

Casting History in Bronze: Delving into the Political Mosaic of Maharaja Ranjit Singh Sculptures

DOI:<https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2024.2.1.23>

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Abstract

Statues within urban landscapes serve as powerful instruments shaping the collective ethos of communities and ethnic groups, functioning as identity markers and emblematic embodiments of power and ideology. Crafted as vehicles for political messaging throughout history, statues endure as relics, actively participating in societal discourse. They represent collective imprints, embodying a community's history and broadcasting its traditions, institutions, beliefs, and ideologies. This study explores the commemorative practices and visual rhetoric of monuments and statues, focusing on the iconic status of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Punjab. Analyzing statues in Amritsar and Ludhiana, it delves into their symbolic allure, guided by Mitchell's *Picture Theory*, Roland Barthes' conception of images as political subjects, and Stuart Hall's "Encoding-Decoding" discourse. Unearthing the interplay of images in shaping collective memory, this research illuminates the contemporary political and cultural significance of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's statues. **Keywords:** Statues, Power, Ideology, Visual Rhetoric, Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

“All that was once directly lived has become mere representation.”

- Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Statues, as monumental symbols in the urban landscape, embody a complex interplay of authority, politics, and public perception. These sculptures transcend mere memorials, becoming charged symbols in the political fabric of society. In the realm of public art, statues act as actors, representing ideologies and commemorating historical figures. Crafted in bronze or stone, they evoke emotions and encapsulate the essence of bygone eras. Behind their stoic facades, statues wield power, influencing those who gaze upon them. They can either foster unity or sow division, consciously shaping historical narratives. This selective remembrance, termed 'monumentalization,' directs collective attention and moulds perceptions, shaping the public's understanding of history. The rhetoric of statues functions as a symbolic language in the political arena, conveying potent messages about the ethos of a particular era. These visual allegories prompt reflection on the past's profound implications for the present and future. Simon John argues that “Statues can teach us about history, but they do not convey some immutable truth from the

past. Instead, they are symbolic of the fixed ideas of a specific community regarding its past, as captured at a particular point in time.” Statues thus serve as public displays of traditions, institutions, beliefs, and ideologies.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, a distinguished figure, stands as the quintessential ‘bio-icon’ of Punjab, embodying a tradition where remarkable individuals are immortalized for future generations. Bishnupriya Ghosh’s exploration of ‘bio-icons’ in her 2011 work *Global Icons: Apertures to the Popular* sheds light on how such figures, like Mother Teresa and Arundhati Roy, become influential public personas through mass media. The enduring tradition of public remembrance spans cenotaphs, statues, memorials, museums, texts, songs, narratives, and rituals, reflecting society’s collective memory and values. Among these expressions, statues and monuments have historically stood out as primary cultural commemorations. These sculpted effigies, rising in public spaces, connect the past tangibly, symbolizing iconic personalities and their ideals. More than static relics, statues are living symbols that, through their visual impact, transform the viewer’s experience and serve as a powerful testament to historical significance.

The Visual Spectacle

Statues and monuments, as visual forms of remembrance, have a profound impact on individuals, transcending language and cultural barriers. In the case of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, celebrated as the ‘Lion of Punjab,’ statues in cities such as Amritsar and Ludhiana symbolize his profound impact on Punjab’s cultural and historical identity. Visual rhetoric is crucial in the commemorative rituals of public monuments, guiding people’s interpretation of the past and shaping their self-identity. These monuments serve as custodians of identity in contemporary society. Being a remembrance of history and culture at face value, these visual texts “guide people in their thinking about those facts from the past, and what possible futures to seek...they also direct people’s view of themselves” (Palczewski et al. 84). Visual culture, playing a primary role in memory and communication, is integral to human culture. Lynell Burmark, the author of *Visual Literacy* writes that “...unless our words, concepts, ideas are hooked onto an image, they will go in one ear, sail through the brain, and go out the other ear. Words are processed by our short-term memory where we can only retain about seven bits of information...Images, on the other hand, go directly into long-term memory where they are indelibly etched.”

