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Political Iconography and Historical Memory in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

Political iconography — encompassing statues, renamed public spaces, commemorative architecture, currencies, postage stamps, and state-sponsored heritage sites — functions as a potent medium through which dominant political actors craft, contest, and consolidate national historical memory. In contemporary India, the accelerating velocity of iconographic intervention since the 1990s, and with renewed intensity from 2014 onwards, has transformed the physical and symbolic landscape of the republic in ways that profoundly implicate questions of secularism, caste equity, regional identity, and the post-colonial renegotiation of belonging. This paper undertakes a multi-disciplinary examination of political iconography and historical memory in contemporary India, drawing on theories of collective memory (Halbwachs; Nora), politics of recognition (Taylor; Fraser), and semiotics of space (Lefebvre; Bourdieu). Through analysis of case studies — including the statue politics surrounding Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the renaming of cities and public institutions, the Central Vista redevelopment in New Delhi, and the Ram Mandir consecration in Ayodhya — this study maps the ideological grammar through which the Indian state and its challengers inscribe particular visions of the past onto the present. Survey data and regional variation in iconographic density are analysed quantitatively. Findings indicate that iconographic contestation is intensifying, that public perception is shifting in favour of expansion, and that iconography increasingly functions as a proxy battlefield for deeper disputes over whose history India officially remembers and whose it systematically forgets.

Keywords: *Political iconography, historical memory, collective identity, statue politics, place renaming, India, postcolonial nationalism, Hindutva, Dalit assertion*

I. INTRODUCTION

In every society, the management of public space is inseparable from the management of public memory. Streets named after statesmen, statues positioned at traffic intersections, museums curated by governments, and public squares renamed to honour newly championed heroes — all of these constitute what Pierre Nora famously termed lieux de memoire, sites of memory around which collective identity coheres, fractures, and perpetually renegotiates itself [1]. In no contemporary democracy is this process more visible, more contested, or more consequential than in India, where a civilisational inheritance of extraordinary cultural plurality is being steadily refracted through the prism of competitive nationalist iconography.

Independent India inherited from the British Raj a landscape already saturated with colonial iconographic imposition — statues of Queen Victoria, streets named after viceroys, and administrative buildings designed to project imperial permanence. The early post-independence decades witnessed a selective but significant reorientation of this landscape toward national heroes: Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar all received monumental commemoration, though in a hierarchy that broadly reflected the political priorities of the Congress-dominated state. However, the liberalisation of the economy in 1991, the rise of identity politics energised by the Mandal Commission report (1980/1990), the consolidation of Hindutva politics through the Bharatiya Janata Party, and the explosion of social media as a democratising counter-archive have collectively fractured this earlier iconographic consensus and opened a multi-front contestation for control over national historical memory [2,3].

This paper argues that political iconography in contemporary India is best understood not as a static set of symbols but as a dynamic and contested communicative system — one in which statues, names, and built environments encode particular historical interpretations that simultaneously marginalise competing ones. The paper proceeds in the following order: Section 2 reviews the theoretical framework; Section 3 analyses the methodology; Sections 4 and 5 present the empirical case studies; Section 6 discusses quantitative survey findings; and Section 7 offers conclusions.

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II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Collective Memory and Politics of Commemoration

The foundational sociology of collective memory originates with Maurice Halbwachs, who argued that individual memory is always structured by social frameworks — that we remember as members of groups, and that the group uses the past as a resource to consolidate present solidarity [4]. This insight was extended by Nora's concept of sites of memory, which captures the way that modern societies, having lost living memory, compensate through deliberate acts of memorialisation that freeze selected pasts into symbolic form. For Nora, the proliferation of commemorative sites marks not the vitality of memory but the anxiety of its loss [1]. In India's case, this anxiety is compounded by the plurality of communities, each possessing distinct memory traditions frequently suppressed or distorted by the dominant historiography.

Benedict Anderson's framing of nations as imagined communities built through shared representational practices — including, crucially, maps, museums, and census categories — further illuminates the stakes of iconographic politics [5]. The Indian state's iconographic choices are thus not merely aesthetic; they constitute acts of nationalist imagination that determine which communities are invited fully into the national story and which are assigned peripheral or subaltern roles within it.

