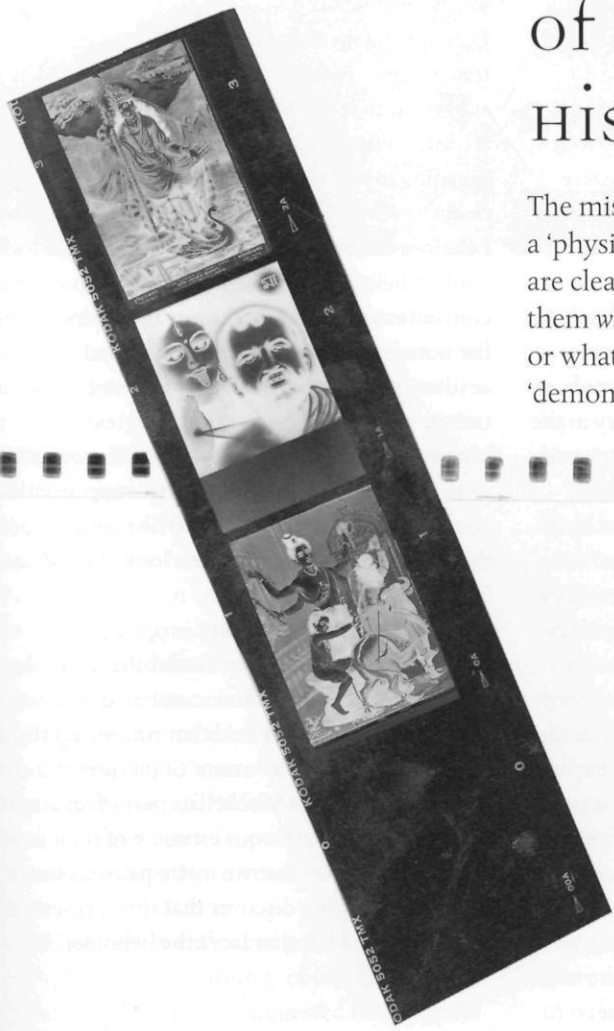


# introduction: The possibility of a visual History

The mishaps that can result from such a 'physiognomic' reading of artistic documents are clear enough. The historian reads into them *what he has already learned* by other means, or what he believes he knows, and wants to 'demonstrate'.<sup>1</sup>



Can one have a history of images that treats pictures as more than simply a reflection of something else, something more important happening elsewhere? Is it possible to envisage history as in part determined by struggles occurring at the level of the visual?

This is the central question I pursue in this study. Its specific focus is the production of chromolithographs within India from the late 1870s onwards. These pictures could easily be used to produce a narrative that conforms with what we already know about India, serving as evidence of what (as Carlo Ginzburg suggests) we have proved 'by other means'. What, however, if pictures have a different story to tell, what if – in their luxuriant proliferation – they were able to narrate to us a different story, one told, in part, on their own terms?

This is what I have struggled to achieve here: not a history of art, but a history made by art. The visuals in this study are not 'illustrations' of some other force, and it is not a history of pictures. Rather it is a study of how pictures were an integral element of history in the making.<sup>2</sup> Picasso told Getrude Stein in 1914 that it was Cubism (rather than the French Army) that had invented camouflage;<sup>3</sup> this book makes a similar claim for the relation between visual schemata and the wider social world in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century India. I try to make the case for visual culture as a key arena for the thinking out of politics and religion in modern India. Rather than visual culture as a mirror of conclusions established elsewhere, by other means, I try to present it as an experimental zone where new possibilities and new identities are forged. This is not an ordered laboratory with a single script: the reverse is true – divergent political, religious and commercial interests ensure a profound contingency to all outcomes. However, I hope to show that in this sometimes bewildering zone new narratives are established that may be quite disjunct from the familiar stories of a non-visual history. Two clear examples of this, examined in more detail later in the book, are the affective intensity of new nationalist landscapes (the actual 'look' of the emergent nation)

and the prominence of revolutionary terrorism in the popular imagination.

In trying to rearrange Indian history so that a central place can be found for the visual, I have found inspiration in Boris Groys's provocative account of the elision of the aesthetic with the social and political in mid-twentieth century Russia,<sup>4</sup> and also in recent writing by anthropologists of Melanesia. Scholars such as Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern have investigated the manner in which certain cultural practices treat images as compressed performances. They have suggested that, for Melanesians, images are not representations in the sense of a screen onto which meaning is projected. Rather, 'the experience [of an image's] effects is at once its meaning and its power'.<sup>5</sup> I explore the usefulness of this insight in an Indian context below. In so doing I also develop a critique of conventional approaches to aesthetics and argue for the notion of 'corporetics' – embodied, corporeal aesthetics – as opposed to 'disinterested' representation, which over-cerebralizes and textualizes the image. Conventional notions of aesthetics will not get us very far. Of much more use is an appreciation of the concern with images' efficacy. The relevant question then becomes not how images 'look', but what they can 'do'.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside the question of images' powers, we should also consider their 'needs': the technology of mass-picture production documented here was grounded in a cultural field that routinized these needs. Addressing the 'wants' of pictures is a strategy advanced by W. J. T. Mitchell as part of an attempt to 'refine and complicate our estimate of their power'.<sup>7</sup> Mitchell advocates that we invite pictures to speak to us, and in so doing discover that they present 'not just a surface, but a *face* that faces the beholder'.<sup>8</sup>

