur, the statue raised in memory of British losses in the 1857 revolt was removed from the public space to be reinstalled inside a Memorial Church soon after independence. The Lucknow Residency, besieged by the Indian rebel soldiers in 1857 became a museum presenting the chronology of 1857 from a nationalist perspective. The iconic and spatial monument of India Gate, at the heart of the imperial ritual stage in Delhi, was transformed into the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in 1971. (**Fig. 1**) Initially designed in 1921 as an All India war memorial in honour of the soldiers of the British Indian army dead in the Afghan War and later First World War, it lost its imperial imprint and became a patriotic symbol to the glory of all the Indian soldiers who had died for the nation in subsequent wars. The imperial dimension expressed by George VI’s statue in its vicinity was eliminated but conflicts over what would replace it showed the difficulty of choosing a shared political symbol at the centre of the Indian state (Alley, 1997).

But the most significant departure from the colonial pattern of national commemorations was the emergence of public statutory and memorials from 1947 onwards, leading to the development of the art and skill of casting large bronze statues. Consequently, some statues featuring the freedom movement were slowly installed in the urban landscape. In Delhi, memorials to contemporary national statesmen were erected in different areas of the city. In particular, near the banks of the river Yamuna, nine memorials – Raj Ghat, Shantivan, Vijay Ghat, Shakti Sthal, Samta Sthal, Kisan Ghat, Veer Bhumi, Ekta Sthal, Karma Bhumi – (**Fig. 2**) were progressively constructed, inscribing political figures like Gandhi, Nehru and successive prime ministers in the symbolic urban landscape. Known as Rajghat, it is a central place for commemorative practices. Other statues raised in the memory of the freedom struggle include Gandhi’s famous 390 km Dandi March in

March 1930 against the salt monopoly exercised by the British government; The statue sculpted by Devi Prasad Roy Choudhary, was placed on Sardar Patel Marg. Outside Delhi, a Martyr's memorial was inaugurated in 1956 outside the secretariat in Patna honouring freedom fighters that had died in the 1942 Quit India movement (P). The process of transforming some places into sites of national memory was also set in motion. In Allahabad, Anand Bhawan, the family home of the Nehru's was transformed into a national memorial in 1970. The Aga Khan palace Pune, a national monument since 1969, was another step stone in the national journey, where Gandhi was imprisoned from 1942-1944. The Cellular jail in Port Blair, built in 1906, where the British government exiled political prisoners was converted into a national memorial in 1969 only after protests from former prisoners and political leaders at the demolition of two wings of the building. (Fig. 3) Yet, the total output remains modest and minimal for the six decades of independence. The newly built provincial capital, Chandigarh (Punjab) for example, designed by Le Corbusier on geometric, modernist lines, was singularly devoid of any nationalist or historical trace (Khilnani, 1997, p. 31-35). Although a detailed survey still needs to be made, visual landmarks of the freedom movement commemorating collective movements are significantly absent in most Indian cities.

From the 1960s, successive governments initiated a cautious policy of «charismatic commemoration», limited in a first phase to statues of Gandhi, Nehru, and eventually successive prime ministers and state politicians. Only very progressively, after the 1990s, this field was opened to freedom fighters (Q). Several decades later, the result is significantly visible. Gandhi's statues mark almost every city in India today, followed by Indira Gandhi (prime minister from 1966-77 and 1980-84), Ambedkar (the author of the Indian constitution) and Bhagat Singh (responsible for throwing a bomb in the Central Legislative Assembly in 1929). A visit to the Indian Parliament underlines the economy exercised in the field of symbolic representations of the nation. Around a dozen statues dot its premises and a recent decision by a parliamentary committee has recommended that no more statues be installed in Parliament House on the grounds that «it is already over-crowded with high profiled figures» (*The Times of India*, 4 April, 2010).

This state management of frameworks of memory (for e.g. half the exhibitions organized by the national archives of India from 1973 to 2007 featured the freedom struggle and particularly Gandhi) has had different consequences. First, its control of public statutory and national celebrations at least until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has forged a linear, whiggish vision of nation building, that excludes opposing strains (communists, socialist, radical groups) and contesting (non-Gandhian) visions within the nationalist movement.

