8 what pictures want now: rural consumers of images, 1980-2000

It was the insistence by village friends, during my first research in India in the early 1980s, that I must attend to the needs of various printed images in my possession of deities that first alerted me to the significance and complexity of Hindu chromolithographs. Their concern awoke an interest that led me back to India on many occasions and to some of the fruits presented in this book. The perceived demands made by images in that Madhya Pradesh village, and in a nearby industrial town, is one of the central concerns of this chapter. This is a very particular slice of contemporary India and the information presented in this chapter is, almost certainly, radically different from what one would encounter if one was studying image practices in an elite south Delhi suburb, or a Scheduled Caste neighbourhood in a large Maharashtrian city. It is not intended to represent all of modern India. It is as yet, however, the only detailed ethnographic investigation into the use of these images anywhere in India.

A BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHY

The name of the village is Bhatisuda, located on the Malwa plateau in Madhya Pradesh, roughly halfway between Bombay and Delhi. Chromolithographs are popular across all castes and religious groups. Jains and Muslims own images as well as Hindus, and Scheduled Caste Chamars and (warrior) Rajputs or (priestly) Brahmans own similar numbers of images. (Across the village as whole there is an average of seven images per household.)[1]

Bhatisuda's population is spread through 21 castes, and although village income is still overwhelmingly derived from agriculture (the main crops being maize, sorghum and wheat), the presence of the largest viscose rayon factory in Asia a mere 6 kilometres away in the town of Nagda has had an enormous impact on the economic fortunes of landless labourers, and has structured local discourses on history and the nature of progress. The village cosmology reflects the nature of popular Hinduism in this area and there are temples and shrines to the main gods: Ram, Hanuman, Krishna, Shiv, Ganesh, Shitala; and also to local deities: Tejaji, Ramdevji, Jhujhar Maharaj, Bihari Mata, Lal Mata, Rogiya Devi, Nag Maharaj and many more.

In 1991 (the date of the most recently available census figures), 531 of the total population of 1,366 were members of the Scheduled Castes (Bagdi, Bargunda, Chamar, Bhangi).[2] By far the largest single landholding group are Rajputs (owning 37 per cent of village land) but the 'dominant caste' is a very small number of Jains, descendants of the last zamindar who administered the village in the final years of the village's existence within the princely Gwalior State. It is the Jains – ex-urbanites now returning to city life – who own the best agricultural land (although only 8.5 per cent), have for long dominated the village council (the *panchayat*) and continue to exert a pervasive influence over the central public space of the village.

The horizontal and vertical arrangement of the village encodes a symbolic separation and hierarchization of the diverse caste (*jati*) groupings that make up Bhatisuda. Higher caste households are predominantly built on higher ground in the centre of the village and most Scheduled Castes live in caste-specific neighbourhoods (*mohallas*) on the south side of the village. Among Scheduled Caste groups, Chamars live nearest the village in compact groups of small huts, and Bagdis inhabit a more dispersed *mohalla*, which forms a spur spreading from the village down towards the River Chambal.

Approximately one third of the images are 'framing pictures', chromolithographs printed on thin paper, which have been framed by a local supplier. Most will have been purchased ready framed, although some will have been bought as prints and then framed subsequently. About another third are unframed paper prints; most of these are large glossy laminated prints (20 x 30 inches), which are pinned or sometimes pasted to walls (illus. 146). The remaining pictures consist of a mixture of images printed directly on glass, engraved in aluminium, embossed on plastic, or are ephemera featuring deities (such as the packaging for incense

146 Bherulal Ravidas in front of his domestic images, including one of Ravidas. 1994.

sticks), postcards, stickers or, in a few cases, sheets of multiple images pirated and distributed free as part of a local newspaper. The interior of the house belonging to Biharilal, a Banjara[3] villager, gives a good idea of the rich mix of different media to be found on the walls of most village homes (illus. 147). Sometimes postcards are displayed inside elaborate small glass temples, which have been made specially for this purpose. There is a further class of images, which I have not attempted to document systematically, worn on the body in the form of engraved small silver or bronze amulets, or laminated necklaces and wristbands.

The oldest images are owned by a Brahman family (Basantilal's) and probably date from the late 1940s,

147 Images displayed inside Biharilal Banjara's house. 1993.

about the same date as the oldest photograph, which is owned by a Jain family and represents Khubchand the Jain zamindar.[4] As we shall see, the majority of images are of much more recent provenance and some households replace all their images each year during the festival of Divali.

The figure of (on average) seven images per household conceals both regularities and disjunctions in the ownership and use of images. Most strikingly there are some strong similarities between *jatis* at opposite ends of the caste hierarchy. For instance, the figures for (high-status) Rajputs and (Scheduled Caste) Chamars who, together with Scheduled Caste Bagdis, form by far the largest groups in the village demonstrate an uncanny similarity in the average numbers of images owned. Conversely, one could juxtapose other castes where sample households exhibited dramatically different numbers of images displayed, but it would be difficult to relate this in any way to caste or economic hierarchy. There are, however, (and this is not a surprise) certain patterns of deity choice that are clearly caste specific.

There are thus regularities in caste ownership. The averages, however, mask a huge divergence in the images owned by individual households. To give just one example, the average of three images owned by Mukati (high-status agriculturalists) households is the average of all the five households in the village, which individually owned zero, two, two, three, and eight images respectively. I am tempted to claim that the unpredictability of image ownership demonstrates the purely personal factors that dictate distribution between households. I found myself completely unable to predict the numbers of images that might be concealed behind the wooden doors of the mud houses of which Bhatisuda is almost exclusively comprised. The devotionalism, or questioning irascibility, of villagers was no guide to the number of images they might display within their homes.

Chromolithographs assume a specific importance for Scheduled Caste members who, in Bhatisuda as in

many other Indian villages, are still prevented from entering village temples. Although many Scheduled Castes have their own caste specific shrines (*autla*, *sthanak*) they are generally unable to enter village temples to the main gods. The data from my village survey records a democracy of the printed image in which Scheduled Castes, denied access to most village temples, are able to control their own personal pantheon. Some isolated Scheduled Caste households, such as Bhangi and Bargunda, pursue this strategy with particular enthusiasm.

Deities accessible to all castes – meat-eating as well as higher caste vegetarians – are often described as *sarvjanik* (universal, common, public). Chromolithography makes vegetarian deities accessible to Untouchables but only in the realm of the home. These mass-produced images permit a new *sarvjanik* ritual practice but only in the private sphere. The public sphere remains hierarchically exclusive but in ways, as we shall see, that are increasingly tenuous.

'Clean' castes may enter temple precincts but Scheduled Castes are required to squat outside, at some distance. Channu and Lila Mehta, the village Bhangis,[5] were quite explicit that it is this denial that necessitates their domestic engagement with the gods through chromolithographs. Confirming that her family was still unable to enter most of the village temples, Lila remarked, 'for this reason we have made a temple inside our house'.

Channu and Lila Mehta live in a low mud house on the eastern periphery of Bhatisuda, overlooking a steep gully that drops down to a Chamar neighbourhood. The most striking feature inside the house is a small black and white television, a gift from one of Channu's brothers, who lives in Nagda. To the right of this, two-thirds of the way up the wall, is a display (sometimes, but not always, referred to as a *jhanki*) of fifteen assorted images, together with a few clay *murtis* (three-dimensional images). In the sort of arrangement common in the village, lines of images are displayed above and below wooden shelves bearing an assortment of three-dimensional images, colourful

decorations and steel cups. Among Channu and Lila's display there are large laminated prints depicting Lakshmi and Ganesh, Arjun, Ram, Sita and Lakshman, a large black *Shivling*, and various images of Lakshmi showering wealth from the palms of her hands. There are also two framed prints of Ramdevji (see chapter 7) and the Krishnalila, a large glittered image of Satyanarayan in a wooden shrine-like structure, and a mirrored glass panel depicting the local Krishna incarnation Samvaliyaji. The *jhanki* is completed by a couple of postcards of Shiv and the Buddha and paper prints of Durga and Shiv, plaster images of Ganesh and Shiv, two women with their hands folded in a welcoming *namaste*, a couple of mirrors, some peacocks, tinsel and sundry other plastic decoration, together with a flock of green plaster parrots of the sort that are often sold at local fairs.

With the exception of the glass mirrored image these were all purchased in Nagda, the nearby town, where there are two shops and a stall specializing in 'framing prints'; before the festival of Divali these are supplemented by about a dozen small stalls and itinerant tradespersons selling religious images. Most of Channu and Lila's images were purchased on successive years just before Divali, and this was reflected in the predominance of images of the goddess Lakshmi who is worshipped during this festival, which marks the start of the financial year.

The glass mirrored image depicts Samvaliyaji, Avari Mata and Bhadva Mata, who are the subject of a recently flourishing cult in Mandsaur District. Channu and Lila had visited their main pilgrimage temples several years ago and purchased the image from a stall there. At Samvaliyaji, and also at Pavargadh in Gujarat, which they had recently visited, Channu and Lila's *madhyam* (low)[6] *jati* and *uttam* (high) *jatis* are indistinguishable, for here there is no *chhuachhut* (untouchability) or *bhed bhav* (hierarchy).

