



The travails of the modern icon

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The travails of the modern icon-Balance and fairness elude the Indian quartet, whose fate sways between hagiography and hysterical downsizing

- Icons have always been a part of memory and heritage, carrying the seal of the sacred.
- Classical iconography was, in fact, the study of religious icons, an exploration of symbols and their meaning.
- While iconography has a sense of tradition, modern society looks at its icons differently.
- The perspective did not always carry the mark of the sacred, but combined folklore and propaganda in interesting ways.

An important plurality

- Folklore captures a sense of orality and storytelling in plural ways.
- Each locality has its own version of the hero and his exploits, providing a sense of a modern epic.
- Yet, the stories can be deeply plural, reflecting different histories and memories.
- Mass culture and state propaganda operate differently.
- If folklore has a sense of joy, mass culture brings to its icons a sense of frenzy, hysteria, what one can call a modern sense of idolatry.
- The narrative possesses an official character which creates a grid of uniformity.
- The stories are hyperbolic, following a grid.
- Often there is an attempt to rewrite history or give it a caricatured quality.
- The fate of the Indian icon has been constructed differently. The poignancy comes from a benign neglect, reducing memory and commemoration to a ritualistic event, an empty marker.

The four pillars

- In fact, it is interesting to consider the fate of four great modern Indian icons — Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru (left, in picture), Vallabhbhai Patel (right, in picture) and Subhas Chandra Bose.
- Each followed a different narrative and each suffered what we can call the travails of the modern icon.
- The Gandhi of the independence movement was every child's icon, hero and idol.
- But Indian officialdom and the historian created a one-sided Gandhi, a saint rather than an experimental politician.
- The uncomfortable questions he raised, the controversies around him were forgotten.
- From one of the great monuments of the era, he became a memorial and was soon reduced to mnemonic commemorations on birthdays through official clichés.
- In 2019, it'll be 150 years since his birth, and one realises he is being strip-mined for official slogans and programmes, where his great quotations become clerical clichés.
- A Gandhian programme combined the political and the ethical, which Swachh Bharat Abhiyan does not — it is a mere act of governance, a spectacle which has still to encounter untouchability and the septic tank.

Nehruvian magic

- The fate of Nehru has been the most controversial.
- The memory of Nehru has been battered by opponents ever since the war with China.
- Nehru has been unfairly constructed as a Pandora's box of errors since then.
- One has to acknowledge that his leadership evoked a different style, a different set of memories from Indira Gandhi's.
- Nehru's ideas of modernisation still have a political appeal.
- Nehru is a perennial icon, whose ability to survive has made a mockery of his critics.

Appropriation of Patel

- The recent events around Sardar Patel capture the travails of a modern icon poignantly. .
- Patel, like Bose, was labelled one of the ignored men of modern history, even when both were larger-than-life creatures in folklore.
- In fact, they did not need the manicuring of history to make them

relevant.

- The humanity, the vulnerability, the ethical genius of each of these exemplars disappears in these acts of exaggeration or downsizing.
- The sadness is that all four icons understood the limits of power and history.
- One misses professionalism, the craft of academic scholarship in these moments where contemporary power destroys history for opportunistic reasons.

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