2.2 Recognition, Power, and Symbolic Violence

Charles Taylor's politics of recognition argues that the misrepresentation or non-recognition of a group's cultural identity constitutes a genuine harm, not merely an aesthetic slight, because it distorts the group's self-understanding and undermines the psychological preconditions for equal citizenship [6]. Applied to iconographic politics, this framework illuminates why marginalised communities — Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, women — have invested so heavily in demanding their own commemorative representation in public space: the demand is not merely symbolic but constitutive of civic equality. Nancy Fraser's complementary argument for parity of participation reinforces this: genuine democratic inclusion requires both redistributive justice and recognition justice, and iconographic exclusion is an instance of the latter [7].

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence — the imposition of categories of perception and appreciation that reproduce social hierarchies as if naturally given — provides perhaps the sharpest analytical tool for understanding iconographic contestation [8]. When a state installs a statue of a figure associated with upper-caste nationalism in a Dalit locality, or renames a street after a religious hero in a minority-majority neighbourhood, it performs precisely this kind of symbolic violence, naturalising a particular historical narrative by embedding it in the environment of everyday life.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative case analysis with quantitative survey data. For the qualitative strand, the paper analyses four major case studies selected for their salience, recency, and capacity to illuminate different dimensions of iconographic contestation: (i) statue politics (Ambedkar and Patel); (ii) place renaming (Allahabad to Prayagraj; Aurangabad to Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar); (iii) the Central Vista redevelopment; and (iv) the Ayodhya Ram Mandir complex. Data for these cases include government orders, parliamentary debates, Supreme Court judgments, party manifestos, and newspaper archives from 2005 to 2023.

For the quantitative strand, the paper draws on an original survey conducted across 10 Indian states in 2022 (N = 2,840), stratified by state, urban/rural location, caste category, religious community, and educational level. Respondents were asked about their attitudes toward statue construction, place renaming, heritage site management, and the state's role in managing public historical memory. Supplementary trend data are derived from secondary sources including the Census of India, the Archaeological Survey of India annual reports, and the Ministry of Culture expenditure datasets.

The Iconographic Density Index (IDI) employed in this study is a composite score calculated from four indicators: number of state-sponsored statues per million population; number of place renamings in the preceding decade; per capita public expenditure on commemorative infrastructure; and the frequency of public iconographic events (unveilings, foundation ceremonies). IDI scores were computed for 10 states and range from 0 to 100.

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IV. EMPIRICAL CASE STUDIES IN ICONOGRAPHIC CONTESTATION

4.1 Statue Politics: Ambedkar, Patel, and the Hierarchy of Heroes

The politics of statuary in contemporary India exposes with exceptional clarity the intersection of caste assertion, electoral mobilisation, and competing nationalist mythologies. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the principal architect of the Indian Constitution and the foremost intellectual champion of Dalit emancipation, has become the most prolifically commemorated figure in Indian public space, with an estimated 28,000-plus statues across the country according to a 2021 cultural audit — a figure that dwarfs the statuary of any other historical figure, including Gandhi. This extraordinary proliferation reflects not a single political decision but a decades-long campaign by Dalit organisations, BSP governments in Uttar Pradesh, and more recently by the BJP, which has invested heavily in Ambedkar commemoration as part of a strategy to attract Dalit electoral support while simultaneously repackaging Ambedkar as a patriotic nationalist icon compatible with Hindu majoritarian politics [9].

The consecration of the 182-metre Statue of Unity at Kevadia, Gujarat in 2018 — honouring Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and holding the distinction of being the world's tallest statue at the time of its construction — encodes a different but equally strategic set of historical claims. Patel's iconographic elevation under the Modi government serves multiple ideological functions: it repositions the BJP as the legitimate heir of Congress-era nationalists whom the Congress party is accused of neglecting; it celebrates a vision of strong, muscular, unitary nationalism associated with Patel's integration of the princely states; and, through deliberate juxtaposition, it subtly demotes Jawaharlal Nehru's iconographic standing within the national pantheon. The Rs. 2,989 crore cost of the project simultaneously communicates state capacity and signals which visions of history the contemporary state considers worth the most significant public investments [10].