Lila's testimony clearly marked out pilgrimage as an egalitarian activity, not only because many *tirth* (i.e. pilgrimage) sites operate in liminal, relatively caste-free spaces, but also because the dislocations of

travel and the anonymity of the crowd nullifies any attempt at the sort of *jati* identity that is so entrenched and enforceable in a stable village community. In view of this it is not surprising that a substantial minority (18 per cent) of all the images in the survey households were purchased at pilgrimage sites and depict deities associated with those.

The connection between pilgrimage and image ownership is also apparent in the case of Biharilal Banjara, a man I first knew when he worked as a bonded labourer for one of the Jain families in 1982. Since then he has been employed in the factory and succeeded in securing the post of village chowkidar (watchman). Despite their status in Madhya Pradesh as a Scheduled Tribe, Banjaras – like Bagdis – have a rather anomalous status in the Bhatisuda *jati* hierarchy. As a result Banjaras, although they live right next to the Bhangi, are permitted to use the *uttam* well, that is the well normally reserved for the use of higher status *jatis*.

In his single-roomed house, Bihari displayed a profusion of images including a large framed and garlanded Kali, a framed Sharma Picture Publications Satyanarayan, sheets of miniature film posters, two pieces of incense-stick firework packaging depicting Shiv and various framed photographs (illus. 147).[7] The largest and most impressive image, however, was the central Ramdevji image, placed above a small alcove in which Bihari regularly lit a sacrificial fire (*havan*) and purchased on pilgrimage to Ramdevra in Rajasthan a few years earlier. This was a Sharma Picture Publications image, *Ramdevji ka Jivan Lila*, which the Ramdevra vendor had placed in a mirrored frame.

Some households have no, or very few, images. Perhaps the most extreme example was Bherulal Kachrulal, a Chamar who lives in a house built by the side of a *nulla* (ditch) behind the Bhangi house. Abutting onto his front wall is a small stone marking the presence of a goddess, known variously as Khokha Mata and Bhukhi Devi, who is adept at eradicating phlegm in young children and effecting general cures. The only image he kept in his house

was a tiny studio portrait of his late father Kachruji,[8] who had worked as a bonded labourer for one of the Jain families. Bherulal had no images of gods. He had thrown out Kachruji's old pictures and had been unable to replace them because his mother had been ill. Bherulal had casually thrown these old images into the *nulla*: this was an act expressive of his frustration and disgust and was the sole contravention I encountered of a powerful consensus concerning the proper disposal of images. Several households, including Rup Singh's, owned only one image. In his case it was a brand new print by the Madras company J. B. Khanna of the goddess Lakshmi, whose worship during the festival of Divali is a route to prosperity (illus. 148).

The majority of households lie between these extremes. The most popular images are, as one would expect, of Lakshmi. Most of these are of a single standing figure of the goddess, the most obvious enduring trace of the early presses described in the earlier chapters of this book. Although Lakshmi *puja* finds its most extravagant manifestation in the practices of urban merchant castes, who inaugurate new ledger books and go to elaborate lengths to ensure the goddess's presence during the coming financial year, nearly all village households observe Lakshmi *puja* on (or one or two days before) Divali.

148 Rup Singh's only image: a small framed J. B. Khanna Lakshmi.

The second most popular class of images are depictions of Shiv, either on his own or with other members of his family (i.e. Parvati and Ganesh). There were 78 images of Shiv, including that on a large calendar displayed in the *puja* room of one of the Jain households (illus. 149). Also visible at the bottom left is a Sharma Picture Publications *Divali Pujan* and at the top left of the Shiv calendar is a glass mirrored image of Samvaliyaji, whose image is the third most commonly to be found in the village.

All of the 62 Samvaliyaji images in Bhatisuda were printed on plain or mirrored glass. None of them was printed on paper or could technically be termed a 'chromolithograph'. Samvaliyaji is described as an avatar of Krishna (who in turn is an avatar of Vishnu) and lies at the centre of an efficacious local cult that has recently mushroomed: all the images documented

during a major survey of village images in 1993/4 were brought back from pilgrimages within the last ten years to the Samvalayaji temple near Neemuch on the Madhya Pradesh/Rajasthan border.

Most of the Bhatisuda Samvaliyaji images depict him either seated alone on a throne, or with two associated goddesses, Avari and Mahamaya Bhadva Mata, or at the centre of a larger number of other deities (Avari, Bhadva, Lakshmi, Shani Maharaj, Amba, Krishna with Vasudev, Hanuman, Ramdev and Ganesh). Only one image among the 62 relates the 'proofs' or 'tests' (*parche*) of Samvaliyaji. This is owned by Hariram Ravidas (a Chamar) and depicts a Gujar man named Bholi Ramji, tending his cows (*gay charane*) and having a vision of the God. In addition the miraculous effects of faith in Samvaliyaji are depicted and one can see in particularly explicit form a

149 Puja room in Prakash Jain's house. Hindu images co-exist with images of Jain *tirthankars* and renouncers.

pragmatic strategy to be found within popular Hinduism: poor men are turned into rich men (*garib ko dhanvan banaya*) and dry crops are made green (*sukhi phasal ko hari banai*). Samvaliyaji can also confer immunity from an oppressive state: Bholi Ramji is shown being interrogated by two policemen who suspected he had grown opium (illus. 150). When they looked in the large barrel depicted they found that the illegal crop, which is widely grown in this part of Madhya Pradesh, had been transformed into jaggery (*aphim ka gud banaya*).

There are also striking absences in the images to be found in the village. Perhaps most remarkable is the almost complete lack of political imagery in the village. Two calendars (depicting Shivaji and Rana Pratap Singh, and Bhagat Singh, Chandra Shekhar Azad and others) in the house of a Rajput, Madan Singh, were the only political images I encountered (illus. 151). We have seen in the previous chapter that historical political images constitute a large element of the major picture publisher's output and its absence in this rural realm is intriguing. Less surprising, but worth commenting on, was the complete absence of images of the Scheduled Caste political icon B. R. Ambedkar (1893–1956). The key historical figure of Dalit self-assertion, his image is seemingly

151 Madan Singh's display of political imagery. 1994.

omnipresent in parts of western India, and in Scheduled Caste wards in urban settlements throughout north India (illus. 152). But in Bhatisuda he is completely invisible.[9]

Equally interesting is the paucity of images of Santoshi Ma, the *filmi* goddess: in Bhatisuda there were only six images of her. Santoshi Ma was famously 'created' by the popular, low-budget, mythological film *Jai Santoshi Ma* (see chapter 7). This was released in 1975 and is still shown regularly in cinemas in Nagda, the nearby town. One striking aspect of the film, well analysed by Lawrence Babb,[10] was the intense visual engagement between the goddess and Satyawadi, the central figure, which the cinematography captured in a particularly compelling manner (see below). Prior to the release of the film there were few documented Santoshi Ma shrines; subsequently many thousands appeared.

In relation to the ownership of images by different castes there are two contradictory and striking patterns that must be immediately highlighted. The first of these is the overall similarity of deity choice by different *jatis*. There are no remarkable disjunctions in image ownership and, *ipso facto*, ritual practice. The most popular deities are so across a wide range of castes.

However, the pattern is by no means homogenous. Despite the problems inherent in using such a small sample there are differences in deity ownership that

150 Samvaliyaji turns a farmer's opium into jaggery when the police arrive. Detail of a Samvaliyaji image.

152 K. P. Siwam, *Babasaheb Ambedkar, c.* 1990. An image with India-wide circulation, but not to be found in Bhatisuda.

highlight differences of emphasis in ritual practice. For instance, there are almost twice as many images of Lakshmi in Rajput households than in the similarly sized Chamar household sample group. By contrast there are more Samvaliyaji images among Chamar households than among Rajputs. While there is no question of exclusivity there is evidence here of different, *jati*-determined, choices between mainstream mass-produced deities. Rajputs are more likely to seek *barkat* (see below for discussion of this key concept) through the longer established and more orthodox conduit of Lakshmi; Chamars are more likely to seek their *barkat* through the less orthodox Samvaliyaji.

Even clearer divergent strategies are evident in the ownership of deities standing on the periphery of the mass-produced pantheon, which are frequently very closely related to caste-specific pilgrimage networks.

This divergence on the margins is most evident in the case of three figures associated with Chamars. The first of these is Ravidas, a caste-specific guru whose five images are exclusively, as one would expect, owned by Chamars. As elsewhere in north and central India, most Bhatisuda Chamars describe themselves as 'Ravidasi' rather than 'Chamar'. All the various images of Ravidas show him making shoes (the traditional caste occupation of Chamars) and it would be inconceivable for a non-Chamar to want to purchase and display such an image.

