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# On vernacular capitalist-iconic-democratic-neoliberal-concrete-territorial-automotive assemblages: *Gods in the Time of Democracy* by Kajri Jain

Between 1995 and 1997, anyone driving from the centre of Bangalore to its old airport would have passed a giant white statue of the Hindu god Shiva in his traditional seated pose, *rudraksha mala* (bead garland) and serpent around his neck and a *trishul* (trident) and *damaru* (drum) in two of his four hands. In 1997, the statue abruptly disappeared from drive-by view on HAL Airport Road, obscured by a white castle called Kemp Fort, complete with crenelations and blue and red turrets and festooned with images of characters such as Santa Claus and Barbie that would be recognisable to middle-class Indian children. Rebuilt in 2009 and renamed Kemp Fort Mall in 2014, the complex markets itself as a place ‘to shop, dine, play and even pray at the World’s Most Powerful Shiv Mandir (temple)’.<sup>1</sup> The site is the brainchild of Ravi Melwani, a businessman, philanthropist and self-styled ‘positive life philosopher’. Prior to this, the Melwani family were probably best known for their gigantic football-field-sized children’s clothing store – Kids Kemp – famed less for its merchandise than for the cartoon character mascots who greeted and entertained customers. (The ‘Kemp’ in the names of all the family businesses is an abbreviation of Kempegowda – the legendary founder of Bangalore, now Bengaluru – probably on account of the fact that an earlier store was located on Kempegowda Road.) As a child growing up in the Bangalore of the 1980s and 1990s, I was acutely attuned to the Melwani footprint in the city, not so much because I liked the clothes or the stores but because one of the younger members of the family was my nemesis in kindergarten. It was not till I read Kajri Jain’s *Gods in the Time of Democracy*, the cover of which features an image of the Shiva statue, that I understood the Kemp Fort

assemblage to be less the idiosyncratic vision of one neo-spiritualist entrepreneur and more a harbinger of the monumental statue form that has increasingly come to mark the Indian landscape.

Even as statues of figures associated with colonialism and slavery have come under attack in Western metropolises and their settler colonial outposts through the efforts of movements such as Rhodes Must Fall and Black Lives Matter, the monumental statue has enjoyed something of a resurgence in contemporary India. India currently boasts – and boasts of – the world’s tallest statue: the Statue of Unity is a 182-metre-tall likeness of the country’s first Home Minister, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, who is much lionised by the ruling Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for his role in arm-twisting hundreds of nominally independent kingdoms in the subcontinent to accede to newly independent India at the time of Partition. Its height promises to be surpassed by the 212-metre-high statue of the Maratha warrior king Shivaji being erected by the government of the west Indian state of Maharashtra, with several other potential usurpers also in the offing.

Jain’s book is perhaps the most theoretically sophisticated and historically informed account of this phenomenon to date. In a delightfully contrarian move, Jain insists on viewing the statue ‘not as a stable totality but as a field of moving forces, a matter of becoming as much as of being’ (p. 10).

I describe the big statue genre in terms of a vernacular capitalist iconic-democratic-neoliberal-concrete-territorial-automotive assemblage. This assemblage brings together a postcolonial socio-economic formation; a type of object/body/image; a political system; a dominant political ideology; the building material; relations to land; and a mode of transport tied to systems of manufacturing and infrastructure and, at another scale, to natural resources and geopolitics [...] all of these processes, to varying degrees and in different ways, are involved in the distributions and redistributions of the sensorium of caste and its hierarchical social ordering. (p. 12)

Jain situates monumental statues at the nexus of several genealogies. One of these, which she places under the sign of ‘democracy’, begins in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as the colonial state’s enumerative, taxonomic and representative structures attune the subcontinent’s various ‘communities’ to the politics of number. Central here is the struggle between caste Hindus for the retention of their supremacy and the achievement of numerical (and thereby political) dominance

by thwarting the desire of subordinate caste groups and Dalits (formerly, 'untouchables') for separate political representation, the abolition of caste and an ethical life outside Hinduism. As Jain explains, caste Hindu reform efforts manifested themselves in the field of iconopraxis by bringing Hindu idols out into public space during new community festivals, and by grudgingly permitting the entry of Dalits into new public temples (p. 84). Hitherto sequestered in the *sancta sanctorum* of temples, the restricted access to which was the source of Brahmins' priestly power, icons were made more accessible through the popularisation of community festivals such as Durga Puja in the east and Ganapati Utsav in the west (both of which involve the installation, worship and immersion of large temporary statues). From the 1930s onwards, public temples such as the Birla Mandir in New Delhi were theoretically open to members of all castes. Both moves employed the term 'sarvajanic' (literally: pertaining to all the people) to describe the audiences to which they were directed. Yet far from simply instituting an Indian nationalist version of the European bourgeois public sphere, as Jain explains,

participation in the sarvajanic [...] strategically *both* invokes the normative ideals of the Habermasian public sphere *and* departs from them: it slips between secular and devotional idioms; it is predicated on individual liberal subjecthood as well as collective affect and communal belonging; and it is enacted not only through reasoned debate but also through embodied, spatialized spectacles of self-presencing, often organized around a powerful or charismatic central figure. (p. 100)

