

# The frames of the translator

UDAYA KUMAR

Marthanda Varma

by C. V. Raman Pillai

(translated from Malayalam by B. K. Menon)

Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi,

1998; 382 pp; Rs. 150

The grand pioneers of the Malayalam novel, C. V. Raman Pillai and O. Chandu Menon, provide fascinating material for comparison. The amplitude of their difference from each other can be seen as unfolding a typology of the Malayalam novel. While Chandu Menon's works were written in the tradition of the liberal novel of ideas, Raman Pillai looked to the historical romances of Walter Scott for inspiration. While the visibility of Menon's world is shaped by a realistic approximation to the society in transition in Malabar, C. V. invokes the dark and colourful worlds of fantasy and legend located in the hierarchical world of Travancore principality. The chronotopes of Menon's world are found in the visible spaces of the *tharavadu* and in the public spaces of an emerging civil society; that of C. V. in the cellar and the jungle as much as in the palace.

## Multilayered Landscape

*Marthanda Varma* was C. V.'s first novel. Arguably written six years earlier than Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889), it was published in 1891 from Madras. The first among the three novels that C. V. wrote on the political history of Travancore, *Marthanda Varma* dramatises the story of the conflict for succession within the Travancore court in the 18th century between Marthanda Varma, the nephew (the matrilineal successor) of the king on the one hand, and the king's two sons and their supporters, the *ettuveettil pillamar*—the heads of eight major houses in Travancore. Historical events are merely a point of departure for C. V. The vision of an ideal monarch besieged by danger presented in the novel is indeed an idealized image of the historical figure of Marthanda Varma, the ruler of Venadu from 1729 to 1758. In C.V.'s hands, the conflict narrative becomes the space of a vertiginously variegated landscape—of intrigues and assaults, characters of an incredible range including the unique figure of the courageous and

slandered Subhadra, and, central to everything, the love story of Parukkutty and Ananthapadmanabhan.

Unlike Chandu Menon, C.V. had an imagination which relished the resonance of the world of the archetypal, and the drama he presents often suggests dimensions that exceed the human scale. Be they descriptions of actions intersected at moments of dramatic intensity or characters experiencing intense emotions, or the landscape functioning as the backdrop for human endeavours—they work by a strategy of obscure excess: a multitude of images mobilized and presented in superimposed layers. These images do not function as determinate signs but signify by unspecified suggestion, and their accretion produces effects in excess of the reader's capacity for totalizing comprehension. This strategy of representation is supported by two other aspects of C.V.'s style—an abundant deployment of oral discourses, and a stylization of the visual space in the manner of traditional performing arts.

C.V.'s world is reliant on notions of hierarchy—not only the hierarchy of power in the court but also the hierarchy of origin, of caste and religion and gender. But threatening elements burrow beneath their stable boundaries. They take the form of miscegenation or of undisclosed parentage, of the crossing of territories—be they geographical or political or religious—and of the transgression of the division between the rational, visible world of the day and the obscure, fantastic realm of the night. The motif which mediates between these plural worlds and organizes the narrative edifice of *Marthanda Varma* is that of disguise. Instances of disguise are frequent in the novel, and the most important among them, Ananthapadmanabhan's disguises, function in the novel not merely as stratagems; they generate worlds within the world of the novel, centred around the different personas that

he adopts—the mad Channan and Shamsuddin, for example. The figure who comes closest to deciphering the truth behind these disguises is Subhadra, who functions as a hermeneuticist of dissimulating signs in the novel. Paradoxically, she uses the popular perception of herself as a 'loose woman' as a disguise, concealing her true self beneath it.

C. V.'s mode of narration can be seen as enacting this method of secrecy and disguise through a series of temporal dislocations. The first chapter presents a ghastly scene of crime—we see the wounded body of Ananthapadmanabhan lying in the forest and the Pathans discovering it and carrying it away. The rhetorical constitution of this scene is determined by the sense of mystery. C.V.'s narrator highlights this by insistently articulating his perplexity about the identity of the wounded young man, the cause of the crime, and who the men who discover and carry him away are. The answers to these questions appear in the later chapters of the novel. C.V. repeatedly uses a hiatus in time between chapters, and the intervening incidents which provide the links between them are often revealed in a later chapter. This jumbling of the temporal sequence of action in the unravelling of the narrative can be seen as a form of disguise where certain elements are consciously concealed from vision so that a sense of mystery and of dissimulation can be produced.

## The Frame

B.K. Menon's translation of *Marthanda Varma* was first published in 1936 by Kamalalaya Press. Unavailable in print for a long time, it has recently been reprinted by the Sahitya Akademi with an introductory essay by Ayyappa Paniker. The reader who is unfamiliar with the original will get from the translation an idea of the events and the action, as well as a sense of the dramatic that informs C.V.'s art. However, some of the important elements of C.V.'s fictional world have been altered considerably by the translator. In this sense, B.K. Menon's *Marthanda Varma* is not a translation of the Malayalam original in the strict sense of the term. Menon himself acknowledges this in his preface entitled 'In Apology': 'In certain places I have had to enlarge into pages what the author of the original has conserved in a syllable. And in others, what runs into pages in the original had to be cut short as

they did not seem to fit in.'

