

BOOK REVIEWS

Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations (eds.) V.R. Mehta and Thomas Pantham, Sage, New Delhi, pp. 481, 2006

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Compiled by two veteran political theorists, V.R. Mehta and Thomas Pantham, *Political Ideas in Modern India* is one of the doorstopper volumes in the series on 'History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization' being published under the general editorship of the senior philosopher D.P. Chattopadhyaya. The objective of the mammoth series, launched in 1990 and sponsored by the Government of India, is to probe "the interconnection between science, philosophy and culture as they developed in the long history of Indian civilization" by tapping primary source materials in classical and modern Indian languages (<http://csc-india.in/history.html>). In the editorial introduction, Pantham and Mehta claim that the book seeks to illuminate "the main ideas and ideals, whose contextual meanings and configurations made up the political world envisioned by the political and intellectual leaders of colonial and postcolonial India" (p. xxvii). To this end, they have assembled two dozen essays contributed by a team of scholars spanning three generations and from the following disciplines: political science, international relations, law, history, philosophy and literary studies.

The first section of the book features four essays on social reform and radical politics under colonial modernity. Bidyut Chakrabarty covers a large canvas and summarizes a sizeable scholarly corpus in his overview of 'radical thought' in colonial India. But it remains unclear what purpose is served by subsuming disparate thinkers like Rammohan Roy, Jotiba Phule, Aurobindo Ghosh and M.K. Gandhi under the omnibus category of 'radicalism'. Sanjay Palshikar's essay examines the ideas of militant nationalists in colonial Maharashtra and interrogates B.G. Tilak's and V.D. Savarkar's construction of an aggressive, anti-Muslim masculinist politics within a Hindu revivalist framework. He laments but does not explain the current resurgence of 'masculinized nationalism' and the eclipse of the Gandhian socialist alternative proffered by S.D. Javdekar.

Valerian Rodrigues focuses on the century-long quest of *bahujan*

and *dalit* intellectuals from Jotiba Phule to B.R. Ambedkar for empowerment via modern education, a regime of equal rights, a substantive democracy based on communal representation and preferential policies as well as the creation of an equitable, gender-just social order suffused with the spirit of Buddhism. He presents the *bahujan/dalit* discourse primarily through a hermeneutics of trust, lightly touching on its fault-lines which have come to the fore in the post-Independence period. Partha Chatterjee provides a fresh perspective on Ambedkar's thought by treating it as a counterpoint to Benedict Anderson's influential theory of nationalism, which treats nations as unbound serialities that inhabit the empty homogeneous time of modernity and transcend the parochialism of ethnic politics. Chatterjee argues that Ambedkar granted the importance of modern universal citizenship and endorsed the value of unbound serialities; but he perceived the actually existing nation as comprising bound serialities in dense, heterogeneous time and demanded sufficient political representation for the underprivileged.

The second section deals with history, literature and political imaginations in colonial India. It opens with Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay that draws out the implications of Subaltern Studies for political theory and underscores the imperative of redefining non-Western politics through an alternative understanding of fundamental categories like time, agency, community and democracy. Chatterjee's contribution to this volume may be seen as an apt illustration of how such investigations can be conducted. In a rambling, conversational essay sans footnotes, G.P. Deshpande charts the terrain of the Marathi public sphere by tracking key debates on religion, caste, language, history and political power. Noting the contradictory coexistence of a radical intellectual legacy and regressive practice in contemporary Maharashtra, Deshpande attributes it to the potentially progressive *dalit-bahujan* movement's myopic neglect of imperialism, and its failure to grasp the changing nature of caste and agrarian relations.

Sitanshu Yashaschandra dives deep into the history of Gujarat to scrutinize the semiotics of social and political thought in the state through an *anekaanta* (plural) mode of reading which was first formulated in 1592 by the Jain monk Samyasundar. He alludes to the writings of the nineteenth-century intellectual Narmadashankar Dave, who insisted that '*Hindusthaan*' was much larger than 'British India', and sees M.K. Gandhi as drawing on a variety of regional traditions to amplify and deepen this epistemic-political modality

of challenging colonial hegemony. Harish Trivedi deftly explores the visions of politics reflected in Hindi fiction by comparing two novels: Bhagavati Charan Varma's *Terhe-Merhe Raste* (*Zig-Zag Ways*, 1946) and Rangeya Raghav's *Seedha-Sada Rasta* (*The Straight and Simple Path*, 1951). While the former expresses a 'liberal gloom' and takes a skeptical view of all ideologies, the latter—explicitly conceived as a critique of Varma's novel—sets out to celebrate Marxism, but vindicating Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the novel as an essentially dialogic literary form, ends up presenting an ambivalent, complex portrayal of political possibilities.

The third and bulkiest section dwells on religious diversity and nationalist imaginations. Pratap Bhanu Mehta explains the dynamics triggered by anti-colonial nationalism which led the hierarchically ordered Hindu society to develop a *modus vivendi* with liberal democracy. He also exposes the anti-democratic character of the Hindutva-centric identity politics preached by Savarkar and his acolytes. Gurpreet Mahajan analyzes the interplay of majoritarianism and minoritarianism in the construction of India's multicultural democratic polity. She pertinently observes that the primacy granted to the community relegates questions of individual liberty and equality for vulnerable groups to a secondary position. Mushirul Hasan criticizes the tendency to view Indian Muslims as a homogeneous entity and sheds light on their multiple identities. He advises them to continue forging cross-community linkages within the framework of the country's secular democracy.