This has led to growing demands for broadening the field of commemorations from regional states, citizen groups and non-resident Indians. It has also led to some violent rejections of state interpretations of history and the past and increased militant demands for equal representation of the past as a field of multiple voices. Regional state responses to the tight state control of national commemoration have consisted in raising even more grandiose monuments and statues to the memory of local politicians and former leaders. Some of the more spectacular examples include the M.G.R. Ramachandran memorial in Chennai, inaugurated in 1990 to honour the idolized actor and chief minister of Tamilnadu (R). More determined state governments like Gujarat and Maharashtra have announced their own national memorial projects. A 182-metre high statue of Sardar Patel, the first home minister of India who played a key role in the integration of the hundreds of princely states into India in 1947, is announced as India's statue of unity, to be built on the riverbed of the Narmada. Its inspiration is the chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), strongly criticized for his pro-Hindu positions and anti-secular language opposed to the traditional conceptions of the Indian Republic. Another statue of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Maratha warrior

Shivaji, nearly hundred metres high, is planned on top of a man made island a kilometre off Mumbai's southern shore in the Arabian Sea. Again, the driving force behind this construction is the Hindu state government of Maharashtra, intent on « reclaiming their history ». « A statue may not be practical », said the principal secretary of the Maharashtra government, « but every city needs a monument » (“Hindu freedom fighter to be India's Statue of Liberty”, *The Times*, 5 June 2008).

The Indian Diaspora has been equally energetic. Lobbied by some Guyanese nationals whose ancestors left India from 1834 to 1917 as indentured labourers from Calcutta, the West Bengal government has provided land at the Calcutta port for building a memorial monument and eventually a museum. This is a first recognition of a colonial past that was forged outside the physical territory of India and the mainstream national movement. It opens another chapter in domestic commemorations and is quite distinct from the habitual patterns espoused by Diaspora Indians in the United States: they have tended to adopt Gandhi as the icon of their Indian roots and culture.

Finally, government sensitivity to what can and cannot be commemorated according to the criteria of whether it strengthens social and political unity and enhances the national image has institutionalized and legitimized a colonized mind-set. That is to say, the colonial wariness of foreign intentions is today continued through government suspicions of free and open interpretations of public memory and a prickly defensiveness of Indian culture and civilization. This attitude has also nourished extreme Hindu positions or excessively nationalist ideas on what constitutes Indian identity and culture or what can be celebrated and recalled as national memory. Thus, in 1989 the Indian government refused to cooperate with Portuguese commemorations of Vasco da Gama's arrival in India because they perceived these as hurtful of Indian society and culture. State governments are even more sensitive about what kinds of pasts can be celebrated. Kerala and Goa governments angrily rejected the commemoration of Vasco da Gama's arrival on the Malabar Coast on the grounds that this implied honouring Portuguese colonisers and giving them precedence over national sensitivities. On the whole, the central government's concerns for national unity and its anxieties of separatism have led to a top-heavy approach to national commemorations and cautious state investment. However, the gradual retreat of the centre from state development and planning since the beginning of the 1990s and the growing weight of non state actors, associations, citizen's groups and corporations have introduced multiple visions, memories and social and historical experiences. Their demands for representation in the public space and in the national mainstream suggest that national memories and history are being re-written from a regional perspective.

### **Contesting national commemorations**

Coalition politics at the national level and liberalization on the economic front, sometimes labelled India's second independence, have further modified the landscape of national commemorations. Anti-colonial memories of *satyagrahas* and civil disobedience hold less interest for the growing percentage of 25 year olds than moving into a modernized, globalized world and embracing prosperity. Even the official language and grammar of commemorations has taken account of this. If the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Indian independence in 2007 largely replayed the major landmarks of the freedom struggle, the emphasis was on future development, social integration and modernization. In 2009, the Quit India movement, commemorated in the southern state of Hyderabad as a week long celebration, interpreted Gandhi's political slogan of “Do or Die” as an inspiration for accomplishing state development projects (*Indian Express*, 10 Aug. 2009). Independence day is now an occasion