#### IMAGES, POLITICS AND HINDUISM

Within Hindu practice, the enormous stress on visuality endows a great range of images with extra-

# ROLLING WHEEL

WARNING: Flammable - Revolves on the ground clockwise and anti-clockwise - Light fuse with Sparkler and get away - Use Only under Adult Supervision - For Outdoor Use only.



SRI GANESHKUMAR FIRE WORKS, INDUSTRIES, SIVAKASI.

1 Firework packaging, printed in Sivakasi (1992). The prevalence of eyes in Indian popular imagery is a reflection of the importance of seeing, and being seen.

ordinary power. A key concept here is the notion of *darshan*, of 'seeing and being seen' by a deity, but which also connotes a whole range of ideas relating to 'insight', 'knowledge' and 'philosophy'. Its role at the centre of Indian Hindu scopic regimes will be referred to many times during this study. *Darshan's* mode of interaction (especially as practised by the rural consumers described in chapter 7) mobilizes vision as part of a unified human sensorium, and visual interaction can be physically transformative (illus. 1). Lawrence Babb has described how in various Hindu traditions 'seeing' is conceived of as an 'outward reaching' process: 'seeing itself is extrusive, a medium through which seer and seen come into contact, and, in a sense, blend and mix'.<sup>9</sup> More recently Arvind Rajagopal has made a similar point: 'one is "touched" by *darshan* and seeks it as a form of contact with the deity'.<sup>10</sup>

Visuality and other embodied practices have played a central role in the constitution of Indian public culture. Sandria Freitag has suggested that in India it was the religious and political procession that carved out a public sphere in colonial India.<sup>11</sup> To this performative realm we might add the much larger (mass-produced) visual field described in this book.

A practice that has privileged the power of the image and visually intense encounters, which have implicit within them the possibility of physical transformation, forms the backdrop against which a new kind of history has to be written.

Besides this central theme, there is a further thread that I hope runs clearly throughout this book. This concerns the relationship between religion and politics and its changing configuration. Recent writings on India have described a new popular religious-nationalistic imaginary as a product of a specific time and specific technologies. Many analysts have, for instance, stressed the ways in which South Asians have used new electronic media to circulate their vision of the political choices facing India. The narrative generated by such approaches has conjured an opposition between a threatening super-modernity and a Nehruvian modernity rooted in a commitment to a secular state. The story presented here complicates this narrative and suggests a much greater depth to what are often seen as recent struggles.

The juxtaposition of a series of painted episodes from the *Ramayan* with, at the bottom, the actors who portrayed Ram and Sita in the 1987 Doordarshan television serialization of this epic embodies this historical



2 Scenes from the *Ramayan* (c. 1995), colour print with photographic portrait of actors at the bottom. The 1987 television serialization of this great Hindu epic had a significant impact on the political culture of India.

interpenetration (illus. 2). This television broadcast is widely accepted as a key event (a 'flash point or moment of condensation') in India's movement towards the Hindu right, leaving in its wake a 'politics after television'.<sup>12</sup> What may seem an incongruous mismatch of media makes perfect sense to the consumer of this picture for whom the painted images sit happily with the televisual image. The *Doordarshan* serial's aesthetic, after all, was derived from that of chromolithography. Both the actors shown subsequently accepted Bharatiya Janata Party invitations to become involved in their campaign to build the *Ramjannabhami mandir* (temple of Ram's birthplace) on the site of the Babri *masjid* (mosque) in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh; Deepika, the actress who played Sita, became a BJP member of parliament. In December 1991 Hindu activists destroyed the Babri *masjid*. In the ensuing disturbances many hundreds of Indians died. The account presented here aims to give this complex and consequential entanglement of images and politics a (longer) history. It needs this history not to excuse, or create the alibi of *déjà vu*, but as the precondition of a correct prognosis.

During the colonial period politics and religion were conceptually titrated into separate domains, politics being placed under strict surveillance and religion conceptualized as autonomous. As Sandria Freitag puts it, the colonial state 'labeled issues related to religion, kinship, and other forms of community identity as apolitical – as private, special interest, and domestic and therefore not requiring the attention of the state and its institutions'.<sup>13</sup> Then, in large part because of the practice of colonial censorship and proscription, an authorized 'religion' became the vehicle for a fugitive politics. Indians were able to do things under the guise of 'religion' that they were not able to do in the name of 'politics'. But these two domains were now (to recall Adorno's phrase), 'torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up'.<sup>14</sup> Incapable of being recombined they were realigned in a new deadly form. Visual culture was perhaps the major vehicle for this reconfiguration.

