KALA GHODA (BLACK HORSE) STATUE
Mumbai, India
18.9278691, 72.8296424

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Executive Summary

The *Kala Ghoda* (Black Horse) statue is a 16.7-foot-tall bronze statue in Mumbai, India, and a prominent relic of the country's colonial era. The equestrian statue of King Edward VII became contentious during a period of rising nationalistic sentiments opposing symbols of imperial power in newly independent India. It was moved to the Byculla zoo in 1965. Another structure, titled the 'Spirit of *Kala Ghoda*,' depicting a black, riderless horse, was reinstalled in the area in 2017. The case study illustrates India's ambivalent relationship with its colonial past, reframing the popular narrative in public spaces while retaining the contested structure.

Introduction

The *Kala Ghoda* statue is an equestrian statue located in Mumbai, India. The statue displays King Edward VII, King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the British Dominions, and Emperor of India from 1901 to 1910 during its colonial era. The bronze icon was unveiled in 1879 to commemorate the visit of the then-Prince and Princess of Wales. A decade after India gained independence from the British in 1947, a wave of patriotic fervour surfaced that contested the presence of imperial power symbols in public spaces. Monuments of British rulers were vandalised, relocated, and replaced with statues of national or regional heroes. During this period, the *Kala Ghoda* statue came under heat, too, and was relocated to the Byculla Zoo in 1965. However, the area around the statue, which came to be called the '*Kala Ghoda* district,' retained its shorthand name. Half a century later, in 2017, the Kala Ghoda Association (KGA) constructed another 25-foot-tall statue titled the 'Spirit of *Kala Ghoda*,' which displayed a black horse without a rider. The statue was placed in the *Kala Ghoda* district as a compromise to denote the precinct's history without colonialist connotations.

Background

Origins of the Kala Ghoda

The bronze sculpture polished to a black sheen - hence the name *Kala* (Black) *Ghoda* - was intended to commemorate the visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales to India in 1879. The statue was commissioned by Sir Albert David Sassoon and unveiled on June 29, 1879, at the junction of Esplanade Road and Rampart Row.[1] Albert Sassoon was a Jewish businessman and philanthropist belonging to one of the founding families of Mumbai.[2] The family's philanthropic contributions to the city were plentiful, including the David Sassoon Library, opposite which the statue was originally placed. The 16.7-foot-tall[3] statue was carved by the well-known London-based sculptor Joseph Edgar Boehm for 12,500 pounds sterling. It depicted the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) in military attire with a sword hanging by his side, astride a horse mounted on a tall pedestal.[4] Horses were typically tools of war and hence symbolised military might. Similarly, the *Kala Ghoda* symbolised imperial power and is a remnant of the city's colonial era,[5] seeking to portray King Edward VII in a heroic light. Over time, the locals began identifying the general area as '*Kala Ghoda*.'[6]

One can find some evidence of resistance against British artefacts in pre-independent India; for instance, Queen Victoria's bust was smeared with tar and lime in 1896, and the bubonic plague that spread in Pune later was seen as a 'curse' of the queen.[7] An uprising took place protesting the

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[1] Hindustan Times, "Meet the original Kala Ghoda, and other colonial rejects cast in stone," *Hindustan Times*, January 5, 2017
[2] Anshika Jain, "The Tale of the Kala Ghoda," Live History India, November 12, 2018.
[3] Hindustan Times, "Meet the original Kala Ghoda, and other colonial rejects cast in stone," *Hindustan Times*, January 5, 2017
[4] Anshika Jain, "The Tale of the Kala Ghoda," Live History India, November 12, 2018.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Simi Kamboj, "Kala Ghoda Arts Festival," RitiRiwaz, N.A.
[7] Manimugdha S. Sharma, "What statue-topplers around the world can learn from India," *Times of India*, September 3, 2017.