This study delves into the role of images in shaping memories and disseminating information, drawing on theoretical frameworks by scholars like W.J.T. Mitchell, Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, and art historian Kajri Jain. Mitchell's works, *Iconology* and *Picture Theory* explore the power dynamics of images, emphasizing their impact on power, value, and human interest. "The Pictorial Turn" scrutinizes the interplay between visual and verbal representations, examining their linkages to issues of power. In our image-centric culture, Mitchell suggests we live in a society of spectacle, bombarded by images. Statues, as visual representations, profoundly influence observers, guiding perceptions of history and shaping collective memory. Beyond symbols of remembrance, statues serve as communicative tools, adding depth to narratives and contributing to the construction of collective memory. Kajri Jain's work on "calendar art" in India highlights the significance of visual imagery in shaping contemporary society. The focus of this paper is on the role of images, particularly statues of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, as bio-icons, influencing public spaces in Amritsar and Ludhiana. The term 'bio-icon' characterizes these statues, transforming into emblems of masculine valour and national identity. With reference to these heroic figures, Thomas Carlyle eloquently points out that "they were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or attain" (*On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* 6).

It is a pervasive understanding that we inhabit a culture predominantly characterized by images, what Mitchell terms "a society of the spectacle, a world of semblances and simulacra" (Mitchell 5). Mitchell posits that we are currently residing in an age of "spectacle" or perhaps more fittingly, an "age of surveillance." In this era, we find ourselves enveloped by a relentless barrage of images, yet a comprehensive theory elucidating the profound impact of these images on the observer and their intricate connotations remains elusive. Images, much like histories or technologies, spring forth from human creation and inevitably transcend our control. In this context, statues, as a prominent form of iconic representation in the visual domain, exert a profound influence on the mindset of the observer. Beyond their surface-level role as symbols of historical and cultural remembrance, statues possess an intricate depth. They serve as guides, shaping people's perceptions of historical facts, influencing contemporary actions, and directing the pursuit of possible futures. Statues and images alike are potent communicative tools, adding layers of depth and context to narratives, thereby offering a more engaging and immersive experience.

This study delves into the pivotal role of statues as potent repositories of imagery, serving as formidable instruments of visual communication and ideological representation. As intricate three-dimensional works of art, statues often visually manifest historical figures, significant events, or entrenched cultural ideals. Positioned strategically across bustling public spaces in Punjab, the statues of Maharaja Ranjit Singh exert palpable influence with their distinctive form. These bio-icons resonate deeply within the collective consciousness, fostering a sense of intimate connection. The visual medium, embodied in these statues, plays a crucial role in eliciting profound reactions, stirring emotions, and orchestrating immersive experiences. This paper comprehensively analyzes three notable statues in Punjab, India: (a) The Equestrian Statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Ram Bagh Gardens, Amritsar, (b) The Statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh at Town Hall, Amritsar, and (c) The Colossal Statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the Maharaja Ranjit Singh War Museum, Ludhiana.

These statues, ceremoniously erected during various festive occasions, serve as poignant reminders of Maharaja's extraordinary achievements and enduring legacy, contributing significantly to the forging of the Punjabi community's unique identity. Under his sagacious rule, the Sikh Empire expanded, reaching its zenith and becoming a formidable power in the Indian subcontinent. Placed strategically in locations accessible to residents, commuters, tourists, and passersby, these visual embodiments have a pervasive impact on a diverse audience. Integrated into the vibrant urban landscapes and tranquil rural vistas of Punjab, the statues create a profound connection between the populace and the revered 'bio-icon,' invoking a sense of closeness and emotional resonance. With distinctive architectural designs, these iconic statues bear considerable psychological weight, enriching national and communal historical narratives within the public sphere. The statues featured in this project are images that harmoniously coexist within the shared public space, and that "concretize their individual history/life within the public domain as encoded 'symbols' thereby enriching the layers of the 'greater' national/community history" (Ahmed 137).