The Ravidas image owned by Bherulal, which is pasted to an exterior wall in the courtyard of his house along with other images (see illus. 146), depicts Ravidas (at the top centre of the large image at the top right) cutting his chest open to reveal a sacred thread, proof of his Brahman status in an earlier life. This action can be seen much more clearly in a contemporaneous calendar (illus. 154) and reflects a position associated with a text known as the *Bhaktamala* (Garland of Devotion). Ravidas displayed powers that rivalled those of Brahmans. The question for the reactionary *Bhaktamala* is how, as a Chamar, he was able to do this. Elsewhere in India, urban Chamar intellectuals argue that this reflected his asceticism: 'He is the ultimate

Indian representation of the triumph of spirit over the physical body, and of the perfect "unbounded" ascetic.'[11] The *Bhaktamala*, on the other hand, reasserts the prevailing order: Ravidas was able to act like a Brahman because 'really' he was a Brahman. The original Brahman Ravidas had mistakenly offered polluted food[12] to a deity and was consequently reborn as a Chamar; when asked to explain how he was able to perform his miraculous deeds he cut open his chest and revealed the Brahmanic sacred thread of his earlier identity. He was not 'really' a Chamar. These competing narratives were the subject of fierce contestation by the Lucknow Chamar intellectuals among whom R. S. Khare worked. Bhatisuda Chamars do not take an oppositional stance on this but do dispute caste hierarchies in many other ways.

The second figure is Ramdevji (see chapter 7) of whom there were 33 images in the village. Five of these were to be found in Rajput households, to whom the figure of a Rajput king appeals. Small numbers of images were also to be found in Brahman, Gujar and Banjara households, but it is in Chamar homes – where there are 13 – that the largest number of Ramdevji pictures can be found (illus. 153). Although it is frequently claimed that figures like Ramdevji are believed by all castes (for they are true *devs* and *devatas*),

153 Naggu Ravidas and baby son with an ornately decorated Sharma Picture Publications *Ramdevji ki Samadhi*.

it is simultaneously acknowledged that Chamars have a greater belief in Ramdevji (*chamar zyada mante*). The clearly articulated reason for this is Ramdevji's egalitarianism and opposition to caste inequality and Untouchability, made explicitly clear in the narrative associated with him. One booklet of songs (*bhajans*) in praise of Ramdevji, printed in Ajmer but purchased in Nagda, includes the observation that 'in this middle period Shri Ramdevji Maharaja performed in these discourses and this path what Mahatma Gandhi did in the twentieth century'.[13]

The third case is the Gujarati pilgrimage site at Pavagadh, the location of a powerful shrine to the goddess of smallpox, Shitala. Twelve out of the eighteen images to be found in Bhatisuda are in Chamar homes, and once again this should come as no surprise since Shitala is associated with the village's Chamars.[14] The most obvious connection is through the activities of Kannaji, a Chamar medium (*bhopa*) who regularly assumes the form of Shitala and maintains a regionally renowned *autla* or shrine to the goddess in the Chamar area of Bhatisuda. Shitala functions here, as elsewhere, as a specific mani- festation of a much wider alliance between Scheduled Castes and powerful peripheral goddesses.

This relationship is also borne out in the data on the distribution of the goddesses Kali, Durga and Amba. Kali is a hot and uncontained goddess and in Nagda those roadside restaurants that serve meat are immediately recognizable by the presence of images of Kali. These are also on display in the Nagda liquor shop, while the largest Kali image in Bhatisuda (purchased at the huge cost of Rs 105) is owned by Shankar Bagdi, a Scheduled Caste retailer of locally produced alcohol on the southern periphery of the village. Set against this context it is intriguing, but hardly surprising, that none of the 27 Kali images in Bhatisuda is owned by Brahmans, yet they own five of the 56 Durga and Ambaji images, these being more benign forms of the goddess, lacking the hot and over- energized qualities of Kali who is so closely associated with meat-eating Scheduled Castes.

THE QUEST FOR PLENITUDE

In Bhatisuda visual forms are desired for the access they facilitate to divine energy and to *barkat*, or plenitude. Although it is undoubtedly true that in certain key respects popular Hinduism mobilizes a recuperative idiom within a decaying universe, it is fundamentally constructed by what the playwright Brian Friel (in a very different context) once described as a 'syntax opulent with tomorrows'.[15] Mass- reproduction gives formerly excluded classes access to all the high gods, whom they can approach directly without the intercession of priests. In evaluating the potentiality of images *barkat* emerges as the key concept. Villagers are not interested in what images 'look like', but only in what they can 'do' – the nature and extent of the *barkat* that they capable of conducting.[16]

Villagers have hardly any interest in the producers or publishers of the images that adorn almost every home. Occasionally, following meetings with artists I particularly admired, I was unable to resist remarking to a village friend that the image hanging on his wall was the work of an individual with whom I had some personal connection. But this information was never greeted with any fascination, and there was never any attempt to uncover further information about the artist or his work. The blank indifference my immodest claims provoked indicated a profound and utterly deep indifference to the circumstances in which these all important images were created. This reflected villagers' engagement with images as the sources of future interventions, rather than as embodiments of past intentionalities.

In a similar way, most aspects of form did not feature in any significant way in any of the hundreds of conversations with villagers about their pictures. Instead of exegesis about the nature of the image's execution, there was comment about content, efficacy, and about the praxis that surrounded the acquisition and ongoing maintenance of pictures. They were interested not in what artists had put into pictures, but

in what they as supplicants – with all their complex predicaments – could get out of the images.

The 'syntax opulent with tomorrows' that emerges in Bhatisuda practice is one that springs from a corporeal practice in which it is the devotee's visual and bodily performances that contribute crucially to the potential power – one might say completion – of the image. Most villagers 'seat' their pictures without the assistance of Brahmans, although some will call a Brahman to install newly purchased images. On these occasions the priest will swing the image in front of a mirror and perform a *sthapana* (installation) of the deity.

Most, like Lila Mehtarani, are the sole authors of the pictures' conversion from mere paper to divine simulacra. When asked about pictures of deities lying on market stalls in Nagda (deities jumbled up with film stars and 'scenery', Hindu with Muslim images, Sikh with Jain) she responded: 'It's just paper ... [they haven't] been seated'. She then pointed to the images in her own domestic *jhanki*: 'You see those pictures that are seated? Those are paper but by placing them before our eyes, energy (*shakti*) has come into them ... We entreat the god and the god comes out because the god is saluted. That's how it is.'

Some Bhatisuda images are thought to be more opulent with tomorrows than others. Samvaliyaji is an example par excellence of a deity who gives *barkat*. Whereas orthodox deities such as Shiv are considered essential to *alaukik labh* ('disinterested, or unworldly, profit'), that is transcendental concerns, Samvaliyaji can produce *bhautik labh*, that is material, worldly or physical profit. *Bhautik* problems (for instance, uncertainties relating to wealth, bodily health and illness, matters relating to employment and agricultural productivity) are the ones that most concern villagers.

Like the vast majority of villagers Pannalal Nai, a retired factory worker, lights incense sticks in front of his images at sunrise and dusk. He asks for the protection of all that is most valuable to him: 'give *barkat*, food, water, children, small children, protect all

this'. As Pannalal performs this *puja*, appealing for a protective plenitude in the face of harsh uncertainties, he murmurs to himself, waves his incense sticks, rings a small bell and crumbles whatever marigolds might be lying on the *puja* shelf in front of his images. As he does this his eyes maintain an intense visual intimacy with the gods and his body describes a gentle swaying, yearning, movement as though caught in the force field around the image.

Every conversation about images is likely to invoke the term *barkat*. But there are other ways of expressing the efficacy of images. *Chamatkari* (miraculous, wondrous) suggests an extramundane power that exceeds the quotidian requirements of *barkat*, and *akarshan* (allurement) is a way of describing the particular ability that certain images have to call to the devotee in ways that are often disruptive of daily life.

The interconnectedness of these terms was apparent in the response of Pukhraj Bohra (a Jain landlord living in the central square of Bhatisuda) to a question about the special powers of images in the locality:

Nageshvar Pareshavar near Alod [a Jain pilgrimage site] is a very *chamatkari murti* (image) ... When I first went there fifteen years ago I made a *man* (wish). I asked that my business should go well, that the crops should prosper and then I came back. But there was some *mansik* (psychic) effect from this, some *akarshan* (allurement) born in the image. When I was away I felt that I had to go back and see the image, had to see it again and again.

The consumption of images by Bhatisuda villagers needs to be understood in terms of these processes of bodily empowerment, which transform pieces of paper into powerful deities through the devotee's gaze, the proximity of his/her heart and a whole repertoire of bodily performances in front of the image (breaking coconuts, lighting incense sticks, folding hands, shaking small bells, the utterance of *mantras*).

154 Ravidas cuts open his chest to reveal his Brahmanic sacred thread. 1980s calendar image.

ELEMENTARY ASPECTS OF PEASANT VISUALITY

The most fundamental mark of the images' sensory quality – their predisposition to this corpothetic regime – is their non-absorptive directness (see chapter 1). The vast majority of images behold their owners directly, engaging and returning their vision. As Diane Eck observes, the primacy of sight as the idiom of articulation between deity and devotee is lexically marked so that devotees will usually stress that they are going to the temple for *darshan*, to see and be seen by the deity: it is this 'exchange of vision that lies at the heart of Hindu worship'.[17]

However, as was suggested in the Introduction, the *darshanic* relationship that devotees cultivate engages vision as part of unified sensorium. The eye in *darshan* is best thought of as an organ of tactility,[18] an organ that connects with others.

Walter Benjamin's observation that 'everyday the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction'[19] has generally been read as a sign of the ineluctability of encroaching media practices that have increasingly virtualized the world. The anthropologist Michael Taussig, however, has suggested another approach that reconstitutes Benjamin' work as centrally relevant for an ethnography such as this.

