

Reason(s), Culture and Civilization

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Hulas Singh, *Rise of Reason: Intellectual History of 19th-Century Maharashtra*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, New Delhi, London, New York, 2016.

Indian rationality, on the other hand, could not emerge since ancient times as a self-contained system of thought, as an independent epistemology. It remained deeply embedded in the overall holistic world-view of life and cosmology. Reason in India had more of a practical rather than purely epistemological orientation. Holism and monism dominated the intellectual world view in pre-British times with spiritual salvation as the practical aim of human wish and efforts. In this world view, afterlife was prized more than this life, at least at the ideational level. (p. 26)

By arguing along the above mentioned logic, Hulas Singh has successfully questioned few well established notions of Indian History as well as proposed a fresh line of investigation to understand the intellectual history of India, especially for modern times. His definition of intellect and intellectual is particularly important for a student of history in general and Indian History in particular, as it avoids their reduction merely to questions of science and technology. Although the author himself makes no such clear cut delineation in the monograph yet one can discern in his writing the argument that it is a misplaced notion that intellect and reason cannot be imagined without developments in science and technology. Locating the history of intellect and reason in the sole domain of science and technology distorts the very basis of historical investigations.

It is equally important to appreciate the manner in which the author has characterized intellect. 'Intellection is essentially a process of cognition through the prism of reason'. The author does not stop here, rather, he qualifies this statement by emphasizing the intention of intellect. He suggests: 'Intellectuals by the very character of their calling are primarily concerned with the present state of affairs which they try to improve. Change, the core of intellectual concern, has to be brought about in the present, and not in the past' (p. 6). This qualified formulation distinguishes him from those who are eager to

locate every development in the 'glorious past' of 'ancient India'. To counter such a perspective, the author forcefully suggests that 'conceptually, "intellectuality" militates against any kind of primordiality or restrictiveness, be it class or group; its openness and open-endedness are its strength, not weaknesses' (p. 6). In an era when the highest political dispensation itself is justifying attempts to seek the roots of every 'development' in the 'glorious past' of 'ancient India', such attempts attain greater significance. Monographs like this can be very useful in offering a more appropriate and nuanced perspective on the intellectual traditions discernible in the Indian past.

While addressing another well-established notion of history that 'the manifestation of reason as a powerful intellectual advocacy in Europe, particularly during the days of Enlightenment, has led many a scholar to believe in its European ancestry', the author proposed two lines of investigations. Firstly, he examines the supposed 'automatic antagonism or hiatus between scientific developments and religion or the church'. His analysis of the 'antagonism or hiatus' leads him to a second line of investigation which suggests that there are multiple paths through which modernity emerges, the Enlightenment not being the sole one. The author states: 'The excessive idealization of the Enlightenment further obfuscates the fact that its rationalistic seeds were actually sown within the Christian tradition itself. ... Thus it would be difficult to defend that the development of reason as a critical tool was the outcome of the Enlightenment and that the Enlightenment ethos is inherently irreverent to religion' (p. 20). This line of investigation offers him the space to locate 'indigenous' or 'local' roots of 'reason' and 'rationality' in non-European societies, one of the significant contributions of this well researched monograph.

In his attempt to critically revisit the 'Eurocentric' origin of reason and rationality, the author begins with an exploration of the long established traditions of social questioning in nineteenth century India. To further trace the local roots of reason and rationality, he deliberately and quite necessarily shifts his investigations from the

Indian National Congress to the proceedings of the Indian National Social Conference, an often neglected but very important source to understand social movements. Singh points out that Rammohan Roy, the pioneer of 'Indian Renaissance', in his first extant work *Tuhafat-ul-Muwahhidin*, suggests that 'the worth of a religion is to be evaluated in terms of 'reason' and 'social good' that it intends to hold and uphold' which are 'predominantly Islamic; the imprints of Western ideas is at best negligible, if not totally non-existent' (p. 89). The work thus emphasizes the pre-British origins of 'reason'.