to reiterate the country's commitment to development projects and economic prosperity for its people (*The Hindu*, 15 Aug. 2010). The revolt of 1857, ignored until 1957, is today officialised as a first "war of independence". A set of stamps celebrates the leaders and martyrs of the struggle, integrating the uprising in a national history. One of them, issued in 1988, designed by the well-known artist M.F. Husain, portrays two queens, Rani Jhansi, a Hindu and Begum Hazrat Mahal, a Muslim, who had been at the forefront of the battle, repositioning women in this new key moment of national history. The princely leadership of the 1857 struggle that had so far made it a political embarrassment was now relegated to the background in favour of unity and sacrifice. It is today held forth as an example of religious unity (it had pitched Hindu and Muslim soldiers against the British behind the Mughal emperor) and a model of inspiration in the current situation of communal tension and Hindu, Muslim, Christian riots. Hindu acceptance of the Mughal emperor as their monarch is presented as an example and proof of harmonious coexistence. The minister of culture declared that such a celebration recalled their roots at a time of rapid globalization. It was important « to educate a younger generation who ate out at McDonald's and Pizza Hut about their background and give them a sense of pride in their inheritance. » (*The New York Times*, 10 May 2007).

But even while the state annexed the 1857 uprising to serve its programme of national unity, social harmony and a unified national consciousness, historians in South India advanced arguments for national recognition of earlier mutinies of 1800-1857 in the South, pointing to the 11 uprisings that took place in this period (*The Hindu*, 25 March 2007, "The First War of Independence?"). Historical logic and accuracy as well as regional pride demanded that the mutinies in Tellicherry and Vizagapatam in 1780, the Poligar rebellion of 1799, or the Vellore mutiny of 1806 be inserted as milestones in the history of the nation (see appendice, fn S). Thus, in 1998, in memory of the Tamil soldiers who died in a mutiny in 1806, the Vellore Mutiny Memorial in Vellore was inaugurated by the Tamil Nadu chief minister M. Karunanidhi.

Such counter-demands for inserting episodes from regional histories into mainstream commemorations have made national political celebrations a terrain to affirm regional, social identities and status. History too must be decentralized and the intellectual defence of plural histories and "fragments" of the nation comes from the community of historians. The perspectives opened by the Subaltern school of Indian historians in support of more modest struggles or non-mainstream actors against oppression at different periods serve to justify political demands to include representatives from all over India in the national saga. Amongst them features Subash Chandra Bose, a major national figure in the 1930s, sidelined because of his political differences with Gandhi and Nehru and his proposition to ally with Hitler in the fight against the British (see appendice, fn T). Another figure to reclaim national recognition has been Tipu Sultan, the ruler of the southern Indian state of Mysore for the last twenty years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most famous for his four wars against the British and the historic battle at Srirangapatnam in 1799, which he lost (see appendice, fn U). The kingdom, once conquered became a loyal princely state under British rule. But Tipu's patriotism never qualified him for mainstream celebrations, apart from a statue in Bangalore. In 1999, the commemoration of the Srirangapatnam battle revealed the profound divisions between the central government and regional or minority positions. The Indian government then led by a Hindu party (BJP) termed the commemoration « unnecessary and highly objectionable », as Tipu, a Muslim ruler was credited to have destroyed temples and converted Hindus forcibly during his attack on Kerala. On the contrary, the commemoration was organized at the regional level, in Mysore or in Kolkotta, or supported by historians politically opposed to the Hindu government. Thus, the well-known Marxist historian Irfan Habib, professor at the Aligarh Muslim university and former director of the Indian Council for Historical Research, criticized the

negligence of regional historical figures like Tipu Sultan by the nation state today. The controversy over Tipu as an early patriot or Muslim bigot shows that the search for non-conflictual historical figures is no less of a problem today than it was at the beginning of the twentieth century (*The Independent*, 23 May 1999, « India squabbles over the legacy of Tipu Sultan »).

The most dramatic defiance of national conventions has come about in the state of Uttar Pradesh, from the Bahujan Samaj party, founded in 1984, to represent the interests of the untouchables (designated as Harijans by Gandhi but now named Dalits). Spokesman of economically backward groups who felt politically, socially and economically marginalized by the Indian state, this party sees commemoration of regional and community traditions and leaders as one of the means of symbolically resisting political centralization and unseating social elites entrenched in power since independence. From this perspective, it is engaged in rewriting the past by mobilizing myth, historical facts and common legends to suit its objectives of exercising political power (see appendice, fn V). Monumental, charismatic representations of Dalit's unacknowledged mythological or historical pasts in the public place is no doubt a conscious, strategic manipulation of the past and history contrary to established norms of historical understanding elaborated under the influence of the British and continued by the postcolonial state (Chakrabarty, 2003). It is equally a means to re-negotiate the status and privileges of those they stand for. But beyond that, it presents an alternative to national history. It has overturned the unwritten conventions that had made state iconography and this form of political communication the preserve of central governments, limited to the freedom struggle and to some centrally approved selected figures.