Taussig chooses to see Benjamin's notion of the 'optical unconscious' not as 'ebullient Enlightenment faith in a secular world of technological reason' in which 'magic' is replaced by 'science', but rather as a visceral domain in which objects become sensorily emboldened in a 'magical technology of embodied knowing'.[20] Taussig's re-reading of Benjamin permits us to rethink the ways in which local consumers 'get hold' of mechanically produced images and to at last recognize the significance of Valéry's claim (with which Benjamin prefaced his essay 'The Work of Art'): 'In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be'.[21]

One of the strategies through which peasants are able to 'get hold' of images is through the creation of a zone of mutuality that encompasses devotee and image: the 'locking in' of vision to which we keep returning. This relationship is clearly expressive of *darshan*, which is after all predicated on the mutuality of 'seeing and being seen' by the deities in the images one worships. However, it would be misleading to conclude that this is simply the specific outcome of this particular 'cultural' practice. Local understandings of *darshan* must certainly nuance and finesse our understanding of popular Indian visuality, but underlying this there is a much more widespread practice of what I term 'corpothetics' (sensory, corporeal aesthetics). This local Indian practice is certainly on the face of it dissimilar to dominant class 'Western' practices, which privilege a disembodied, unidirectional and disinterested vision, but not strikingly unlike a whole range of culturally diverse popular practices that stress mutuality and corporeality in spaces as varied as those of religious devotion and cinematic pleasure. So while the power and specificity of local discourses is clearly crucial I would resist the wholesale reduction of meaning to such discourses. Rather than create a specifically Indian enclave of *darshan*-related practices we should also be aware of the continuities and resonances with popular visual practice elsewhere. The choice here should not be seen as simply one between a universalism and a cultural specificity[22]: rural Indian corpothetics exist in a space that is less than universal and more than local.

THE DOUBLE SENSATION

The villagers' chief requirement is for images of deities that can see them. It was this demand, we may recall, that presented itself as such a burden to Yogendra Rastogi, who felt trapped by the commercial market's desire to meet the needs of its largely rural customers. This desire to be seen necessitates hieratic frontal images in which the deities stare forth at their beholders. Ballu Bagdi had purchased six postcards

separately in Nagda and then taken them to a framing shop (of which there are several in the town). The resulting artefact (illus. 155) clearly embodies this rural preference for the non-absorptive and theatrical (to recall, respectively, Fried and Diderot's terminology). The turn away from colonial absorption is here absolute. The deities in all six images invite a reciprocating gaze; none of them permits of any 'indirectness'.

The profound mutuality of perception that such images make possible has parallels with what the phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty terms the 'double sensation' of touching and being touched. In his *Phenomenology of Perception* he considers what occurs when he touches his right hand with his left and the resulting 'ambiguous set-up in which both hands can alternate the roles of "touching" and being "touched".'[23] Each hand has the double sensation of being the object and subject of touch. Merleau-Ponty then applies this model of the double sensation (and of the reversibility of the flesh) to vision, arguing that, 'he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at. As soon as I see, it is necessary that vision . . . be doubled with a complementary vision or with another vision . . . he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it'.[24]

The commercial cinema of Bombay frequently invokes a mutuality of vision that presupposes this 'double sensation'. The celebrated *Jai Santoshi Ma* (1975) included several sequences in which the desperate heroine Satyawadi implores the assistance of Santoshi Ma. In these sequences the goddess's vision is shown as a physical extrusive force (a beam of scorching fire). In two key episodes in which the heroine beseeches the goddess to intervene, intercut shots of Satyawadi's and Santoshi's faces are used repetitively to inscribe the mutuality of vision that binds the devotee to the goddess, and the camera also pans in between their gaze, further accentuating this crucial axis.[25]

In *Amar Akbar Anthony*, released two years later in 1977, the process of *darshan* is literally vision enhancing: being seen becomes the ground from which one's own vision is possible. Chased by ruffians, the blind elderly mother of the three central characters is attracted by the noise of an ecstatic song in praise of the Shirdi Sai Baba conducted, in keeping with the ecumenical spirit of the film, by her son Akbar. (For recondite reasons the three sons have been raised in different religions.) While the congregation praises the visibility of god in Sai Baba and his ability to relight lamps and turn dark nights of sorrows into brightness, the blind mother is ineluctably drawn by some mutual corporeal attraction towards the image in the temple. Although blind, she is drawn compulsively to the face and body of Sai Baba who – as the song proclaims the relighting of lamps – reciprocates her devotion with his own brightness in the form of two flames that migrate from his eyes to hers, liberating her from blindness. Touching Sai Baba's feet she proclaims her ability to see and to have *darshan* of the god, and tells Akbar that it is thanks to his devotion (*bhakti*) and the Baba's 'magic' (*chamatkar*).

I have proposed the use of the term 'corpothetics' as opposed to 'aesthetics' to describe the practices that surround these images. If 'aesthetics' is about the separation between the image and the beholder, and a 'disinterested' evaluation of images, 'corpothetics' entails a desire to fuse image and beholder, and the elevation of efficacy (as, for example, in *barkat*) as the central criterion of value.

The consequences on the form of images of the desire for fusion – for the subject/object dissolution of the 'double sensation' – is nowhere more apparent than in the many mirrored images that are to be found in Bhatisuda, such as an image of Badrivishal purchased at Badrinath (illus. 156); most images of this type were purchased at pilgrimage sites. Ramdevji is also commonly treated in this manner, as we saw in the case of the image hanging in Biharilal's house (see illus. 147).

This is a common mode of customization that allows local artisans to add value to machine-printed images, which become crafted relics of the spiritually charged place. The key figures from
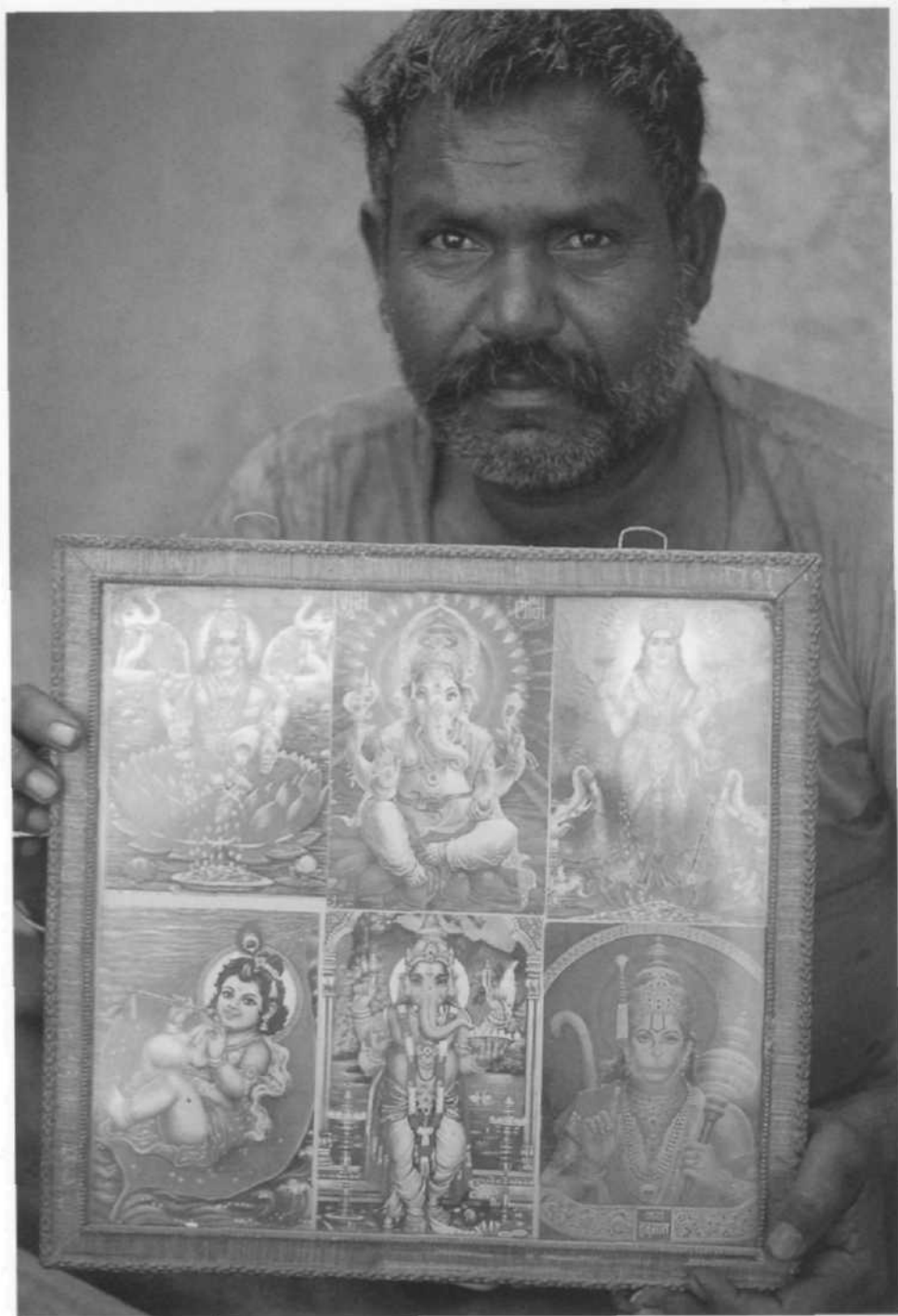
155 Balu Bagdi holds a frame containing six *darshanic* postcards, 1994.