memorial for the unpopular retiring governor Lord Willingdon in 1918.[8] However, these instances were few, and not every imperial authority figure was despised. Some were revered. Lord Cornwallis' statue in Mumbai was worshipped with garlands and coconuts in the early 1800s and had to be ringed with an iron fence because people used to offer *puja* (worship) and put vermillion on it.[9] The contestation of these colonial relics only grew in intensity a decade after independence, and a wave of patriotic zeal in the 1960s called for removing statues of British rulers. It was believed that they epitomised imperial power and should not be placed in places of prominence around newly independent India's cities. As a result, the equestrian statue was moved to the Byculla Zoo in 1965 and remained there to date.[10] The statue's original place was taken up by an equestrian statue of Chatrapati Shivaji, a Maratha warrior, and the latter too was eventually moved to the Gateway of India. A local legend claims that the statues of King Edward and that of Shivaji 'came to life after midnight and battled it out on the streets.'[11] While many supported the removal of the *Kala Ghoda*, some also deemed efforts to erase the city's colonial past and engage in vandalism disguised as 'patriotism' unproductive and worrisome. Either way, the shorthand way of referring to the area as '*Kala Ghoda'* remained.

Contemporary Namesake: Kala Ghoda Art District

In 1998, the Urban Design Research Institute (UDRI) formed an association of users and building owners in the *Kala Ghoda* area called the Kala Ghoda Association (KGA) to convert the site into a flourishing arts district.[12] The committee began by mapping out an area of South Bombay with historical significance and whose buildings warrant heritage preservation. They commenced an annual nine-day-long multicultural arts festival - Kala Ghoda festival - in 1999 to bring the area into public focus. A provider of edifying arts entertainment, the KGA maintained that the festival aimed to help the city 'dig back the values that were always around before Page Three (society page) took over."[13] Beyond the music, food and art, the committee's main goal was to produce a certain kind of urban space. Since 1999, the association has shifted its focus from architectural presentation to enhancing public spaces- cleaning the neighbourhood, repair of sidewalks, installation of benches etc.[14]

Currently, '*Kala Ghoda'* denotes a premier crescent-shaped art district in Mumbai that houses several art galleries, museums, libraries, designer boutiques, restaurants and cafes. Some of the major buildings contained in the area include Jehangir Art Gallery, Prince of Wales Museum, National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay University, Elphinstone College and David Sassoon Library. The district roughly covers the distance between the Regal Circle at the Mahatma Gandhi Road in the South up to the Mumbai University at the northern end, flanked by the Oval Maidan to the west and

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[8] Vaishnavi Chandrashekhar, "How colonial statues vanished from India's cities," *Times of India*, June 29, 2020.

[9] Manimugdha S. Sharma, "What statue-topplers around the world can learn from India," *Times of India*, September 3, 2017.

[10] Pedal and Tring Tring, "If Statues Could Speak?" March 20, 2021.

[11] Vadukut, Sidin Vadukut, "Revenge of the native," Live Mint, August 8, 2008.

[12] Urban Design Research Institute, "Kala Ghoda Area Conservation Plan", Urban Design Research Institute, August 19, 2016.

[13] Karin Zitzewitz, *The Aesthetics of Secularism: Modernist Art and Visual Culture in India* (PhD, Columbia University, 2006), 137.

[14] Ibid., 139.

the Lion Gate to the east.[15] The area takes its name from the equestrian statue of King Edward VII, which was placed here previously, and the precinct has transformed into an important cultural hub and throbbing urban node.

History of the Contestation

National Context

India paid little attention to its colonial relics in the first decades after independence. In the Ambassador report of 1954, Chester Bowles - the U.S. ambassador to India during 1950-53 - expressed surprise at how Indian streets were still named after British Viceroys, whereas the rest of the world was busy protesting statues of colonial rulers.[16] The conversation surrounding colonial statues and their symbolism in public spaces gained momentum only in the late 1950s, during the preparation for the centenary celebration of the 1857 revolt, often dubbed as the country's first struggle for independence.[17] In 1957, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru announced that the colonial-era statues be split into three categories and dealt with accordingly; those that threatened national identity, those with historical significance, and those that were merely 'artistic,'[18] Nehru himself believed that India's colonial past is part of its history and neither can nor should be effaced. He also feared straining diplomatic relations with the U.K. over such controversies.[19] However, there was growing pressure from the Hindu-right wing and socialist factions to oppose statues of British power occupying prominent spaces in cities.