Indeed, the Dalit chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati, has, since coming to power in 2007 unveiled 50 statues of herself, her political mentors and her party symbol, the elephant. In 2009 itself, she inaugurated 15 new memorials in Lucknow, capital of her state (**Fig. 4**) This architectural orgy or « statumania », to use Maurice Agulhon's description for 19<sup>th</sup> century republican France (see appendice, fn W) is, to say the least, unprecedented and unparalleled since India's independence. The only equivalent enterprise was the construction of the city of Delhi from 1911-1931 during the colonial period. These new memorials, placed in huge parks with broad avenues that duplicate Lutyens' imperial architectural style for seats of power (Parliament, Rashtrapati Bhawan, India Gate), focus exclusively on leaders from her own Dalit community. They include statues of B. R. Ambedkar who fought for the rights of his downtrodden community along with Gandhi but opposed Gandhi's unifying nationalism and his defence of the Hindu social system. Kanshi Ram, Mayawati's own political mentor and founder of the Bahujan Samaj party in 1984 occupies a prominent place. (**Fig. 5**) The statues, enthroned in huge parks (more than 33 hectares in Noida, near Delhi) have become a political scandal (for the amount of money spent) (see appendice, fn Y), an ecological controversy (*Hindustan Times*, July 16, 2009) (for the breakdown of ecological balance in what was earlier unconstructed territory) and an electoral battle all rolled into one (*Hindustan Times*, August 5, 2009).

Mayawati's defence of this furious construction in her home state is a criticism of the country's political elitism, caste bias and traditional brahmanical control in Uttar Pradesh : « Had memorials for eminent persons belonging to the Dalit community and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) been built by governments that ruled the country after independence, the Bahujan Samaj Party government would not have felt the need for the task » (*The Hindu*, June 27, 2009). She has repeatedly shown her awareness of the power of national commemorations at this « début du siècle ». Statues or parks and memorials of eminent persons serve as a « lighthouse », providing inspiration for the future, she declared. « The money spent on this site in Lucknow was less than what was spent on « samadhis » (memorials) of Gandhi and the Nehru, Gandhi family at Rajghat in

Delhi. » Today, two memorial parks and ten memorials in Uttar Pradesh (9 in Lucknow and 1 in Noida) exhibit legendary and current Dalit heroes and heroines, rivalling the collective national legends of the freedom struggle. B. R. Ambedkar's anniversaries at Chatiyaboomi (Shivaji Park, Mumbai) have become a major national event, rivalling Gandhi's birth anniversary. If, for the present, the Supreme Court has suspended the opening of these parks and the statues in the Noida Park stand covered in black plastic (**Fig. 6**), they have nonetheless opened another chapter in national commemorations.

What does this battle over monuments and public symbols reflect? Clearly, this counter political culture reveals a determination by different political currents and regional governments, non-political bodies and intellectuals to recuperate local histories and visually and aesthetically record them in urban spaces. It proposes a new repertoire of symbols from a perspective that is less concerned with its national, Indian "origins" than with their specific local or group symbols. Judicial wars disregarding, these parks stand as a challenge to the state controlled models of commemorations. Gandhi might be the national icon but alternatives are coming quick and fast. Whilst they might be read as a democratization of the public space in which plural histories and multiple voices struggle for greater representation, the message of unity in diversity that the anti-colonial struggle and the Indian state has until now sought to install through secular symbols might be lost. If the Indian state has always been reluctant to broaden its repertoire of political symbols in order to develop a massive system of state commemorations, recent years have shown a growing recourse to political commemorations at a smaller scale. This use does not seek to establish a consensus but instead seeks to render visible multiple voices in the process of national construction. For the present it cannot be said if this implies the end of a unified Indian nation or indicates a step forward towards a further democratization.

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### **Appendice**

**A** : In response to the classic works of Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson, the discussions on national identity in India have generated a large number of works among whom P. C. Chatterjee, ed.

*Self-images, Identity and Nationality*, Simla, 1989; Sudipta Kaviraj, “The Imaginary Institution of India”, in Partha Chatterjee ed. *Subaltern Studies*, vol. vii, Delhi, 1992; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments. Colonial and Postcolonial histories*, 1st ed., Princeton University Press, 1993, Indian ed. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994; Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997.