Fred Dallmayr reveals the flaws in M.A. Jinnah's project of anchoring the State in essentialized modes of religion and nationhood. He commends Gandhi's creative orthopraxis which could counteract hegemonic State structures and promote inter-societal, cross-cultural goodwill. Thomas Pantham condemns the conflation of Gandhi's political philosophy with Savarkarite Hindutva. He clearly brings out the contrast between the inclusive, moral character of the former and the exclusionary, instrumental thrust of the latter. Vasanthi Srinivasan critically surveys the attempts made by Ananda Coomarswamy, S. Radhakrishnan and C. Rajagopalachari to spiritualize politics. Acknowledging the aporias involved in reconciling the dictates of ancient wisdom with liberal norms and noting the violence unleashed by the liberal ideology of progress, she recommends the eschewal of overarching first principles in favour of a 'spirited liberalism'.

Liberal-secular democracy and social/gender justice constitute the thematic rubric of the fourth section, which is almost as lengthy

as the previous one. Reflecting on the Indian constitutional order, Upendra Baxi applauds its resistance to predatory forms of sovereign power. However, he deplors its subservience to the interests of the dominant classes and counsels a justice-and-rights-based conception of constitutionalism as a corrective. Rajeev Bhargava characterizes Indian secularism as a multi-value doctrine that safeguards tolerance, individual liberty and minority rights, even as it sanctions principled State intervention in religion. He stresses its distinctiveness and projects its trans-cultural potential. Akeel Bilgrami defends secular liberalism vis-à-vis advocates of religious-identitarian politics. He deploys a fraternal humanism to persuade the latter that they are wrong in terms of their own values.

Rochana Bajpai plots the changing perceptions of social justice in India through the lens of the controversy over reservations for the Other Backward Classes. She finds that equality and justice are now valued for their own sake; but not entirely at the cost of the Constituent Assembly's emphasis on relating them to the supposedly larger considerations of national unity and development. Nivedita Menon dissects the debate around the Uniform Civil Code and the Women's Reservation Bill. She critiques the attempts to recuperate these proposed reforms within majoritarian or communitarian agendas and reaches the conclusion that the struggle for gender justice requires an open-ended emancipatory (re)construction and inflection of the category 'woman' through the optics of other identities like caste.

The fifth section entitled 'Towards a Just and Peaceful World' features an essay by Kanti Bajpai, who maps four Indian conceptions of order/justice in international relations. The Nehruvian notion which remained dominant for long reckoned with the reality of the Westphalian inter-state system; but sought to leaven it through the practice of non-alignment. The Gandhian worldview envisaged a transnational community comprising equitable and peaceable local communities. The ideologues of Hindutva expect India to play a major role in an inescapably hierarchical international order on the basis of the country's presumed civilizational superiority. The neo-liberal school visualizes an emerging globalized scenario where economic integration will lead to a softening of state sovereignty, resulting in universal standards of governance and an accent on human security. Bajpai regrets the waning of the Gandhian conception and anticipates a three-way conversation involving vestigial Nehruvianism, a somewhat sober Hindu nationalism and a nascent neo-liberalism.

The sixth and concluding section considers some concerns of recent Indian political thought. Javeed Alam furnishes a comradely assessment of communist theory and practice in India. He holds that the communists have shown a sure grasp of old-style class politics; but they are unable to grapple with the struggle against caste oppression and the new social movements, nor can they effectively resist the twin assaults of imperialist globalization and communal-fascism. Rajaram Tolpady revisits the ideas and interventions of Ram Manohar Lohiya and Jayprakash Narayan. He highlights the originality of Lohiya's civil-societal socialism and lauds Narayan's reinvention of *sarvodaya*. Despite their inclusion in the section on recent concerns, both the essays seem to be gesturing towards rapidly receding horizons.

Sarah Joseph offers a useful *tour d'horizon* of certain prominent critics of modernity, who have come to the fore since the 1980s: Ashis Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj and Dipesh Chakrabarty. She appreciates their insights into the communitarian pluralism of Indian society, but holds that they remain trapped in a culturalist framework and fail to overcome the limitations of the tradition-modernity dichotomy. In a refreshing review of the conceptual framework governing the Indian polity, Bhikhu Parekh calls for a revision of some of its central components. He uncovers the fallacies inherent in treating the policy of caste-based quotas as a panacea for 'backwardness' and urges the adoption of a programme of educational and economic assistance targeting the relevant communities. His other proposals pertain to the regulation of judicial activism, promoting new ways of empowering citizens, and strengthening national integration by imaginatively revitalizing the country's rich pluricultural heritage.

The predominance of liberal and left-leaning authors gives the book a pronounced ideological slant and generates monotony. An excessive preoccupation with caste, religion and culture to the relative neglect of the new challenges posed by issues concerning technology, environment and political economy makes the collection of essays a better window on the past than on the future. The quality of copy-editing leaves much to be desired. In spite of such shortcomings, it can be said that on the whole, this substantial volume will serve as an indispensable guide to those seeking a deeper understanding of political discourse in modern India.