A similar rationale permeated public sentiment in the city of Mumbai. In November 1947, the municipal council in Bombay removed marble busts of Queen Victoria and those of three former British mayors from its Corporation Hall.[20] Several relics of colonial rule were vandalised, and much of the damage happened during the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement in the 1950s-60s, which advocated for a separate Marathi-speaking state. Ahead of the Independence Day celebration in 1965, on August 10, marble statues of Lord Cornwallis and Lord Wellesley were decapitated.[21] During this period of patriotic fervour, several statues were removed from public places and put in museums, namely the Prince of Wales museum and Bhau Daji Lad (BDL) museum.[22] Several agitators demanded not the destruction of the structures but their rehabilitation in museums, instead of places of prominence around the city.[23]

Renaming streets and cities, removing colonial statues and structures, and opposing British-era laws and regulations became popular ways for citizens of independent India to reclaim their identity from the colonial rulers. This was also reflected in Mumbai's subsequent renaming; Previously known as

[15] Kala Ghoda Association, "Kala Ghoda Art Precinct," 2016.

[16] Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, "Statues That Travelled: The India Story," *Outlook India*, February 5, 2022.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Sarah Ansari, "How statues fared after independence," The Guardian, June 19, 2020.

[19] Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, "Statues That Travelled: The India Story," *Outlook India*, February 5, 2022.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Manimugdha S. Sharma, "What statue-topplers around the world can learn from India," *Times of India*, September 3, 2017.

[23] Ibid.

'Bombay,' the city's official name was changed to 'Mumbai' by the far-right regional political party Shiv Sena in 1995, who saw 'Bombay' as a legacy of British colonialism.Instead, the name 'Mumbai' is derived from the city's patron deity and *Aai* (mother), Goddess Mumbadevi, and was believed to reflect the city's Maratha heritage better. With its colonial past, it reframed the popular narrative in public spaces while retaining the contested structure. [24]

The Kala Ghoda Statue

Amidst this nationalist fervour, the *Kala Ghoda* became a ground of contestation; several activists argued that the presence of an imperial authority figure in the middle of newly independent India's financial capital undermined the country's patriotic spirit.[25] Rather than a targeted attack against King Edward VII's legacy, the controversy surrounding the *Kala Ghoda* statue was part of a larger national narrative being constructed, questioning the significance of colonial statues in independent India and what their presence in public spaces epitomised. On August 12 1965, the 'Samyukta Socialist Party' - a political party in India at the time - warned the union government that if it did not remove the *Kala Ghoda* statue by independence day (August 15), the *Zopadi Sangh*[26] would do it themselves. Mr George Fernandes, president of the *Zopadi Sangh*, described the damage done to other colonial statues in Mumbai as an act of patriotism rather than vandalism.[27] In another letter to the British High Commissioner, he wrote that if the statues were to be preserved, they should be kept in museums. Thus, in response to the threats, the bronze sculpture, like many others, was moved to the *Veermata Jijabai Bhosale Udyan* - commonly known as Byculla Zoo and accessible through the Bhau Daji Lad Museum.[28] An article in *The Times of India* in 1975 called the zoo a 'graveyard for old colonial statues,' and claimed that the *Kala Ghoda* statue was removed by the municipal demolition squad overnight in a midnight operation in the 'fastest job done by the municipality in its entire history,'[29]

However, the district surrounding the original *Kala Ghoda* statue continued to be called the *Kala Ghoda* district by the locals. Subsequently, a non-profit - the *Kala Ghoda* Association - was established in October 1998 to maintain and preserve art and heritage and upgrade the *Kala Ghoda* district to the premier art district of Mumbai.[30] They instituted an annual festival called the *Kala Ghoda* Arts Festival in 1999. The festivities were divided into visual arts, dance, theatre, music, films, and literature categories. The multicultural festival has grown considerably, attracting visitors from all over the country.[31] '*Kala Ghoda*' thus remained an important pin code synonymous with a locality housing many of Mumbai's iconic landmarks long after the physical origins of the name had disappeared. The inhabitants and stakeholders agreed that the neighbourhood needed something new to represent the precinct and its name.[32] In 2017, a new statue was erected close to the original site titled the 'Spirit of *Kala Ghoda*,' The new statue depicted a black, riderless horse and was a