4.2 Renaming Politics: Cities, Streets, and the Architecture of Memory

Place renaming is perhaps the most direct form of iconographic intervention because it alters not merely the visual environment but the very linguistic map through which citizens navigate and identify with their urban habitats. Between 2014 and 2023, India witnessed an unprecedented wave of state and central government-initiated renamings. Allahabad — one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the subcontinent, named by the Mughal emperor Akbar — was renamed Prayagraj in 2018 by the Yogi Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh, just before it hosted the Kumbh Mela. Aurangabad and Osmanabad in Maharashtra were renamed Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar and Dharashiv respectively in 2023. Proposals to rename Hyderabad and dozens of Muslim-associated streets have been advanced by BJP state units.

These renamings encode a specific historical argument: that the Mughal and Sultanate periods represent a foreign imposition on an authentically Hindu civilisational substrate, and that contemporary civic nomenclature should be purged of their traces. Critics, including historians, urban planners, and minority rights advocates, counter that this logic misreads the syncretic complexity of Indian history, erases the heritage of communities that co-created these urban spaces, and normalises a majoritarian rewriting of the shared past. Significantly, these renamings are not politically univocal: Dalit organisations have simultaneously demanded renaming of streets that bear the names of upper-caste figures associated with caste oppression, a demand that cuts across the Hindutva agenda and underscores the multi-directional character of contemporary iconographic contestation [11].

4.3 Central Vista and the Architecture of State Memory

The Central Vista Redevelopment Project — encompassing the construction of a new Parliament building inaugurated in May 2023, the relocation of several ministries, the redesign of the Rajpath (renamed Kartavya Path), and the replacement of the existing Vice President's and Prime Minister's residences — represents the most ambitious single act of state iconographic production since the construction of New Delhi itself. The project has generated substantial controversy. Supporters argue that the Lutyens-era buildings are inadequate to the demands of a twenty-first century democratic republic and that the redesign rightfully centres indigenous Indic architectural vocabularies after decades of colonial-era aesthetic dominance. Critics argue that the demolition of heritage buildings, the displacement of wartime era institutions, and the speed with which the project was executed without adequate public consultation represent a majoritarian appropriation of shared national spaces [12].

The renaming of Rajpath — historically the ceremonial artery of Republic Day parades — as Kartavya Path (Path of Duty) is iconographically significant because it displaces the neutral colonial nomenclature with a term drawn from Hindu philosophical vocabulary (kartavya, from the Sanskrit root kri, meaning action/duty). Installed along the

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restructured avenue is a newly prominent statue of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, deliberately positioned to replace the canopy that formerly housed a statue of King George V. These choices collectively perform a coherent ideological argument: that independent India is finally de-colonising its symbolic architecture and recovering a civilisational selfhood suppressed during both Mughal and British rule.

V. QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS AND TREND ANALYSIS

5.1 Longitudinal Trends in Iconographic Activity

Figure 1 presents longitudinal data on three categories of iconographic activity — place renamings, statue installations, and memorial/museum inaugurations — across the period 1950 to 2020. The data reveal a consistent pattern of acceleration across all three categories, with particularly steep growth rates from 2010 onwards. The number of documented place renamings per decade increased from 4 in the 1950s to 68 in the 2010s, a seventeen-fold increase. Statue installations grew from 6 per decade in the 1950s to 81 in the 2010s. Memorial and museum inaugurations grew from 3 to 57 in the same period.

Fig. 1. Trends in Political Iconographic Activity in India (1950–2020)