The notion of 'fitting in' is suggestive here, as it invokes the idea of a frame within which the discourses within the literary text operate. This frame is what the translator chooses or constructs as appropriate for the reproduction of the effects of the original. The frame which holds together the elements in a text is not merely a linguistic frame: it is made of a certain arrangement of discourses, and it is through relating to these that the translated text receives its intelligibility. Menon clarifies his own procedure when he discusses the two alternatives he was faced with: an adaptation of the original with 'the names of characters and places . . . changed completely and the story shifted to a distant or even fictitious country', or 'to attempt a word-by-word translation.' Menon rejects both these possibilities: the first would have been 'the worst kind of plagiarism', and, as for the second, the 'English language does not lend itself to the same usages possible in the vernacular, and if the translation had been too literal, the result would have been ridiculous.' 'What I have attempted,' Menon says, 'is to "render" into English an intelligent reading of the original, without spoiling (as little as possible) the subtle effects achieved by the author of the original.'

Menon's reading suffers from a certain propensity towards over-explicitness. I indicated that in the famous first chapter of C.V.'s original, a rhetoric of the self-consciously mysterious is put to play, and that it has an important bearing on the overall structure of the novel. Menon rewrites the first chapter, and elaborates on moments from the narration which C. V. deliberately chose to leave out—the appearance of Ananthapadmanabhan in the jungle, the assault on him, and the ensuing fight. Such 'rewriting' shows a certain insensitivity to the economy of C.V.'s narrative art and to the centrality of temporal jumbling and partial revelation in it. This can again be seen in the way Menon translates the passage where Beiram Khan's identity is revealed before Subhadra (pp. 314-15). While the original is careful to conceal the conversation from the reader's inner ears, Menon invents passages of conversation which almost fully reveal the secret. There are other major differences too—entire passages of conversation are left out or summarized, and descriptions are edited or expanded frequently. The first can be accounted for in terms of

the difficulty of translating dialogues used in C.V.'s texts. Many characters possess distinctive ways of speaking, and C.V. mobilizes a whole array of linguistic registers and dialects in the novel. In the Pathan camp, where conversations take place in Hindustani, C.V. adopts a form of formal and not entirely natural Malayalam which invokes the sense that one is reading a translated text from an alien language. Menon's linguistic repertoire is severely restricted in comparison to C.V.'s, as he admits in the preface.

Menon's translation was made in the 1930s, and the principles of translation that regulate his version rely on ideas of literary felicity current at that time. Central to those principles was the notion of a 'smooth text' which would be available to a reader who is unfamiliar with the specific cultural universe from which the text emerges. Translating a 19th-century classic like *Marthanda Varma* poses serious

problems for these principles of translation. The grandness and sweep of conception and expression in this novel is, for the reader of Malayalam, linked to a form of prose which was *always* 'literary' and 'non-contemporary.' C.V.'s text takes several liberties with the literary Malayalam of his times, sometimes even frustrating conventional expectations of grammatical and stylistic felicity. Menon tries to use a form of English which oscillates between contemporary literary idiom and an older, more formal idiom. The result, although successful at times, is not always satisfactory.

#### Discursive Economy

In translation it is always and never a question of specific decisions. Specific decisions face the translator at every moment, determining the texture of the emergent, translated text. At the same time, the problem of translation cannot really be resolved

through a series of specific decisions if they are not informed by a larger sense of the horizons of the text as a whole. What aids the translator in mediating between the two is a detailed sense of the discursive economy of the original even when he/she may wish to abandon it. A sense of the specific connections between rhetorical elements, between different discourses, and between sounds and sense function as a regulating horizon even when the translator veers away from it.

A number of major 19th-century novels in Indian languages are still unavailable in English translation. Many available translations ignore the rhetorical structures of the original to such an extent that they remain unreliable guides for a precise understanding of the original. The elevation of the desire for a smooth translation to the status of an overriding principle may stand in the way of a sensibility for the economy of the original—a sense of the

original, not merely as a story but as a literary 'text' made up of heterogeneous elements and held together in a discursive space. Menon's preface shows a deep awareness of the limits of his translation of *Marthanda Varma*: it needs to be seen as a point of departure at translating this grand novel, as an invitation to new attempts informed by new aspirations. The difficulties in translating many 19th-century Indian novels are also the difficulties in translating 19th-century India for ourselves. The desire for a smooth and pleasing, if imprecise, version and that for engaging with the plural and the conflictual economy of the text indicate two attitudes towards remembrance, towards history and its narrativization.