156 A mirrored image of Badrivishal.

chromolithographs are cut out, pasted behind glass and the remaining clear glass is silvered to produce a mirror. But the additional benefit from the purchasers' point of view is that they can now visually inhabit the space of the picture, alongside the deity with whom they desire the double sensation. Mirrored images allow the devotee to (literally) see him or herself looking at the deity. In the case of mirrored pilgrimage images there is what might be termed a double corporeality; firstly of the devotee's movement through space on pilgrimage where she or he bought the image; secondly of the devotee's visual elision with the deity when he places himself in front of the image.[26]

Other modes of image customization – such as the application of glitter, or zari (brocade) or the adhesion of paper surrounds (see illus. 153) or plastic flowers – might also be considered as corpothetic extensions that move the image closer to the devotee, transforming the ostensible representation or window into a surface deeply inscribed by the presence of the deity.

Objects of value are also occasionally introduced onto this surface. 'Found' banknotes, which are considered auspicious, may be pasted on the glass of framed images, and Muslims may similarly attach banknotes containing the auspicious sequence '786' in their serial numbers.[27] The dressing of images takes the place of words. Instead of exegesis, instead of an outpouring of language, there is a poetics of materiality and corporeality around the images.

The progressive empowerment of images through daily worship involves a continual burdening of the surface with traces of this devotion. Although some households replace all their images every year at Divali, the majority retain old images, which continue to accumulate potency as they become accreted with the marks of repeated devotion. These marks include vermilion tilaks placed on the foreheads of deities, the ash from incense sticks, smoke stains from burning camphor, remnants of marigold garlands and other traces of the paraphernalia of puja.

Even at the end of its life, a picture's trajectory is determined by corpothetic requirements, in this case the necessity of ensuring that the image never comes into contact with human feet. Lila Mehtarani explains the constraint:

> [The images] are paper and when they have gone bad (kharab) we take them from the house and put them in the river. That way we don't get any sin (pap) . . . we don't throw them away. You take them out of the house and put them in the river or in a well, and place them under the water.[28] This way they won't come under anyone's feet. You mustn't throw them away or they will get lost. That's the proper (tamizdar) way to do it – in the river or well. In our jat we say thanda kardo – make cold. That way they won't come under [anyone's] feet.

In Hindi the phrase pair ankh se lagana literally signifies to look at the feet, and idiomatically 'to respect, venerate' and to touch someone's feet is to physically express one's obeisance. Certain images in Bhatisuda encode this hierarchical relationship in which the devotee submits his body, through his eyes, to the feet of the deity. Photographs of holy persons' feet (illus. 157) permit this physical acting out of the devotee's obeisance. Correspondingly, it is fundamentally important to Bhatisuda villagers that the bodies of the

157 A photographic image of the feet of Sathya Sai Baba.

deities that they have so carefully brought to life should not suffer the dangerous indignity of having this relationship reversed.

SUBALTERN VISUAL PRACTICE?

The democratic praxis that chromolithography engenders is thus one that in certain key respects recapitulates the protocols and hierarchical codes of orthodox Hindu practice. But it also occasionally comes close to destabilizing long-established ritual and social hierarchies. Formally, all deities, and the different media through which they manifest themselves, are conceptualized as part of a complementary and harmonious project. A common response by villagers when questions of differences between deities is discussed is to throw up their hands and say *ek hi maya hai* ('it is all (just) one illusion', one 'play'). They mean by this that 'ultimately' all the differences are resolvable into a single central imaginary form. In this sense villagers affirm that the various gods can be thought of as variations on a central, common theme.

But rather in the same way that I have suggested we need to theorize a bodily praxis in order to understand the reception of Hindu chromolithographs, we need also to position the formal discourses and representational conventions described in the paragraph above in the context of the chaotic physical enactments of being Hindu in Bhatisuda village. Once we do this, the formal articulations and synoptic overviews start to assume the same marginal position that 'aesthetics' has in relation to everyday 'corpothetics'.

During Nauratri (two periods of nine nights each year associated with goddesses) some Scheduled Caste households remove their domestic chromolithographs and place them in the Jhujhar Maharaj *autla*, which is maintained by Badrilal, a Bagdi (Scheduled Caste) *pujari* (ritual officiant). The (usually framed) prints spend nine lunar days nestled against the red stones and paraphernalia that form the centre of the shrine (illus. 158) and accumulate an additional power from the excess

158 Badrilal, the pujari of the Jhujhar Maharaj *autla*. Domestic chromolithographs placed by villagers in the shrine for the duration of *Nauratri* can be seen in the background.

energy of the consecrated shrine during this period. Domestic images are also installed in the Bihari Mata shrine, which also lies in the Bagdi *mohalla*. Bihari Mata lives under a *nim* tree on the southern fringe of the village; large laminated prints of Durga and Kali are nailed to the trunk of the tree and an old framed image of Durga is propped behind several red tridents that sprout from the base. This Durga image (illus. 159) is taken in the parade around the village at the conclusion of the nine nights along with the bowls of wheat shoots (*javara*), which will be cooled at the end of the procession. However, the relationship between chromolithographs and consecrated images, and that between those villagers who 'thrash' – who become possessed by the goddesses – and consecrated images, is not always so tranquil.

Nauratri is a very dangerous period: it is 'hot' (*tamsik*) and vast numbers of *bhut pret* (ghosts and spirits) thicken the air. They live 'with a free hand' (*khuli chhut rehte*) and 'play' without restraint. The unpredictability of events is intensified by the numbers of villagers who thrash (illus. 160). Several *bhopas* or *ojhas* (mediums) will thrash without fail, and a further dozen or so villagers (some predictable, some not) will also thrash with sundry goddesses, spirits of ancestors who met violent deaths, and *jhujhars* and

159 Hemraj with his framed Durga image, two days prior to the Nauratri procession.

sagats. These are warriors who died from either a single blow to the neck, or several blows, respectively.

The danger implicit in this period reached a frightening intensity in the village in late 1993. The predominantly Bagdi procession, which had set out from the Bihari Mata shrine, was outside Mohan Nai's house near the central *chauk*. The goddess Bihari Mata had possessed the body of Hemraj and she was wearing a green veil and holding a lime-tipped sword. She danced wildly around Lal Mata, who had by now possessed the body of Badrilal, the *pujari* of the Jhujhar Maharaj *autla*. Mixed in this mêlée was a *sagat* in the body of the Rajput Balwant Singh. Two girls carried pots of *javara* (wheat sprouts) and between them a

Bagdi boy carried Hemraj's framed Durga picture, which had until then been displayed in the Bihari Mata shine. As this swirling mass of people made its way down anticlockwise through the village, various people knelt down to have their afflictions cast out. This involved a curative fanning effected with the bedraggled peacock whisks held by the two goddesses. Every so often Badrilal would appear to choke and then, with cheeks bulging, a lime would appear from his mouth.

What happened next showed the extent to which this frenzied outpouring of ecstatic energy was capable of fracturing the normally hierarchical ordered space of the village. Outside the house of Kalu Singh, the Rajput sarpanch, Badrilal swirled in a particularly aggressive manner as the goddess succumbed to some intense rage and it seemed as though everyone would invade the premises. Then the procession veered suddenly away toward the nearby Krishna temple, where the ferociously angry goddess ordered that the *javara* and the image of Durga be taken inside. The *javara* were then placed on the platform at the front of the temple and at this stage Jagdish Sharma, the Brahman *purohit* who lives just to the left of the temple, shot across the front of his verandah and started to plead with the goddess in Badrilal. In a frenzy, Badrilal shouted and spluttered, his cheeks bulging as though his throat would at any moment disgorge more limes.

This was an extraordinary and dangerous moment. Jagdish was clearly terrified. For about ten seconds it seemed completely probable that Badrilal might try to chop off Jagdish's head with his sword, but in the event he retreated. Marigold and rose petals were scattered over the front of the temple and the procession moved on through the Bagdi neighbourhood south-west towards the Lal Mata *autla* and the River Chambal.

Later, discussing this incident, Mohan Singh and Pukhraj Bohra (both of whom are non-drinking vegetarians), opined that Jagdish Sharma had

160 Villagers 'thrashing' (possessed) in the Nauratri procession.

imposed his *rok-tok* (restriction/ obstruction) because
Badrilal was drunk, and if he had polluted the purity
of the temple space that protected the Krishna *murti*
there would have been *nuqsan* (destruction). The
Krishna *murti* was imperilled, and it was to protect this
that Jagdish had risked his life. Badrilal produced a
corpothetic engagement with the Krishna *murti* (via
the agency of his own possession and the presence of
the chromolithographic form of the goddess in the
procession) that threatened the dominant order. The
rule of 'one illusion' (*ek hi maya*) failed to suture the
conflict between (Scheduled Caste) chromolithograph
and (Brahman) temple statue.

