



**BOOK REVIEW**

## **March to Freedom: Reflections on India's Independence**

**Edited by Mrinalini Venkateswaran. 273 pp. New Delhi, DAG, 2022.**

## **Tipu Sultan: Image and Distance**

**Edited by Giles Tillotson. 175 pp. New Delhi, DAG, 2022.**

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The Delhi Art Gallery (DAG) has become a remarkable phenomenon on the Indian cultural scene. It was founded in 1993 and has, by the skilful buying and selling of Indian art, both built up a major collection of Indian art and become a significant patron of activities relating to it, with centres in New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, and New York. The two volumes under review, in both cases hardback volumes produced to the highest standards, are the catalogues of exhibitions put on by DAG in the summer of 2022. *March to Freedom* is designed to celebrate the 75th anniversary of India's independence. It was planned by Mrinalini Venkateswaran, who is a Leverhulme early career fellow at Royal Holloway, University of London, and was launched at the Indian Museum in Kolkata. *Tipu Sultan* was planned by Giles Tillotson, who was senior vice-president of Exhibitions and Publications at DAG, and the exhibition took place in Delhi.

The artworks selected for *March to Freedom* have come primarily from the DAG collection. They enable us to see, as Venkateswaran tells us, 'how the arts as a whole (from painting to cinema), the economy (and the ordinary people driving it), public spaces (and public use of it) colonial institutions (such as courts, and museums, and universities), infrastructure (notably the railways), and colonised disciplines (such as history and art history) were all repurposed and re-imagined as sites from which to resist colonialism, and shape an independent nation' (p. 11). Eight scholars contribute the essays that expand on these themes. Maroona Murmu points towards those who are underrepresented or forgotten in the official histories of India's freedom movement, such as the Adivasis, Dalits, and the tribes of the north-east. Sumathi Ramaswamy reminds us of how women are frequently overlooked in popular nationalist imagery while, ironically, the female form was the embodiment of the nation. Sujit Sivasundaram, through a fascinating study of the Madras Observatory and the role of Indians in providing the scientific information for longitude calculations, demonstrates the links between trade, science, and political thought. Aashique Ahmed Iqbal, not least through some remarkable Indian Railways posters, tells of how the railways helped Indians to imagine India. Lakshmi Subramaniam discusses the problems, and necessary compromises, in repurposing India's classical musical traditions for national ends. In a similar vein, Pushkar Sohoni demonstrates how a wide range of colonial buildings, including those of New Delhi, have been nationalised for modern Indian purposes. Finally, Aparna Vaidik and

Venkateswaran look at two aspects of India's past that have helped to shape the present. For Vaidik, it is the long shadow of famine and measures to keep it at bay. For Venkateswaran, it is the Indian Princely states and the way in which they have been able to use their cultural capital and artistic assets to carve out for themselves a place in the modern nation.

These visual impressions of India's march to freedom, broadly construed, raise new questions about the process that will not necessarily occur to those who are restricted to print media. Moreover, Venkateswaran's captions are full of information and designed to encourage readers to think beyond what they may be looking at. This renders the whole package a considerable educational aid—an excellent basis for a graduate class on India's freedom movement, for instance.

In 2020, DAG bought a major picture called 'The Last Effort and Fall of Tippoo Sultan' by the British exponent of history painting, Henry Singleton. It was designed for British audiences and had never left Britain. Under the leadership of Tillotson, DAG made it the focus of the first major exhibition to be held in India on Tipu—the sultan who led the last truly effective resistance to the British from his state of Mysore and was killed when the British captured the capital city of Srirangapatam in 1799. The British villainised him whilst celebrating their victory. Indians have had various views according to their ideologies and right-wing Hindus see no reason to celebrate Muslim martyrs.

Tillotson, like Venkateswaran, uses essays by experts to draw out major themes. The Karnataka historian, Janaki Nair, sets out the problems of assessing Tipu's legacy by reviewing the polarised evaluations of him and pointing out positive developmental activity—his modernisation of military technology and revenue collection, and his introduction of new industries, such as sericulture and cattle breeding. She notes his religious faith, but also the pragmatism in matters of religious policy that he had, as did most Mughal rulers. Tillotson is concerned to place history painting relating to Mysore in the context of the development of such work in England and France. Modern historians are rightly not content with the 'gaze' of the white man, so it is good to have an essay about the visual culture of Tipu's court that was written by Savita Kumari of the National Museum Institute, New Delhi. It pays particular attention to the narrative murals on the walls of the Darya Daulat palace at Srirangapatam that were aimed at glorifying Tipu and his father as the most powerful rulers in the Deccan. A particular feature is a great mural showing the defeat of the British forces at the battle of Pollilur in 1780 and the capture of the British commanders, who are made to look very glum. In a fourth essay, Jennifer Howes, a one-time curator of the Visual Arts in the British Library's India Office collections, draws on archival documents that were made after the fall of Srirangapatam in order to identify and reconstruct the stories of many of the women of Tipu's court. Finally, Aditi Mazumdar, a senior executive curator at DAG, looks at some of the accounts of the Mysore war that were written by British soldiers, aiming to see them as the verbal counterparts to the images presented. She notes how European accounts differ from those of the British. May DAG support more work of this quality.