## THE 'TOTAL ART' OF HINDUISM?

This book also seeks to explore the idea of a 'total art' – the collapse of the social into the aesthetic – in the context of modern Indian history. This is a perspective recently advanced by scholars of the former Soviet states, such as Boris Groys, Vladislav Todorov and Alla Efimova, who have stressed the central role of the aesthetic in sustaining the Soviet era: communist regimes created 'ecstatic aesthetic environment[s] – grandiose marches, parades and mass campaigns . . . a kind of libidinal stimulation, an abundance of affect . . .'.<sup>15</sup>

The Groys model, however, presupposes the existence of a totalitarian state in which elites are able to impose their vision in all areas of practice.<sup>16</sup> This could not be further from the experience of India in which certain characteristics of the colonial state engendered a tenacious gulf between the mass of the population and the political elite. Ranajit Guha has argued that there was 'a structural split' between the elite and subaltern domains of politics: 'vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people' remained unknown and unknowable to the elite.<sup>17</sup>

One manifestation of this was the distance between elite secular forms of nationalism and a popular messianism. The contrast with the Stalinist Soviet Union is clear. Rather than a skilled elite sweeping everything before it, in India the elite was confronted with a population that it largely failed to recognize or understand. The 'total art' of Hindu India is thus not as 'total' as the aesthetic presented by Groys.

The political effectiveness of images was in large part the result of their ubiquity. The scale of consumption was equally important to the nature of what is consumed, for the performative reunification of the fragmented signs of the nation occurred untold hundreds of millions of times through the repetitive gestures of the devotee facing his domestic chromolithographs, and through that same individual's awareness that around him numerous other citizens-

in-the-making also possessed images coded in the same style.

In certain respects there are parallels between what Benedict Anderson terms 'print capitalism' and the genre of images I have been considering here. Both are involved in the construction of public spaces and arenas of consciousness that are intimately linked to 'nationalism' and both create a sense of commonality through a reflexive awareness of the collective enterprise of worshipping gods and affirming political leaders. Many of the functions borne by print in Anderson's account are assumed by mass-disseminated images in India. And yet the fundamental differences are striking.

Although no causal connection is suggested, Anderson notes that in Western Europe the imagined communities that are nations appear historically at a time when religion is waning: 'the eighteenth century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought'.<sup>18</sup> He argues that nationalism emerges, firstly, from the decomposition of great sacral cultures bound together by eternal sacred languages whose signifiers were God-given, rather than arbitrary, and secondly through the decomposition of kingly rule in which dynasties were set apart through their claim to divine priority.

These changes occur against a, perhaps even more significant, background of a new temporal order in which what Walter Benjamin termed 'Messianic time' (a simultaneity of past and future and in an instantaneous present) gives way to a new notion of an 'homogenous, empty time'.<sup>19</sup> It is this 'more than anything else', Anderson claims, that made it possible to "think" the nation.<sup>20</sup>

Anderson concludes that 'the very possibility of imagining the nation only arose historically when, and where [the belief in the privileged status of certain script languages, the divine power of kings and the collapsing of cosmology into history] all of great antiquity, lost their axiomatic grip on men's minds'.<sup>21</sup> Although it is *European* disenchantment that is described here, it is this which provides 'modular'

packages of nationalist aspiration and which by the second decade of the nineteenth century had become 'a "model" of "the" independent national state . . . available for pirating'.<sup>22</sup> And, although Anderson has subsequently sought to distance anti-colonial Asian and African nationalism from the 'modular' European form, he still roots the success of such nationalism in totalizing appropriations of the 'census, map and museum'. He notes that 'the intelligentsias found ways to bypass print in propagating the imagined community'<sup>23</sup> and cites the example of mass-produced prints distributed to primary schools by the Indonesian Ministry of Education, some of which represented Borobudur in the guise of an archaeological theme-park, effaced of the Buddhist sculpture that encrusts the site and devoid of any human figures.<sup>24</sup> For Anderson they are messages sent downwards by the state to the masses: Borobudur as state regalia or logo, disseminated to every school.

The contrast with the images examined here is instructive: Anderson's images are vehicles of a totalizing bureaucratic certainty; the Hindu images are expressive of much more locally based cosmologies.<sup>25</sup> In this popular Indian domain, time was still messianic, scripts had indexical and non-arbitrary power and kings were – in many cases – at the centre of the moral and ritual universe.

This decentralization and diversity is another central theme of the book. The images described here were created for a number of reasons: political, commercial and devotional. Further, they mobilize a number of very different styles whose emergence, growth and attenuation I will trace historically. The erasure of this diversity under labels such as 'calendar art', together with a general dehistoricization, make it easier to link these forms with general propositions about the cultural context that produces it. By contrast, a nuanced history of these images complicates, and in some cases destroys, many of these easy propositions. Simultaneously, however, different kinds of relationship between images and social reality will become apparent.