To attempt to study 'corpothetics' rather than
'aesthetics' is necessarily complex. If there is no
'meaning' capable of easy linguistic extraction, the
evocation of significance becomes a matter of subtle
observation, what Carlo Ginzburg calls the 'venatic' or
'divinatory' reading of gestures and other
phenomenological traces.[29] Often this will entail the

study of a quiet praxis such as a villager, at dusk,
whispering to his gods as he shakes a bell and slowly
waves an incense stick. But at other times, as in the
case of Badrilal's attempted incursion into the Krishna
temple, events unfold with a dramatic intensity and
clarity. The predicaments that villagers face are
inextricably determined by the social and economic
hierarchy that in large part encompasses them. The
corpothetic engagement with the efficacy of images
guarantees their collision with the everyday, and
unjust, world around them.

Epilogue:
The Recursive
Archive

Once, in the Rajasthani city of Udaipur (having just interviewed one of Narottam Narayan's sons), I found myself sitting in a cafe beneath a large laminated poster on which was presented a remarkable image, and an even more remarkable caption. The image depicted a blonde woman furiously whipping a set of horses who were dragging her carriage through an inhospitable desert landscape. The text below this image read (in English): 'The happiest nations, like women, are those that have no history.'

I have no idea where in the worldwide circuit of global kitsch this image originated, and of course I may well have misremembered the details, for it was ten years ago that I sat there gazing in fascination. Whatever the case, it was an image and text that recalled the Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock's observation that it is not those who forget, but rather those who 'remember' the past who are condemned to repeat it.[1]

The visual history I have presented in this book should make us doubt the strong claims that are sometimes made for the decisive impact of new technologies and the dramatic newness of the 'post-Nehruvian' moment. Much of what seems so new and so specific to the 1980s and '90s can be seen to have precise parallels in earlier periods.

India has emerged in recent theoretical writing as the site of one of modernity's gravest implosions. A Nehruvian and post-Nehruvian moment stands at the moment of eclipse, threatened by a sinister efflorescent Hindu chauvinism (hereafter 'Hindutva'). Despite Hindutva's origin at the heart of the modern there has been an understandable fascination with this nostalgic politics' alliance with new visual technologies ranging from the mobile video *rath* (chariot) to the superabundance of colour posters. This is propelled in part by journalistic clichés that claim a paradox through the juxtaposition of the 'medieval' and the 'modern': the apparent contrast between Hindutva's 'archaicism' and its love of new technologies seems to further emphasize the 'newness' of those media.

But we could also add to this the impact of secularist accounts that are only capable of constructing

popular media as antagonistic to its own project. The forest of signs that covers contemporary Indian politics currently suffers from an under-informed epidemiology that naïvely links formal content with ideological effect through (to recall Carlo Ginzburg) 'physiognomic' readings.[2] Conclusions are determined in advance ('by other means') and even those who might otherwise struggle to hear the voice of 'subalterns' are unwilling to treat images as subaltern, or to search for an image's 'face'.[3]

The history *through* images that I have attempted in this book allows me to draw two central conclusions. The first of these is concerned with what text-based histories leave out. Visual history restores a vein of popular messianism that has been severely neglected in orthodox historiography. It also permits us to situate modern image usage (and the claims for their historical uniqueness) within a broader context in which there are frequently striking echoes and resonances. Secondly, although the political commitments of particular artists and publishers has I hope been clearly established, these images are the product of a *commercial* industry. The need for commercial survival introduces an extreme degree of contingency to the relationship between intention and artefact.

Text-based histories and critical approaches, especially in the 1980s and '90s, have focused on what has been presented as a qualitatively new relationship between politics and images. The growth of Hindu chauvinism within Indian politics during this period has often been discussed in terms of the proliferation of images. For instance, the authors of *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags*, a deservedly influential pamphlet about the rise of the Hindu right, singled out the deluge of images that accompanied Hindutva's growth. They argued that, since the alliance of right-wing groups claims to have appropriated all Hindus:

signs of this occupation have to be made visible all over the Hindu world. The movement therefore works its way from the overtly political domain into

everyone's everyday life, primarily through the innovative use of small icons, derived from calendar art . . . Slickly produced in a variety of garish colours, at one time they could be seen all over North Indian cities and towns and also in many villages. They could be pasted anywhere – on vehicles, offices, houses, or on school blackboards. Their reach extended much beyond that of posters or wall-writing. They swamped individuals in their ubiquity, contriving a sense of the irresistible tide of Hindutva.[4]

It is tempting to see the colonization of India's public and domestic spaces by such images as marking some qualitatively different phase, some new condition of post-modernity in which the density of images produces a new kind of politics, a claim made most eloquently by Arvind Rajagopal. In this account, by contrast, I have tried to document a complex tradition of image production and dissemination, which casts a rather different light on the use of images in current political struggles.

Seen in the light of this history one is struck by the powerful continuities in practice: the ubiquity of images of the Ram mandir[5] recalls the ubiquity of Cow Protection images, and the iconography of Bhagat Singh remains unchanged from 1931 through to the early twenty-first century.

Four Hindi films narrating the actions of Bhagat Singh were released in the year 2002–3.[6] While Bombay cinema does still occasionally espouse a modernizing 'Nehruvian' inclusivity (for example in Amir Khan's *Lagaan*),[7] it is very striking that no films about Nehru or, Gandhi were due for release in this year (nor have any been released in any other year since Independence).[8] This is a remarkable and fundamental fact about the nature of the visual history presented here that bears reiterating: textual histories of the freedom struggle in India focus overwhelmingly on 'official' practitioners such as Nehru and Gandhi; visual histories celebrate 'unofficial' practitioners such as Bhagat Singh.

How can this be explained? I would suggest that one key aspect is the alliance between conventional historiography's affirmation of the state, and its preference for discursive, 'linguistic-philosophical closure'. A top-down historiography of nationalist struggle that privileges literate elites and the state, as the rational projection of that elite, lacks the strategies to engage with embodied and performative politics. Conversely, a bottom-up visual history, open to the popular messianism that drove much of the nationalist struggle, is much more alert to the affective intensities of the popular and the visual.

These two, partial and exclusionary histories might also be seen as a manifestation of what Rajagopal has perceptively labelled a 'split public'. The introduction to this book briefly alludes to Boris Groys's argument concerning the 'total art' of Stalinism. His argument for the centrality of the aesthetic at the core of political transformation was embraced, but a caution was added about the obvious difference between a Soviet-style system grounded in the absolute hegemony of the ruling elite and India where, as Ranajit Guha has argued, the elite has failed spectacularly to incorporate the masses.

Rajagopal, writing about the impact of the television serialization of the *Ramayan* in the late 1980s, suggests that we think about a 'split public' characterized by 'different languages of politics'.[9] I find Rajagopal's modernist narrative of a rupture before and after this screening problematic. However, his analysis of the different audiences for different media within India is enormously suggestive. He dwells on the way in which different constituencies were addressed by, on the one hand, the English press, and on the other, the Hindi press. The former was concerned with the 'truth-value of news, as information serving a critical-rational public', while for the latter 'neutrality [was] but one of a variety of possible relationships to political power'[10] in its concern to dramatize the narrative dimension of news. The opposition that emerged through this splitting served to reproduce a 'structured set of misunderstandings'.[11]

Rajagopal's ideas can help us comprehend why it is that textual histories find it so difficult to comprehend visual history and why the image, and those who seek relationships with the image, so frequently appear as the embodiment of a 'pre-rational' and 'enchanted' politics. The 'split' that characterizes the Indian public, and Indian politics, is reflected in historiography between accounts that, on the one hand, seek linguistic-philosophical closure and those that, on the other, seek out spaces where 'intensities are felt'. The appeal of such intensities needs also to be understood as the result of a historical process. What I have traced in the book is the emergence of an alternative modernity facilitated by the increasing velocity and referentiality of images during the last century and a quarter. This alternative modernity (as distinct from a non-modernity) takes the form of a popular historicity configured by a rejection of arbitrary colonial signs in favour of a dense 'semioticity'. We have seen repeated movements (such as Ramakrishna's embrace of a 'mythological-real', and Nathdvara's recreation of an enchanted landscape) that involve the rejection of colonial rationalities. The visual forms described in this book are not manifestations of some enduring Indian psyche: they are the products of very complex historical confrontations and refutations. It is in this sense that the term non-modernity (with its sense of a 'lack' and 'priorness') is rejected, and 'alternative modernity' preferred.

Narratives of modernity and nationalism frequently assume an inevitable reproduction of Western models. The empirical substance of this account suggests that, rather than some inevitable disenchantment, there is a contest between different schemata and a complex process of negation, contradiction and critique. The Nathdvara aesthetic, for instance, expressed a naturalized innocence, which stemmed from its knowledge of and rejection of an earlier 'Romanization'; it pursued a 'deformation of mastery' that contained the possibility of 'a release from being possessed'.[12] It is in this sense that it is best viewed as 'neo-traditional', part of an 'alternative modernity'.

Benedict Anderson has argued that nationalism was one product of the 'harsh wedge between cosmology and history';[13] as a visual practice, picturing the nation has revealed itself as the recombination of history and cosmology in the face of a distilled history that suited the rationalistic world-conquering instincts of colonialism. The alternative modernity I have tried to describe here saw the future, and it didn't like it.