The spirit of rational questioning in the Indian past gave rise both to the Bhakti traditions and later the 'Indian Renaissance'. These have been traditionally attributed to the influence of the British education system and culture. The examination of this question offers an opportunity to Singh to make a very important departure from existing historiography. On the one hand he revisits Bengal-centric explanations of the 'rise of reasoning' during the British period and on the other, he critically evaluates 'solutions' envisioned by intellectual during the long 19th century. Hulas Singh makes an important distinction between the influence/imitation of 'British culture' and 'British civilization'. The author argues that the 'nationalistic orientation of the nineteenth century rationalist thought in Maharashtra was also palpable in their approach to the West. They made a conscious choice in favour of adoption and adaptation of modern Western civilization as against Western culture. The demarcation between culture and civilization was sharper and more conspicuous in Maharashtra than in Bengal' (p. 228). The same has been suggested by Hazari Prasad Dwivedi when he highlights the fact that the translation of the term 'independence' in India is 'Swadheenta', i.e., control of self or self-governance as a guiding principle for governance, reminiscent of a long historical tradition.

To elaborate the point further, the author argues: 'As it was, the intellectuals in nineteenth-century Maharashtra as elsewhere were confronted with the claims of Western civilization as well as those of Western culture, both more or less being poured into the country as part of the process of colonial hegemonisation. Reformers in Maharashtra opted for the former and rejected the latter which practically meant rejection of Anglicisation as a way of cultural colonization. The material aspects of modern Western society, that is its advancement in science and technology, education and industrialization, were preferred to the Western way of living, their religion, theology, mode of social interaction, etc., that largely denote an existential cultural complex' (p. 231).

Hulas Singh suggests a couple of plausible reasons for this distinction: Primarily, the middle class in Maharashtra had a long history and it was able to

survive even in the post-1818 phase because they were 'able to grab the new opportunities which the new administration and the introduction of English education presented, and they entered into large-scale employment in British government' (p. 235). Secondly, he suggests that 'Maharashtra did not bear the brunt of colonialism for as prolonged a period as Bengal did (and) as a result colonialism was not able to sap the self-confidence of its people, particularly the middle class, to the extent it could do in Eastern India' (p. 235).

Singh has pointed out that along with several marked features, insistence on moral values was the hallmark of this phase. 'Morality constituted the cornerstone of the endogenous normative order, and the Maharashtra intellectuals came very strong on this question. They did not dream of a society based on some sort of a value-neutral rationality but insisted that social order must have a moral foundation to be viable' (p. 251-52). Thus, he once again stresses the argument that in the Indian context, questions of spirituality and morality cannot be segregated from their vision of nation and nationalism. 'The intellectual link with the past in the nineteenth century was a matter more of the head than of the heart. It was based more on erudition than on emotion' (p. 264).

Last but not the least, the author very forcefully points out that the revivalist tendencies in nineteenth century Maharashtra cannot be termed as blind reverence for the past but rather rationality driven. He concludes: 'Revival as no option was not within the ken of nineteenth-century thought in Maharashtra. The intellectuals' bent towards the Vedas was not blind; they were highly selective in their choice. The past had no sanctity if it was bereft of its utility to the needs of the present conditions. They had no hesitation to repudiate that part of the past which was unsuited to the demands of modern times' (p. 269).

Such analysis makes this monograph highly polemical as it transcends barrier of ideological positions and makes earnest efforts to revisit several well established narratives for nineteenth century India in general and Maharashtra in particular. A major strength of the work lies in the quotations from primary sources, so that there is an effort to reduce subjectivity and allow the reader to draw his/her own conclusions. Uncomfortable positions taken by the intellectuals have not been set aside but rather presented before the reader to flag the complex issues at hand, including that of the complexities of social and individual experiences and responses. I am afraid that the greatest strength of the monograph will limit its acceptance across ideological positions. For that reason, it is a must read for anybody who is keen to understand the complexities of cultural-intellectual interactions in the evolution of long term civilisational processes.