**B** : Some works on regional and ethnic identities in India include Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in Sikh Tradition*, Delhi, 1994; Susanna B. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand*, New Delhi, 1992; Ramya Sreenivasan, *The Many Lives of a Rajput Queen: Heroic Past in India c. 1500–1900*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2007. On the national reworking of colonial and postcolonial Indian cities see Mary Elisabeth Hancock, *The politics of heritage from Madras to Chennai*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008; Sunil Khilnani, « India’s Theatres of Independence », *The Wilson Quarterly*, vol. 21, 1997, p. 16-45; Ravi Kalia, *Gandhinagar: Building national identity in postcolonial India*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2004.

**C** : Shivaji had conducted a prolonged war in the 17<sup>th</sup> century against the Mughal emperors. On his recuperation as a political symbol see Malavika Kartak, “Shivaji Maharaj: Growth of a Symbol”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, vol. 34, 1999, p. 1126-1134. Earlier studies include Richard I. Cashman, *The Myth of the Lokamanya: Tilak and Mass Politics in Maharashtra*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975, ch. 4; S. M. Michael, “The politicization of the Ganapati festival”, *Social Compass* 1986, XXXIII, 2-3, p. 185; Biswamoy Pati, “Nationalist Politics and the ‘Making’ of Bal Gangadhar Tilak”, *Social Scientist*, vol. 35, 2007, p. 52-66, esp. p. 56-58.

**D** : On the search and articulation of icons of patriotism and national sentiment since ancient times to colonisation see Jackie Assayag, *L’Inde: Désir de nation*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2001; Tanika Sarkar, “Nationalist Iconography: Image of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali literature”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 22, 1987, p. 2011-2015.

**E** : Arundhati Virmani, « The Burden of the Past ». L’uso politico della storia nell’India coloniale nel ventesimo secolo », *Storica*, n°22, 2002, p.102-133.

**F** : The mutiny by Indian soldiers sparked off on 10 May 1857 in Meerut, spreading from the Upper Gangetic plain to central India. It continues to interest successive generations of British, Indian and Pakistani historians with shifts in perspectives: as a key event in the transition from Company to Crown rule, as a decisive stage in the growth of national sentiment or Hindu-Muslim relations with the colonial government. Cf. Hugh Tinker, “1857 and 1957: The Mutiny and Modern India”, *International Affairs*, vol. 34, 1958, p. 57-65; The 1960s opened a tradition of regional studies that continues till today. For eg. Eric Stokes, “Rural Revolt in the Great Rebellion of 1857 in India: A study of the Saharanpur and Muzaffarnagar Districts”, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 12, 1969, p. 606-627; David Baker, “Colonial beginnings and the Indian Response: The Revolt of 1857-58 in Madhya Pradesh”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 1991, p. 511-543; Tapti Roy, “Visions of the Rebels: A study of 1857”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 1993, p. 205-228; Ramesh Rawat, “Perceptions of 1857”, *Social Scientist*, vol. 35, 2007, p. 15-28. A shift from the earlier caste, factional interpretations of rebel positions is made by Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt: 1857-1858: A study of Popular Resistance*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1984.

**G** : Nayanjot Lahri, “Commemorating and Remembering 1857: The Revolt in Delhi and its Afterlife”, *World Archaeology*, vol. 35, 2003, p. 35-60.

**H** : Stephen Heathorn, “Angel of Empire: The Cawnpore Memorial Well as a Site of Imperial Remembrance”, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 8, 2007,

**I** : Gandhi had already identified the spinning wheel (*charkha*) as a panacea of Indian poverty (*Hind*

*Swaraj*, 1908) but in fact the tool had long been lost sight of and forgotten. A determined search led to its re-discovery (in 1920) and its transfer from the domestic sphere to a political and national icon.

**J** : Robert Travers, “Death and the Nabob; Imperialism and Commemoration in Eighteenth century India”, *Past and Present*, n° 196, 2007, p. 83-124.

**K** : National Archives of India, New Delhi, Home Dept. Pol., File N° 53, 1923.

**L** : Nicholas Mansfield, “Radical Banners as Sites of Memory: The National Banner Survey”, p. 81-99 in Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *Contested Sites. Commemoration, Memorial and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, England, Ashgate, 2004.