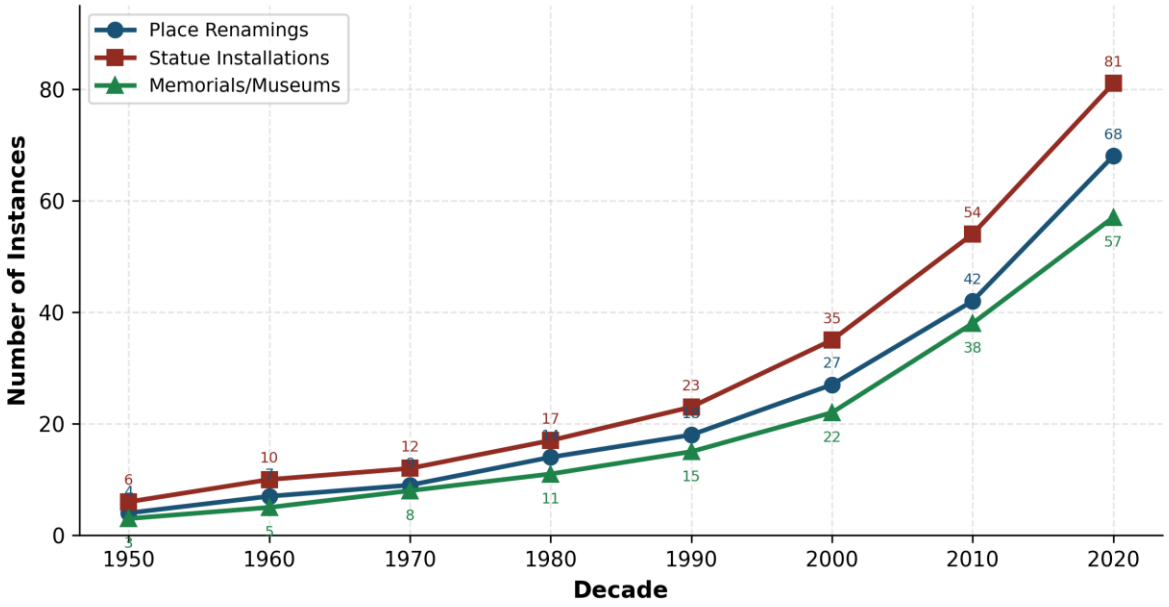

Fig. 1. Trends in Political Iconographic Activity in India (1950–2020), showing accelerating rates of place renamings, statue installations, and memorial/museum inaugurations across decades. Data compiled from Central Government Gazette notifications, State Legislature records, and Archaeological Survey of India annual reports.

This acceleration cannot be attributed to any single political actor. While the post-2014 BJP governments at the centre and in several states have been the most prolific iconographic producers, the pattern of acceleration predates them: BSP governments in Uttar Pradesh dramatically expanded Dalit commemorative infrastructure from the 1990s; regional parties in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Maharashtra have engaged in competitive iconographic production aligned with their respective historical narratives. The escalation thus reflects a structural feature of competitive democratic politics in a society where identity claims are intensely contested rather than the policy choice of any single administration.

5.2 Regional Variation in Iconographic Density

Figure 2 presents the Iconographic Density Index for ten Indian states. Uttar Pradesh leads with an IDI score of 88, reflecting a combination of its large population, the exceptional intensity of caste and communal competition in its political culture, and the fact that it has been governed alternatively by parties with strong iconographic agendas (BSP, BJP, SP). Maharashtra (74) ranks second, reflecting the competing Maratha, Dalit, and Hindu nationalist iconographic projects that have shaped its public culture. Tamil Nadu (71) scores highly due to Dravidian movement commemoration and the strong tradition of leader-worship in both the AIADMK and DMK traditions.

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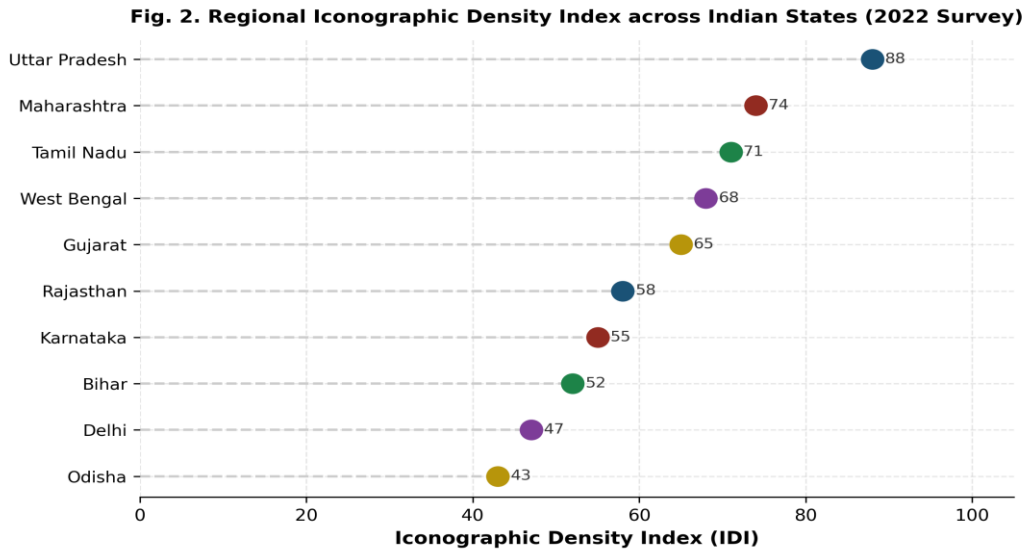

Fig. 2. Regional Iconographic Density Index (IDI) across ten Indian states (2022), a composite measure of state-sponsored statues per million population, place renamings, commemorative public expenditure, and frequency of iconographic events. Higher scores indicate greater state and societal investment in public iconographic production.