Roland Barthes also proffers the methodological ground to the present paper; providing different contexts (lingual, symbolic, connotative, and denotative) under which images work. Barthes whilst dealing with symbols and semiotic theory also talked at length about images. In his fundamental monograph "Rhetoric of the Image," he tries to investigate and discern the message that is encoded in images, and the part they play in creating and shaping an ideological worldview. By employing

commercial advertisements as illustrative models to deconstruct the implicit messages embedded within images, Barthes aims to discern how ideologies manifest in visual representations. For him, commercials are an especially convenient medium, as they contain highly condensed imagery designed for maximum efficiency in communicating their intended message. Similarly, statues serve as vehicles for disseminating specific messages within society. Crafted in various forms and styles, statues, like commercials, employ highly charged and intensive imagery with the intent to persuade the observer.

The very nature of an image has come under scrutiny, as exemplified by Stuart Hall in his essay “Encoding-Decoding.” Hall emphasizes the impact of ideology, power, and interpretation on shaping the meaning of a message. He underscores the potential for diverse interpretations of a text, acknowledging the complexity of the communication process. According to Hall, encoding a message is invariably influenced by the sender’s ideology, values, and perspective, which may not be fully understood by the recipient. In light of these insights, statues and images emerge as potent instruments for the expression and dissemination of power and ideology, moulding our perceptions of history, society, and the world. Such imagery can be harnessed to promote, reinforce, or disseminate a particular ideology or political message, thereby exerting a profound influence on collective consciousness.

Politicized Monumentation

In recent decades, statues have undergone unprecedented politicization globally, evolving into symbols less about history and more about politics, as noted by architect Gautam Bhatia. Monumental architecture, embodying a society’s history, culture, and politics, plays a pivotal role in shaping collective identity. Power and politics underlie the genesis and removal of monuments, exemplified by recent events in the USA and England, where statues linked to the slave era were toppled by #BlackLivesMatter protesters. India, too, has witnessed the removal of colonial statues, reflecting a transformation from sculpture to political statuary. Bhatia highlights the politicization of art in India, where statues and memorials are commissioned to align with political desires, portraying historical figures with bias.

Pooja Pillai, in her article titled “Understanding the Politics of Pulling down Statues: What does it convey and What does it miss?” writes, “Public statues – whether of actual people or of figures

meant to represent abstract notions such as God, national pride, peace – have been an important propaganda tool for centuries, an assertion of power used to establish social and political hierarchies.” The politicization of statues is an intricate dance, wherein these stoic figures are harnessed to propagate the ideals and beliefs of the ruling elite. Public statues serve as propaganda tools, asserting power to establish social and political hierarchies. The act of erecting, dismantling, or altering statues is a political overture, reflecting societal values and shifts in the socio-political landscape.

The land of Punjab bears the weight of an illustrious architectural heritage, steeped in a tradition of vivid representation. The visual arts, encompassing the realms of drawing, painting, photography, poster art, sculpting, and architecture, have long been ingrained in the very fabric of this region. Since its inception, these visual expressions have been dedicated to narrating the tales of valiant warriors and iconic figures from Sikh history. The paintings that thrived during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Punjab were imbued with Sikh relics and military motifs, reflecting the prevalent martial theme. Pavan Kumar’s exploration in “Region, Religion and Rituals: An Exploration of Punjabi Art” underscores that Sikh art predominantly revolves around portraiture, centring on historical personalities and events. “Sikh portraiture developed from the political struggle and it is through understanding the roles which certain individuals played, that we can understand their significance...”

The impetus for constructing monumental structures in Punjab was primarily driven by the royal courts, who sought to not only underscore their status as “cultured patrons” but also celebrate their distinct identity. The intricate details gracing these icons serve as a potent catalyst, kindling fervour and patriotism within visitors, immersing them in the captivating narratives etched in Punjab’s architectural tableau. Furthermore, beyond its role as a vibrant hub of visual iconography, Punjab’s cultural art forms have perpetually woven themselves into a political tapestry. The iconography of Punjab operates as an interactive art form, instrumental in shaping various ideologies and moulding the collective mindset of its people. Monumental architecture, particularly those funded by the government, has been established with the dual purpose of fortifying the state’s narrative and advancing specific political agendas under the guise of paying homage to icons from diverse domains. For instance, the recent decision by the Punjab Government on March 5, 2020, to endorse the installation of statues of iconic figures at designated sites, ostensibly to promote historical

legacies, can be perceived as a strategic manoeuvre to wield power through the medium of iconography. In this light, iconographic architecture has increasingly evolved into an ideological arena through which individuals seek to exert dominion over one another.