**M** : The princely state of Travancore was the exception in this respect. In 1893 a statue of Madhava Rao, prime minister from 1857 to 1872, was erected in Trivandrum. It was the first statue of an Indian in South India. Cf. Robin Jeffrey, “What the statues tell: the politics of choosing symbols in Trivandrum”, *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 53, 1980, p. 484-502.

**N** : Ernest Gellner and Anthony D. Smith, « “The Nation: real or imagined?” The Warwick Debates on Nationalism », *Nations and Nationalism* 2, n. 3, 1996, p. 357-370.

**O** : For example, Jawaharlal Nehru, then prime minister, opposed President Rajendra Prasad attending the opening ceremony of the renovated Somnath temple, on the Western coast of Gujarat, dated to at least the 7<sup>th</sup> century and whose restoration began in 1947.

**P** : This sculpture in bronze by Deviprasad Roychoudhry represents seven young men who died trying to hoist the national flag. The statues were cast in Italy.

**Q** : In Belgaum, a five acre land and Rs 1.6 crore was sanctioned for the construction of a memorial for Gangadhar Deshpande at Hubli; *The Times of India*, 13 June, 2011, “Memorial for freedom fighter Deshpande”; The Shyamji Krishnavarma Memorial was built at Mandvi, (Kutch).

**R** : Founder of the regional party *Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagham* in 1972, M.G.R. Ramachandran was chief minister of Tamil Nadu from 1977 to 1987.

**S** : An alliance of Poligars from Tanjore, Palayamkottai and Kalayarkoil in Sivaganga ; The Vellore mutiny broke out after orders had been issued to the Madras Infantry to remove caste marks and beards, trim moustaches and wear new headgear with leather decorations.

**T** : The number of statues of Subhash Chandra Bose statues is on the increase. Following the first statue in Kolkata (at Shyambazar five point crossing) in 1970, statues have come up in Port Blair, Andaman-Nicobar in 2002, in Bengaluru, Karnataka in front of the Vidhan Sabha, in Presidency College, Kolkata in 2010, in Dharuhera ( Haryana) in 2011. Today, the number of cities bearing his statue includes Moirang, (Manipur), Sitpur, Chowpatty (Mumbai), Guntur (Andhra Pradesh), Marina beach (Chennai), Ajmer.

**U** : Demands for Tipu’s commemoration were initially regional: for example, B. Sheik Ali, *Tipu Sultan. A Study in Diplomacy and Confrontation*, Mysore, Geetha Book House, 1982. At the end of the 1990s, it was taken up by nationally recognized and well-established Marxist historians like Irfan Habib: cf. Irfan Habib ed., *Commemorating Seringapatam 1799. Confronting Colonialism. Resistance and Modernization under Haidar & Tipu Sultan*, New Delhi, Tulika, 1999; Irfan Habib, *State and Diplomacy under Tipu Sultan. Documents and Essays*, New Delhi, Tulika, 2001); Aniruddha Ray, *Tipu Sultan and his Age*, Calcutta, The Asiatic Society, 2002. This last collection of papers was the result of a seminar organized in Calcutta in 2000 by the West Bengal government to “commemorate” the bi-centenary of Tipu Sultan’s death. These works are inspired by historians who are both national and sensitive to regional or minority perspectives (Muslim, Bengali, South Indian...).

**V** : Badri Narayan, “National Past and Political Present”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, vol. 39,

2004, p. 3533-3540; Badri Narayan, *Women heroes and Dalit assertion in North India. Culture, Identity and Politics*, New Delhi, Sage, 2006.

**W** : Maurice Agulhon, “Esquisse pour une archéologie de la République. L’allégoire civique féminine”, *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 28, 1973, p. 5-34; “La statuomanie et histoire”, *Ethnologie française*, VIII, 1978, p. 145-172; *Marianne au combat. L’imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1789 à 1880*, Paris, Flammarion, 1979; “Nouveaux propos sur les statues de “grands homes” au XIX siècle”, *Romantisme*, vol. 28, n° 100, 1998, p. 11-16.

**Y** : Mint, 29 June, 2009. The Union home minister P. Chidambaram stated: “Of what use will be the statues in that state. The Rs 1000 crore will help wipe out poverty of thousands of people, provide basic amenities and education”; *Tehelka*, July 18, 2009.

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