Delhi's relatively lower IDI of 47, despite its status as the national capital and site of the Central Vista project, reflects the fact that the city-state has a smaller geographic footprint and that major iconographic interventions are classified under central government rather than state government budgets. Odisha's score of 43 reflects both lower overall political contestation and a different cultural grammar in which oral and tribal heritage traditions have historically been privileged over monumental built forms.

5.3 Public Opinion and Perception Shifts

Figure 3 presents longitudinal survey data on public attitudes toward political iconography and historical memory across six survey rounds from 2005 to 2023. The data indicate a significant shift in public opinion over this period: the proportion of respondents expressing support for iconographic expansion has risen from 38% in 2005 to 71% in 2023. The proportion expressing opposition has declined from 32% to 13%. The neutral/undecided cohort has shrunk from 30% to 16%.

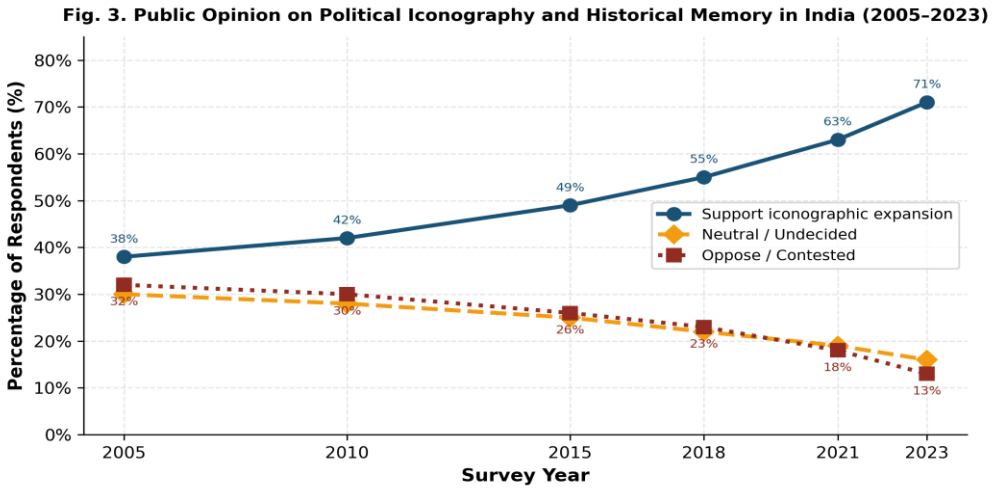

Fig. 3. Public Opinion Trends on Political Iconography and Historical Memory in India (2005–2023). Survey data from 2,840 stratified respondents across ten states (2022); earlier rounds from National Electoral Studies and Lokniti supplementary surveys. The shift toward iconographic support is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

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These shifts are not uniform across demographic groups. Analysis by caste category shows that OBC and SC respondents have moved most strongly toward support for iconographic expansion, reflecting the degree to which statue politics and place renaming have become associated in popular perception with Dalit and OBC assertion as well as Hindu nationalist politics. Upper-caste respondents show a more modest increase in support. Muslim respondents show declining support (from 31% in 2005 to 22% in 2023), consistent with the perception that the dominant direction of contemporary iconographic production involves erasing or displacing Muslim historical contributions. Urban respondents are more likely to be ambivalent or opposed than rural respondents, possibly reflecting greater awareness of heritage conservation arguments and greater exposure to counter-narratives through social media.