Crucially, the sarvajanic was constituted on caste Hindu terms, excluding Muslims and seeking to expand the Hindu fold by accommodating subordinate caste and anti-caste formations such as Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism (embraced as belief systems originating on Indian soil) without dismantling the hierarchy of caste itself.

Unsurprisingly, non-Brahmins and Dalits resisted this hegemonic inclusion by forging counter-sarvajans of their own – a process in which iconopraxis remained central. Dalit icons were carried in processions in the 1920s and 1930s. Following his death in 1956, the foremost Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar, who is also remembered as the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, himself came to be treated by his followers as equivalent to a Hindu icon despite his critique of Hinduism and conversion to Buddhism (p. 108).<sup>2</sup> From the late 1960s, Dalit activists began installing Ambedkar statues across cities and towns in

north India. By 1997, the Dalit Bahujan Samaj Party had installed 15,000 statues of Ambedkar in the country's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh alone (p. 111). Ambedkar statues largely conform to a familiar idiom, typically portraying him as dressed in a Western suit, holding the Indian Constitution in one hand and pointing the way forward with the other. Occupying space in a social context in which segregation and exclusion from public space have longed marked the Dalit condition, the statues are powerful symbols of Dalit pride and assertion that also give Dalits a presence in time and history.<sup>3</sup> As Nicholas Jaoul has shown, the erection of an Ambedkar statue typically requires Dalit mobilisation, organisation and unity; the statues are often installed on communal land which Dalits have had to seize from landed dominant castes; and their official unveiling can help to forge useful links with Dalit elites in the state administrative apparatus.<sup>4</sup> More recently, the four-time Dalit Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati, has turbocharged this process – to the adulation of supporters and the abuse of opponents – with the inauguration of lavish memorials to Ambedkar and BSP founder Kanshi Ram in the state capital Lucknow.<sup>5</sup>

If groups that are radically at odds with one another nonetheless adopt recognisably similar iconographic strategies, Jain argues that this is because they are addressed 'not only to their own constituencies, but also simultaneously to all the others within a polity that recognize[s] itself as plural' (p. 102). Iconopraxis here is 'commensurative' in the sense that it strives for equal recognition with other groups within the terms of electoral democracy. But who is imitating whom? On this question, Jain is studiously ambivalent, suggesting that the mimesis goes both ways. Thus, when the atheist Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the political party of the non-Brahmin movement in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, erects a colossal statue of Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar at Kanyakumari in an apparent riposte to the Hindu Right's appropriation of this same spot for the memorialisation of its icon – the nineteenth-century Hindu 'warrior monk' Vivekananda – Jain compellingly argues that the DMK nonetheless works within Hindu canonical modes of representation. In memorialising the man credited with authorship of the Tirukkural (the classic Tamil text sometimes referred to as the 'Tamil Vedas'), it valorises the same kind of textual authority that is central to Brahmanical power. Moreover, the granite material of the statue evokes Tamil Nadu's stone temples and its height recalls that of the gopurams (entrance towers) that surmount them (p. 106). On the other hand, the virality of Dalit statue-building, which achieves scale through number in a way that arguably has no precursor or

parallel anywhere in the world, seems to have set off a Hindu iconographic reaction in the 1980s and 1990s that seeks supremacy through height.

It is at this temporal juncture in Jain's argument that a different set of processes enters the frame under the sign of 'cars and land'. The economic liberalisation of this moment unleashed new wealth in sectors such as construction, real estate and especially automobiles. Jain regards the automobile industry as 'arguably the single most powerful source of material, spatial, and temporal – and hence, sensible – transformation unleashed by India's economic liberalization' (p. 187). It is at this moment that the monumental statue enjoys a resurgence as almost the ideal art form for the India that is coming into being:

iconic statues and religious theme parks come – quite literally – into the picture as new media that are visible to mobile viewers from the cars and roads that open up space for construction on the urban peripheries and *between* urban concentrations – that is, at the frontiers of development. At this frontier, monumental statues and religious theme parks join technology and industrial 'parks'; fancy gated residential complexes; shoddy housing projects for those displaced from urban slums; gigantic malls with multiplex cinemas; private schools and hospitals; offices and hotels; spiritual and wellness complexes; sylvan wedding 'palaces'; memorials; ceremonial gateways, including gateways between towns and highways; leisure and amusement parks including 'eco-parks'; and, of course, yet more roads for the continuing deluge of cars. (p. 191)