[24] Sridevi Nambiar, "A Brief History Of How Bombay Became Mumbai." Culture Trip, September 19, 2016.
[25] Mumbai guide, "Kala Ghoda in Mumbai - History, Festival, Things to Do, Attractions (2021)," mumbai7.com, 2021.
[26] A hutmen association in Mumbai at the time
[27] Times of India, "3 Months' Needs In Advance Wanted," Times of India, August 12, 1965.
[28] Mumbai guide, "Kala Ghoda in Mumbai - History, Festival, Things to Do, Attractions (2021)," mumbai7.com, 2021.
[29] Times of India, "City Lights: GRAVEYARD FOR STATUES," *Times of India*, December 22, 1975.
[30] Simi Kamboj, "Kala Ghoda Arts Festival," RitiRiwaz, N.A.
[31] Mumbai guide, "Kala Ghoda in Mumbai - History, Festival, Things to Do, Attractions (2021)," mumbai7.com, 2021.
[32] Ibid.

clever compromise to evoke the precinct's history without its colonial connotations.[33] The new 25-foot-tall statue was donated by the *Kala Ghoda* Association (KGA), who stated that they did not want to restore, replicate or allude to the original legislation but 'focus on the future instead.' It also served as a symbolic art installation against the backdrop of the *Kala Ghoda* Arts Festival.[34]

Decision-Making Processes

National Context

Shortly after independence, the movement to resist colonial statues gained momentum. In 1947, the Bombay Municipal Corporation resolved to remove all such busts from its corporation hall and replace them with statues of Indians. This decision met significant opposition, and some members claimed that Indians were against British imperialism, not against the British people.[35] They claimed that the resolution smacked 'racialism of such a morbid character.'[36] In any case, growing political pressure forced the government to take a firmer stance on the issue. In the *Lok Sabha*[37] assembly of May 13, 1957, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru stated that the government had a three-pronged policy to deal with the issue; statues possessing historical significance would be moved to the museum, statues sans historical or aesthetic value could be given away to people willing to take them, and those considered offensive to national sentiments would be removed but gradually, 'in a manner so as not to create international ill-will and raise old questions which are dead and gone.'[38]

Remedy: 'Spirit of Kala Ghoda'

In 2015, the *Kala Ghoda* Association suggested installing a replica of the original statue at the same spot the previous one stood. However, the Mumbai Heritage Conservation Committee (MHCC) believed that historic sites should not be tampered with by the installation of non-historic structures.[39] After careful deliberation, the MHCC approved the proposal for the new installation in August 2016, a few metres away from the original statue at the Rhythm House junction. The new statue, christened 'Spirit of *Kala Ghoda*,' displayed a black horse without a rider. An official from the MHCC stated:

> We definitely cannot fix the original one there as it was removed during a political uprising. Especially, with the elections around the corner, we did not want to create any controversy. We are not even calling the new installation '*Kala Ghoda*,' It is an art installation, of a horse without a rider. As the *Kala Ghoda* art festival happens here, it will be a good icon.[40]

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[33] Anshika Jain, "The Tale of the Kala Ghoda," Live History India, November 12, 2018.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Manimugdha S. Sharma, "What statue-topplers around the world can learn from India," *Times of India*, September 3, 2017.
[36] Ibid.
[37] the lower house of the bicameral Parliament of India
[38] Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, "Statues That Travelled: The India Story," *Outlook India*, February 5, 2022.
[39] Eeshanpriya M.S., "Kala Ghoda statue to stand tall without rider," *Asian Age*, August 19, 2016.
[40] Ibid.

Figure 1: "The Spirit of Kala Ghoda" Image by avia via Flickr CC BY 2.0

Thus, the new bronze statue was meant to serve as a tourist attraction to symbolically commemorate the original statue, as the 'area of *Kala Ghoda* gets its name due to the statue after all.'[41] It was erected as an art installation, consistent with the *Kala Ghoda* precinct's identity as a leading arts district. The heritage committee decided to not erect the 'Spirit of *Kala Ghoda*' at the same spot as the original statue because it might 'distort history' and confuse future generations.[42] The KGA wanted to create a symbol of the future and not reminisce about the past, stating in a press release that the 'Spirit of *Kala Ghoda*' embodies 'the essence of art, culture and the free flow of ideas.'[43] The association constructed the statue with a budget of over five Lakh rupees over a period of six months, and the 'Spirit of *Kala Ghoda*' was designed by architect Alfaz Miller and carved by sculptor Shreehari Bhosle. The statue was unveiled by then Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, a right-wing *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) member.[44]

Future Considerations

The targeting of the *Kala Ghoda* statue was less concerned with the actual object, event or person and more bothered by what it symbolised. Historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta noted that 'what often matters more is the places of prominence they occupy, and when that politically becomes

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[41] Eeshanpriya M.S., "Kala Ghoda statue to stand tall without rider," *The Asian Age*, August 19, 2016.