One of the most striking examples of a historio-graphic voice speaking into the void that defines this split is Anuradha Kapur's celebrated analysis of the 'muscularization' of the god Ram.[14] Starting in the late 1980s a series of popular images (illus. 161) appeared depicting a vengeful saffron-clad Ram (often towering above a new imaginary Rama temple in Ayodhya). Ram was endowed with a muscular armature to rival that of his simian assistant, Hanuman, and Sylvester Stallone. For Kapur, such images are labelled merely 'poster from Ayodhya', as though they were symptoms whose malignancy and relevance lay exclusively in their geographic occurrence at the site of the destruction of the Babri *masjid*. While emphatically concurring that a text's (or chromolithograph's) unity lies (at least in part) in its destination rather than its origin,[15] that origin does need to play some role in our analysis. The angry Rama image, for instance, was first produced by the Vishva Hindu Parishad in the late 1980s[16] and, following the publication by S. S. Brijbasi of a commissioned copy by the Bombay artist Ved Prakash and then by Rajan Musle, several other companies produced similar images.

The critical focus on these images, while enormously stimulating and raising issues of vital political importance, is nevertheless frequently a victim of a textual historiography that establishes its evidence 'by other means'. Because it has decided in advance that these images are a visual manifestation of an ideological force, it is unable to catch hold of the ways in which the materiality of representation creates its own force field. Consequently a very straightforward 'Durkheimianism' emerges in which the image somehow draws together and exemplifies, as a social
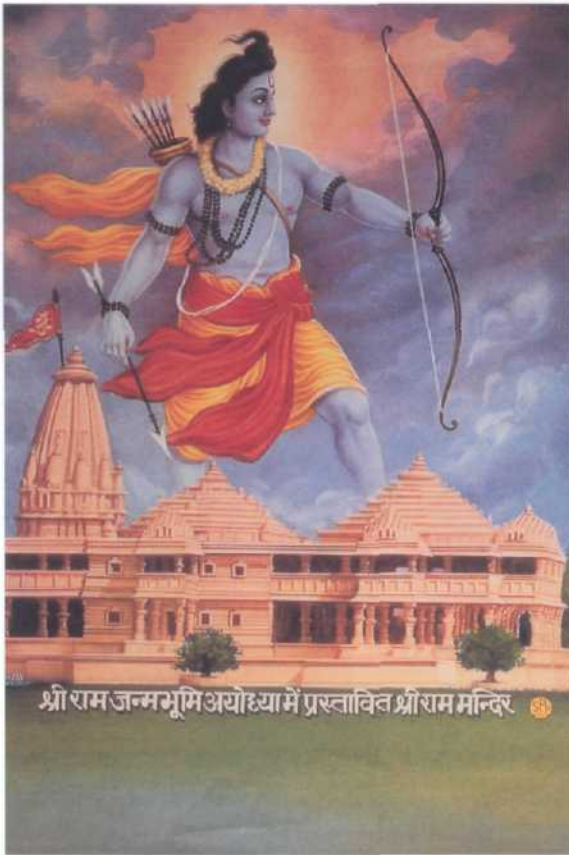
161 A muscular Ram flexes his bow above the proposed Ramjamnabhumi mandir in Ayodhya. The slogan reads: *shri ram janma bhumi ayodhya mem prastavit shri ram mandir* (proposed Shri Ram birthplace temple in Ayodhya), *c.* 1994.

representation, everything that can be identified as potentially determining it, and which the historian wishes to have deposited in the image as the validation of his/her supposition. This displaces the other strategy I have attempted to delineate in this account: one in which images are treated as unpredictable 'compressed performances' caught up in recursive trajectories of repetition and pastiche, whose dense complexity makes them resistant to any particular moment. I do not at all wish to imply that images are completely disconnected from everyday history: this study is replete with such historical connectivity. What I am

suggesting is that images are not simply, always, a reflection of something happening elsewhere. They are part of an aesthetic, figural, domain that can constitute history, and they exist in a temporality that is not necessarily co-terminous with more conventional political temporalities.

The images I have described might be seen as moving through a pathway of what Roland Barthes has called 'wavy meaning', in which their materiality impresses itself upon the surrounding world. While these images are in certain contexts amenable to recoding, they can never be plucked from that pathway and sutured in any simplistic way with the 'socio-logical' or 'political' reality of any particular historical moment. Barthes made the point that most histories of objects are not histories of *the object* at all. He recalls narratives, supposedly of objects, with titles like *Memoirs of an Armchair*, or *The History of my Pipe*, and argues that these are in fact stories of objects passed from hand to hand.[17] Likewise one might say that a conventional historiography, which determines the nature of images 'by other means', simply passes objects from historical moment to historical moment, discovering that the object exemplifies its own particular historical moment. The precondition for the complex task of escaping the tautology of this relationship is the recognition that the visual and material will always 'exceed' the present. The account presented here is certainly still trapped within an inescapable residue of the 'physiognomic' but I hope to have made at least a small break in the tenacious circularity of such arguments.

The 'recursivity' of popular picture production, its refusal always to conform precisely to its own present, also reflects the producers' assessments that their consumers require images for tasks that remain relatively historically uninflected: the desire for *barkat* endures and demands the broad repetition of an established iconography. Clearly there is a history to these images, but it is a history determined in large part by an accretive dynamic within the practice of image production.

Because, as one producer said, images should be 'new, but not too new', most commercial artists maintain archives of early images. In the case of Indra Sharma, for instance, this amounted to several thousand images. Indeed significant elements of the chronology expounded here have been established through working in these artists' archives: they exceed in range and number anything to be found in public institutions.

The visual possibilities stored in these archives lack any clear sedimentation. The entire institutional art world infrastructure of galleries, curators and historiography has (until very recently) passed these images by. Consequently few of them look 'quaint' or so marked by a process of dating and sedimentation that they are excluded from the possibility of one day once again becoming 'new'. No images ever die, they all remain alive, on stand-by. Images migrate endlessly, cutting back and forth across new times and contexts. Publishers assert that the market is ever eager for a 'new' image, and artists have constantly to produce a new tranche of images each year. But as was perhaps most clearly argued in chapter 7, each year's new images tend to reconstitute images that have already been 'half seen in advance'. Sometimes this involves repainting an earlier image. In the mid-1990s Brijbasi commissioned Rajan Musle to repaint several Mulgaonkar and Pednekar images from the 1950s. The publisher had kept the original gouaches and despatched these to the artist with precise instructions to revivify certain colours in a 1990s idiom and to modify other minor features.

Images pastiche and reconstitute other images: they are already 'half-seen in advance'. Often this reconstitution will make a link with an image from the previous year, or previous few years. Sometimes, however, an image will jump several decades or even centuries. The provocative print reproduced here was published by the Bombay branch of S. S. Brijbasi in 1994 and shows Shivaji standing astride the slaughtered body of Afzal Khan as a saffron flag flutters in the background (illus.

162 Shivaji astride the body of Afzal Khan, Rajan Musle, c. 1994. Laminated print published by S. S. Brijbasi.

162). The painting is by Rajan Musle, whose muscular Ram image has already been noted, and this image too is, on the face of it, a 'symptom' of 1990s anti-Muslim Hindutva. The publisher gave the following account of the circumstances of its creation:

We are always looking for some radical changes but it can't be so radical because [then] they will be out of tradition – you can't be radical with religion or radical with history. This one was actually [a] Roman Emperor, this you must have realised is not entirely Indian. This is not Indian [. . .] the lower part – his dress could be anywhere in the world and there was this Roman Emperor standing with his

foot like this and Musle had come out with some art book and was just going through some Roman paintings and he got this reference and he was saying why don't we make this with Shivaji treading on Afzal Khan? . . . This entire thing except the figure has been changed, it was a Roman thing, he [put] Shivaji into this.[18]

This image's Roman antecedents are not known to me and I am unsure whether any other image predates its close model by Louis Dupré, a pupil of David, which was first published as a hand-coloured lithograph in 1825 (illus. 163).[19]

The laminated poster *The Sons of Bharat Mata* (illus. 165) produced in 2000 relies in a similar way on earlier referents, in this case two posters from the 1960s and


163 Plate from Louis Dupré, *Voyage à Athènes et à Constantinople, ou Collection de portraits, des vues, et des costumes grecs et ottomans* (1825).

164 Mother India and heroes of the freedom struggle, calendar image, 1972.

'70s. Triangulated in this manner it is clear that the (unknown) creator of *Sons of Bharat Mata* extracted the central Mother India image from a 1972 calendar (illus. 164), a copy of which he must have had in his personal archive, together with some of the portrait heads (to which were added Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee), and photographically interpolated battle scenes of the sort that (in painted form) have been common in calendar images since the work of Yogendra Rastogi in the early 1960s (illus. 166).