Within the diverse cultural tapestry of Punjab, the statues commemorating Maharaja Ranjit Singh serve as potent symbols of cultural pride, forging a profound connection to the region's illustrious history and heritage. These statues, often hailed as beacons of admiration and inspiration, particularly for the younger generation, play a pivotal role in instilling a profound sense of identity and camaraderie. Maharaja Ranjit Singh, known as the "Sher-e-Punjab" or Lion of Punjab, holds a significant place in history, inspiring generations with his military prowess and unifying leadership. His commitment to justice, religious tolerance, and administrative acumen remains a source of guidance for those who wish to navigate the complex terrain of leadership and governance. The enduring influence of Maharaja Ranjit Singh as a symbol of unity and progress adds greater significance to these statues, testifying to the indomitable spirit of Punjab and its people.

Cast in Stone: Maharaja Ranjit Singh's Statues

The statues of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, strategically placed across Punjab, are imbued with profound political symbolism that mirrors the intricate historical and contemporary political landscape of the region. Maharaja Ranjit Singh, renowned as the visionary founder and leader of the Sikh Empire, encapsulates a complex political legacy that continues to wield influence over Punjab's politics. These statues serve as potent symbols of Sikh sovereignty and self-determination, evoking a poignant era when Sikhs governed their own realm, free from external dominance. In this context, the statues emerge as emblematic representations of Sikh identity and pride, underscoring the imperative of Sikh political representation.

Both Amritsar and Ludhiana have been profoundly impacted by the towering influence of Maharaja Ranjit Singh across various facets of their existence. Maharaja Ranjit Singh assumes the mantle of a quintessential symbol of Punjabi culture, embodying the very essence of the region's folk heritage. In the words of Buxi, he stands as the "symbol of the Punjabi culture and a typical representative of the Punjabi folk" (9). The esteemed historian Marshman, compiler of the comprehensive three-volume *History of India*, hailed Maharaja Ranjit Singh as "the most

extraordinary man of the age between Constantinople and Peking.” He remains an object of veneration, an iconic figure cherished by the people of Punjab. Amritsar often referred to as the “Land of Saints and Gurus,” bears a profound legacy as the birthplace of valiant warriors and dedicated freedom fighters who made invaluable contributions to India’s arduous struggle for independence. The city’s streets resonate with echoes of the freedom movement, where numerous statues and busts have been strategically positioned, paying homage to these heroic figures. These statues, steeped in historical valour and significance, serve as perpetual reminders of the indomitable spirit that fueled Amritsar’s citizens in their unwavering quest for India’s freedom.

Among these majestic representations of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the equestrian statue adorning the Ram Bagh Gardens in Amritsar, Punjab, stands as a preeminent historical and political emblem. The Ram Bagh Gardens, renowned as Company Bagh, occupy a central and revered position in Amritsar. These gardens, ensconced within the confines of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s erstwhile summer palace, now transformed into a museum, radiate elegance and historical significance. Notably, this expansive locale enjoys protection as a designated monument under the auspices of the Punjab Government, as enshrined in their notification number 1/14/97-TS/2051, dated October 10, 1997. Further elevating its status, these gardens hold a place of distinction as Sacred Sites of India under the CPREEC – EIACP Programme Centre, a Resource Partner on Ecological Heritage and Sacred Sites of India, sponsored by the Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate Change, Govt of India.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, renowned for his indomitable rule, conquered Amritsar in 1802 and frequently visited the city, envisioning and commissioning the creation of Ram Bagh in 1831. This sprawling 84-acre garden, inspired by Emperor Shah Jahan’s Shalimar Garden, remains a cherished oasis adorned with rare flora, meandering water channels, and fountains. At one end stands a commanding equestrian statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, showcasing his regal authority, iconic attire, and martial prowess. The statue portrays him astride a gallant steed, exuding an aura of regal authority. He is resplendent in his iconic attire, including the distinguished turban and royal robes, epitomizing his majestic stature. The sword he wields signifies his martial prowess and the indomitable strength of his empire. The majestic horse itself is adorned with opulent decorations, serving as a vivid testament to the opulence of his rule. The statue is accompanied by