[42] Arun Janardhan, "Letters from …a statue," Live Mint, January 7, 2017.

[43] The Indian Express, "Over 50 yrs on, Kala ghoda returns today," *Indian Express*, January 3, 2017.

[44] NMTV, "CM Devendra Fadnavis unveils iconic Kala Ghoda statue in Mumbai," NMTV, January 4, 2017.

unacceptable.'[45] The once idolised statue of Lord Cornwallis was beheaded during the 1960s fervour. Unlike other parts of the world like the U.K. and the U.S., which saw more dramatic protests, India's dealing with its colonial statues was less sensational. Relegating them to museums and parks was the country's way of stripping them of their authority. Historian Gyan Prakash wrote about how the riderless black horse symbolises the 'ruination of colonial mastery' and the post-presence of colonial monuments and remnants 'without the halo that once gave them power,'[46] Art Historian and Honorary Director of the BDL Museum Tanseem Zakaria Mehta explicated on how the statues in the museum were of high artistic quality and carved by well-known sculptors, however, to put them in popular public squares is to describe them as figures worth our adulation. Thus, there is a need for public consensus on the figure's fundamental values.[47]

However, some are of the opinion that a postcolonial appropriation of the statues and replacement with national or regional icons is unproductive and cannot erase a country's colonial past. The argument is to see people in the social milieu and context they lived in rather than hold them to contemporary standards. The replacement of artefacts in the public space is a deeply political exercise, and new governments may negate current moves in the future.[48] Instead, the profligacy can be replaced with practicality and resources utilised to provide educational infrastructure, public transport, medical care etc., and to maintain the existing monuments.[49] Explicating Mumbai's experience of its colonial past in public spaces, Gyan Prakash further expresses:

> Colonialism has been dispatched to the museum, and the postcolonial present summons Shivaji, Mahatma Gandhi, Bhagat Singh, Dadabhai Naoroji, and other regional and national icons to provide a different cultural significance to the city's topography. But all this effort at erasing history cannot expunge Mumbai's colonial past. Like King Edward, the colonial past refuses to be consigned to the museum.[50]

> By Indianizing street and building names, by officially renaming Bombay Mumbai, the postcolonial present suggests that colonial rule is over. Charting transformations primarily in terms of native-versus-alien rule, however, is to miss the histories lodged in the city's doubly parasitical birth and development. It assumes that the colonial past can be bleached out of Mumbai's historical existence as a metropolis and neatly appropriated by the postcolonial era.[51]

Summary and Conclusions

This case study sheds light on the shifting context of relics from India's past, explicating the different values they embodied for different factions in different eras. Only a decade after India's independence, some political and social groups felt the need to demonstrate their repugnance for the imperial authority figures publicly. Nevertheless, the protests still lacked the intensity of other postcolonial countries; the only demand was for the statues to be relegated to museums and parks

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[45] Vaishnavi Chandrashekhar, "How colonial statues vanished from India's cities," *Times of India*, June 29, 2020.

[46] Gyan Prakash, Mumbai Fables (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2010), 29.

[47] Manimugdha S. Sharma, "What statue-topplers around the world can learn from India," *Times of India*, September 3, 2017.

[48] Arun Janardhan, "Letters from ...a statue," Live Mint, January 7, 2017.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Gyan Prakash, Mumbai Fables (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2010), 26.

[51] Ibid.

instead of adorning important centres in the city. The overnight removal of the *Kala Ghoda* statue amidst a feeble number of spectators in 1965 stands in stark contrast to the 'pomp and pageantry' with which it was installed in 1879.[52] The 'Spirit of *Kala Ghoda*,' a counter-monument erected half a decade later in 2017, was neither part of any political agendas nor the result of popular desire from the citizens of Mumbai. The figurine of a black horse with an absconding rider was thought by some to be 'forced iconography' to 'create false memories,' to justify the historic designation of the area and the curious lack of a '*Kala Ghoda*' (Black Horse) in an oversimplified manner.[53] On the other hand, some thought it a clever compromise that carefully reframed the historical narrative in the public sphere without complete erasure of the original account, retaining the contested structure deprived of the colonial connotations. The case study invites reflection on the importance of symbols and the democratic challenge of continually reassessing historical narratives.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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