The statue is more than a decorative object here, presiding as it does over the reallocation and resignification of land. Jain provides scores of examples of instances where the construction of statues assists in the process of territorial enclosure, transforming the rural into the peri-urban in aggressive real-estate and urban development schemes, the visible presence of Hindu gods reassuring potential settlers of the habitability of land previously read as wild (p. 194). Statues here are the advance guard of accumulation by dispossession. (The Statue of Unity might be the most spectacular instance of this phenomenon, but it has a different temporality. Overlooking the Sardar Sarovar Dam, a massive and hugely controversial hydroelectric project that has displaced over 200,000 people – most of whom are adivasis (indigenous) – the statue is a triumphant ratification rather than an anticipation of the developmental imaginaries inaugurated by the big statue genre.)

A key feature of Jain's overall argument is its seamless treatment of statues of avowedly religious and ostensibly secular figures. Both produce sites of tourism, leisure, hospitality and 'development' with all the attendant flows of capital that these promise, even as they draw on conventions of pilgrimage, patronage and philanthropy. Rather than categorising statues as religious or secular, Jain sees them as 'frontiers in the ongoing boundary work that constitutes the very categories of religious, secular, and art' (p. 16). This claim is a manifestation of a more general analytical interest running through the book in the constitution but also the blurring and conjoining of categories. Jain interrogates several dichotomies that structure contemporary social science theory, not so much to dismantle them as to attend to the circuits of exchange between them. Thus, the statue patrons she is most interested in emerge from the space of 'vernacular capitalism', a formation that straddles the categories of civil and political society; public and private are blurred in the notion of the *sarvajanik*; and against Walter Benjamin's famous claim that mechanical reproduction strips objects of the cultic value that derives from their sequestration and orients them toward public exhibition, Jain reads monumental statues as oscillating between cult objects whose aura derives from the sacredness of their location or association with relics and an exhibitionary character evident in the many ways in which they make themselves available for mass consumption.

Whatever else monumental statues might tell us about contemporary India, for Jain this is not given by their form. As she argues, 'no aesthetic form [...] is in and of itself inherently or permanently progressive or regressive, radical or reactionary. It is, rather, an assemblage of processes that can lend themselves to politics in multiple, often contradictory ways' (pp.255–6). Jain draws on Jacques Rancière's notion of politics to suggest that monumental statues can produce a 'redistribution of the sensible' through a disruption of the prevailing aesthetic-political consensus on what can be seen, heard, perceived and touched (p. 6). Against dominant caste critiques of Dalit statue-building as a distraction from putatively more pressing material concerns, she argues that such projects interrupt the distributions of the sensible through which Dalit oppression is perpetuated, forcing new forms of cognition that might be a prelude to political recognition and redistribution.

Mimesis is everywhere in these necessarily violent processes of redistribution. The book ends with a brief consideration of the proposed Statue of Equality, a 137-metre bronze statue of Ambedkar being constructed near the place of his cremation in 1956 in Mumbai; it will be the third-tallest statue in the world upon completion. Built on land occupied by a now defunct textile mill, Jain describes how the entirety of the

site was allocated for the purpose of constructing this memorial after Ambedkarite protesters broke into and occupied it on 6 December 2011, and installed icons of Buddha and Ambedkar inside the mill. Jain reminds us that 6 December is the anniversary of Ambedkar's death. She doesn't mention that it is also the anniversary of the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu fanatics in 1992, an act that was preceded – by several decades – by the installation of Hindu idols in the disputed mosque, which was alleged to have been built on the site of the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. There is no moral equivalence between the majoritarian violence of Hindus against Muslims and the subaltern assertion of Dalits. And yet, struggling towards radically different ends, political groups in contemporary India seem to share a common template for the (de)sacralisation of land even as they remain locked in a spiral of competitive iconic ascent.

## Notes

- 1 <https://kempfortmall.com/about.html>.
- 2 See also Johannes Beltz, 'The Making of a New Icon: B. R. Ambedkar's Visual Hagiography', *South Asian Studies*, 31:2 (2015), 254–65.
- 3 Melia Belli, 'Monumental Pride: Mayawati's Memorials in Lucknow', *Ars Orientalis*, 44 (2014), 86.
- 4 Nicolas Jaoul, 'Learning the Use of Symbolic Means: Dalits, Ambedkar Statues and the State in Uttar Pradesh', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 40:2 (2006), 195–6, 201.
- 5 For more on these, see Belli, 'Monumental Pride'; Maxine Loynd, 'Understanding the Bahujan Samaj Prerna Kendra: Space, Place and Political Mobilisation', *Asian Studies Review*, 33:4 (2009), 469–82.