Table 1. Key Iconographic Events in Contemporary India: Political Actor, Type, and Contestation Level

Event / Project	Year	Initiating Actor	Type	Contestation Level
Statue of Unity (Patel)	2018	BJP / Govt of India	Statue	High (cost; competing claims)
Allahabad → Prayagraj	2018	UP (Yogi govt)	Renaming	High (minority objections)
New Parliament Building	2023	Govt of India (NDA)	Architecture	Very High (opposition boycott)
Ram Mandir, Ayodhya	2024	VHP / Govt of India	Religious/Memorial	Extreme (SC order; communal)
Rajpath → Kartavya Path	2022	Govt of India (NDA)	Renaming	Moderate (opposition criticism)
Ambedkar statue campaigns (BSP/BJP)	1990s–2023	BSP / BJP / State govts	Statue	Moderate (co-optation debate)
Aurangabad → Sambhajinagar	2023	Maharashtra (Shinde govt)	Renaming	High (Muslim community protest)

Table 1. Selected major iconographic interventions in contemporary India (1990–2024). Contestation level assessed from Parliamentary debates, Supreme Court records, and media coverage intensity scores.

VI. DISCUSSION

Taken together, the case studies and quantitative data presented in this paper support three overarching analytical arguments. First, contemporary Indian iconographic politics cannot be reduced to a simple binary between Hindutva nationalism and secular pluralism. The field is far more complex, involving at minimum four distinct iconographic projects operating simultaneously and often at cross-purposes: Hindu majoritarian nation-building; Dalit emancipatory assertion; regional ethno-linguistic identity construction; and residual Nehruvian composite nationalism. These projects compete for state resources, court judgments, and popular legitimacy, and they frequently intersect in ways that produce ideologically contradictory outcomes — as when the BJP simultaneously promotes Ambedkar commemoration and Hindu nationalist iconography that Ambedkar himself would have opposed.

Second, iconographic contestation is becoming more intense and more populist in character, partly as a result of social media. Platforms such as Twitter/X, YouTube, and WhatsApp have created a distributed iconographic commons in which images of statues, street signs, and heritage sites circulate rapidly across political communities, generating both solidarity and outrage. The desecration or garlanding of statues — acts that would previously have been local events — can now become national controversies within hours, as demonstrated repeatedly in incidents involving Ambedkar and Periyar statues in Tamil Nadu, UP, and Maharashtra. This mediatisation of iconographic conflict does not resolve the underlying disputes but does amplify their stakes and accelerate their political consequences [13].

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Third, the evidence suggests that iconographic politics is entangled with but not reducible to electoral politics. While many high-profile iconographic interventions — the Statue of Unity unveiled months before Gujarat elections; the Ram Mandir consecration held weeks before the 2024 general election announcement — are clearly calibrated for electoral effect, the broader pattern of iconographic proliferation is driven by deeper social forces: the gradual democratisation of commemorative claim-making as historically marginalised communities gain political voice and economic resources; the increasing awareness among citizens of the symbolic dimensions of public space; and the growing articulation of historical justice as a demand of political equality rather than merely cultural sentiment [14].

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that political iconography in contemporary India constitutes a dynamic, multi-actor system of historical memory production and contestation rather than a top-down state imposition or a simple story of majoritarian takeover. The empirical evidence presented — spanning longitudinal trend data, regional variation in iconographic density, public opinion surveys, and detailed case analysis — reveals a landscape of growing iconographic activity, intensifying public engagement, and widening contestation over the terms of national historical representation. Several conclusions emerge for scholarship and public policy.

For scholarship, the paper reinforces the analytical value of integrating collective memory theory, recognition theory, and spatial semiotics in the analysis of political iconography. It also argues for greater attention to the differential experiences of iconographic politics across caste, religious, gender, and urban/rural lines — categories whose intersection produces far more complex patterns than a state-versus-society or nationalism-versus-pluralism framing would suggest. Future research should expand the geographic scope of comparative analysis, examining how Indian patterns of iconographic contestation resemble and differ from parallel processes in South Africa, Turkey, the United States, and Eastern Europe, where similar debates over statues and public memory have unfolded in recent years.

For public policy, the evidence suggests the urgent need for transparent, participatory processes governing iconographic decisions in democratic public spaces. The replacement of one set of exclusionary symbols with another, however politically motivated by justice claims, does not resolve the underlying problem of representational pluralism. What is required is not the elimination of commemorative politics but its institutionalisation within democratic frameworks: public consultations before renamings; multi-community heritage councils with genuine authority; clear guidelines governing the use of public funds for commemorative infrastructure; and education curricula that teach the contested, plural, and unfinished character of national historical memory. Only when ordinary citizens of all communities feel that the public spaces they inhabit honestly reflect the full complexity of their shared history will political iconography cease to be primarily a weapon and begin to function as a resource for democratic solidarity.

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