But it would be wrong to over-stress the constraints of popular visual culture: some images appear with very different lineages. Greeting cards produced first in 1998 referring to the nuclear weapons tests in May of
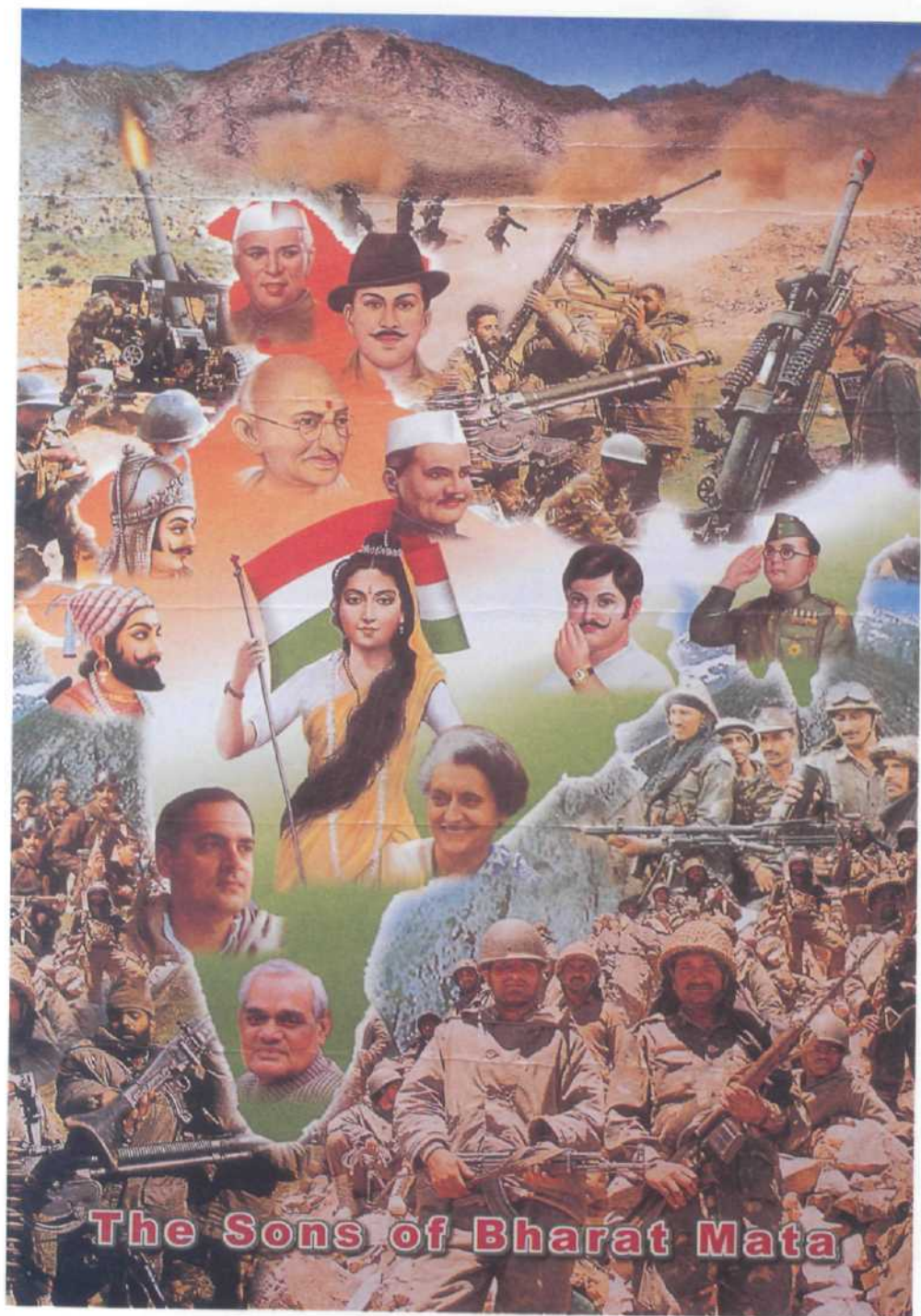
165 *The Sons of Bharat Mata*, laminated print, 1999. Publisher unknown.

166 Calendar image depicting Lakshmi Swaminathan (a female Indian National Army officer) urging 'lahor chalo' (Let's go to Lahore), c. 1965.

that year proclaimed *Ham kisi se kam nahin* ('we are not less than/inferior to anyone').[20] A mapped image of India and collaged photographic images of Prime Minister Vajpayee, together with defence research chief A. P. J. Abdul Kalam and R. Chidambaram, chief of the Department of Atomic Energy, among others,[21] are set against a fiery background (illus. 167). This startling image compresses a whole set of anxieties about metaphorical and literal stature, the Indian national phallus, and the delirious pleasure of fire. Its aesthetics seem to derive more from music videos than the pictorial genres discussed in this study.

While many images produced by the Hindu right reflect the constraints of the 'recursive archive' and are variations on a familiar theme, the apocalyptic

blankness of this image has few visual antecedents. Yogendra Rastogi's image celebrating India's first nuclear test explosion in 1974, which we have discussed above (see illus. 135), put a smiling face on India's leadership. Through its mixture of Hindi and English press response to the event Rastogi revealed the media not as 'split', but as part of a unified, and essentially beneficent, civil society. 'Peaceful' and producing 'no radioactive dust' the headlines proclaimed, in their collective desire to believe the state fiction of 'nuclear necessity'. The 1998 image, by contrast, makes no appeal to civil society: its justification is simply the reassurance given to an anxious self.

The period covered by this present book, from the late 1870s to the end of the twentieth century,

हम
किसी से
कम नहीं
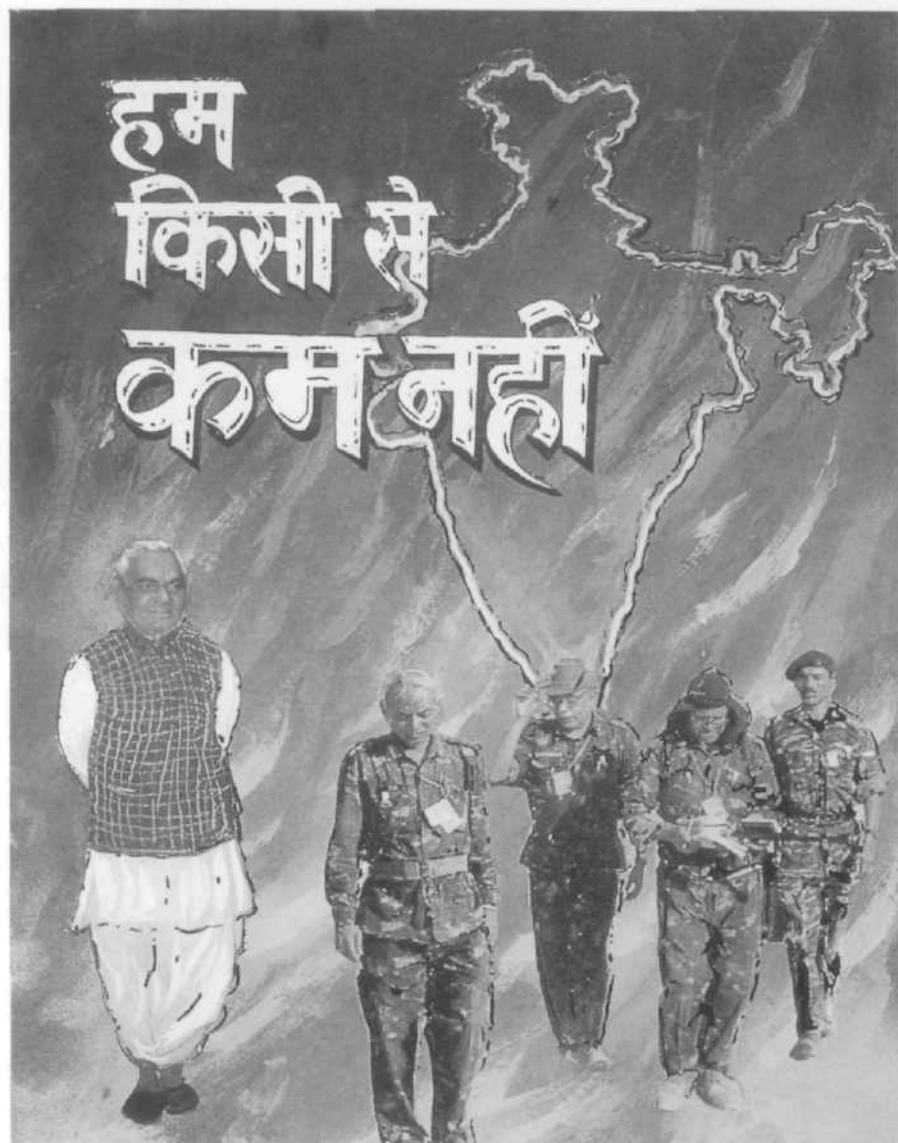
167 *Hum kisi se kam nahin*, 2000, printed card.

seems in retrospect to have retained a visual coherence. The aesthetic changes during these 120 years have certainly been dramatic but so have the continuities and coherences. Enduring concerns, and the visual strategies used to address these, are easy to identify. A fluid yet identifiable cultural national- ism extends across this period, together with

extremely diverse popular practices of Hinduism. The 1998 image suggests the possibility that a new political era, with its own distinct aesthetic modality, is in the process of emerging. The *fin de millénnium* moment, which has been the present of this book's writing, may come to be seen as more than simply a coincidental end point for its narrative.