a symbolic eagle statue, representing the Khalsa. These statues in Ram Bagh commemorate the Maharaja's rule, inspiring future generations with his ethos of strength, valour, and unity.

In Town Hall, Amritsar, another statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh at Fawara Chowk stands as a monumental landmark. Elevated on a seven-tiered pedestal, the figure on a regal horse wields a sword, symbolizing martial prowess. The intricately crafted marble base narrates tales of Sikh heritage, battles, and elephants, encapsulating the grandeur of Maharaja's life and visionary legacy. These statues, reflective of his historical significance, contribute to the rich tapestry of Sikh heritage in Amritsar. The bronze statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh at Fawara Chowk, Heritage Street, Amritsar, serves as a constant and commanding reminder of his enduring influence. Strategically placed at an intersection leading to significant sites like Jallianwala Bagh and the Golden Temple, the statue stands tall, crafted with meticulous detail. Mounted on a steed, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's regal bearing is vividly captured, symbolizing power and martial prowess. Surrounding the life-sized figure, the black metal composition features lion faces, elephants, and water curtains, symbolizing the modern-era armaments introduced by him. The statue's grandeur, flanked by Nihangs armed with various weapons, reflects his military genius, administrative reforms, and the unification of the Sikh Empire. Positioned at Fountain Chowk near the historic Town Hall, the statue not only pays homage to Maharaja Ranjit Singh but also accentuates Amritsar's pivotal role in Sikh history and heritage.

Ludhiana, a key administrative centre during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule, reflects the rich Sikh culture and faith of the meticulously organized Sikh Empire. The city houses a grand museum, showcasing artefacts, paintings, and historical documents related to Maharaja Ranjit Singh. A regal statue of the Maharaja stands prominently in the museum, emphasizing his enduring influence. Ludhiana also features memorials dedicated to preserving his memory, with Rakh Bagh Park serving as a living testament to his visionary contributions. The third selected statue of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is located in a war museum along the GT Road, established in 1999. Positioned in a place of honour, the statue symbolizes his leadership qualities amidst military symbols. The museum, dedicated to Punjab's courageous soldiers, houses galleries, artefacts, and exhibits narrating the military history of the region, including Maharaja's valorous tales. The strategic placement of these statues unveils insights into the prevailing ideology and power dynamics of society.

Conclusion

In this intricate dance between art and politics, statues wield the power to shape, provoke, and even subvert the socio-political landscape. They are not merely lifeless effigies; they are the embodiment of a society's soul, a silent yet resounding declaration of its values, ambitions, and beliefs. As we navigate the labyrinthine corridors of history, we must remain acutely aware of the political aura that these statues exude, for they are both mirrors and architects of the societies they adorn. The erection of a statue honouring Maharaja Ranjit Singh holds profound cultural and political significance. Such endeavours extend beyond mere tributes to iconic figures; they are strategic moves in the political arena designed to secure trust and support from the populace. By invoking the legacy of revered historical figures like Ranjit Singh, governments aim to project an image of continuity with a rich cultural heritage, thereby reinforcing their political standing. This intricate interplay between cultural symbolism and political pragmatism reveals the nuanced dynamics within contemporary governance. In conclusion, the statues of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Punjab stand as powerful symbols imbued with profound political significance. They represent Sikh sovereignty, historical inclusivity, and regional identity, while also playing pivotal roles in contemporary political narratives and electoral strategies. The political symbolism associated with these statues underscores their multifaceted importance in shaping Punjab's political landscape. They serve as enduring reminders of a rich and resilient cultural heritage and the legacy of a formidable leader who continues to inspire generations.

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