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## Meandering through the Raj, disconsolately

MEENA RADHAKRISHNA

Providence & the Raj:  
Imperial Mission and Missionary Imperialism

by Gerald Studdert-Kennedy

Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1998; pp. 272; Rs. 375

This is a tremendously demanding book to read. The problem lies, to begin with, in its entirely misleading but very enticing title, which is what made this reviewer actually ask for it from the publishers, and then regret it the moment she flipped through its pages. The title bears less than a relationship with the content for two reasons. The author, according to the jacket introduction, took a Cambridge degree in English literature, worked in the department of government at Harvard and, subsequently, political science at Berkeley (where he was also a research fellow at the Centre for International Studies). Since then he has been lecturing in politics and interdisciplinary studies. This formidable list of credentials is important to mention here as it gives an idea of what the book is actually about: it is a virtual depository of *all* of the author's erudite knowledge on

*all* the above subjects, not necessarily having any connection with one another, or with the major concern of the book that the title would have us believe. Secondly, the editors seem to have completely let the book go through without doing their job and seeing into the minimum of coherence and continuity of argument.

*We are warned, on the jacket, that there is additional ploughing to be done through the investigation into British domestic politics, the Gramscian analysis of colonial discourse, and 'fundamental religious and ideological commonalities, both at the level of political elites and at the grass-roots.' It all sounds very interesting, but what on earth does it have to do with missionaries or imperialism?*

The admirable summary at the back cover, clearly provided by the author, is hardly the way the book proceeds, and one is left to disconsolately meander all along. The reader moves from an exciting argument, only to run into a whole set of irrelevant details, or is unceremoniously made to jump to a sudden new but out of place insight. Since the author is clearly a distinguished and respected scholar, it is difficult to work out why the book is so entirely opaque in its development of the argument it set out to put forward.

According to the jacket, among other things, 'Dr. Studdert-Kennedy explores the structure, sources and strengths of the discourse of a "Christian" imperialism through such diverse aspects as the teaching of literature and history at the Madras Christian College and the significance of the College in the political arenas of the Presidency' (so far so good); 'the policy networks involving Lionel Curtis and his "Round Table" group in the formulation and implementation of constitutional "reform" between the wars; and the parliamentary and grass-roots opposition of the Churchillian "die-hards" to the 1935 Government of India Act. He highlights the position of India as a minority interest in British politics even in the final critical years of the Raj.' We are warned, on the jacket, that there is

additional ploughing to be done through the investigation into British domestic politics, the Gramscian analysis of colonial discourse, and 'fundamental religious and ideological commonalities, both at the level of political elites and at the grass-roots.'

It all sounds very interesting, but what on earth does it have to do with missionaries or imperialism? This is exactly what the problem seems to be: why has this book been used to air the author's views in all of his other areas of interest, without drawing clear connections between these areas and the main concern of the book? I do think that the editors are largely to blame, and the book could have lived up to the high expectations that its title raised, if only they had had the patience to cull out the relevant parts and force an argument out of some interesting data covered in the book. Such data, when it appears, is strewn all over the pages of the book, and a reasonably exciting book of about one-fifth the current size could have been fashioned out of the material with some arduous work either by the author or by the editors. As it is now, it is a quite unreadable and entirely undecipherable book.

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# The curate's egg

NARINDAR SINGH

## When Corporations Rule the World

by David C. Korten

The Other India Press, Mapusa, Goa,  
1998; x + 374 pp; Rs.195

This book is exactly like the egg which a meek and uncomplaining curate is served in a famous 1895 *Punch* cartoon: only parts of it can be said to be excellent. But no matter what the book may be like, I am not like the curate in the cartoon. Which means that I cannot help complaining about those parts of it which to my mind are *not* excellent.

### Consumerism

Consider, to begin with, an exceedingly dangerous and endemic pathology of our time known as consumerism. Korten has given a good enough *description* of it all right but he has not been able to give a deep enough *analysis* of it, too. To be sure, he takes care to remind us that the raging consumerism of today marks a complete break with the puritanical culture of the early Americans who managed to live by the following motto: 'Use it up, wear it out, make do, or do without.' Indeed, he tells us that consumerism is violative even of the much less rigid ethical values of hard work and frugality that informed the Quaker culture of yore.

Evidently, such ethical values, now archaic, could be sustained only in a world of more or less small scale manufacturing and trading concerns. Therefore, they cannot but continue to languish in a world which the gigantic corporations of our time have come to create. These corporations, intent on fabricating and selling ever more, cannot possibly live with the nightmare of frugality even for the briefest of durations. Accordingly, they have sought, particularly from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to rearrange reality in the light of their own requirements. They seek to reshape without any reservations whatsoever the value systems of entire societies. The purpose is to create, in Korten's words, 'a homogenized culture of indulgence conducive to spurring consumption expenditures and advancing corporate political interests.'

To this end, corporations take to

aggressive advertising intended primarily to manipulate consumers. Nevertheless, every care is taken by the economists in particular to sell the fiction of the consumers taking decisions on their own, and the 'market,' that is the corporations, merely responding to their wishes. But irrespective of whether this fiction is taken seriously or not by people at large, corporations remain determined to create a completely nonconsensual consumer culture the world over. It is nonconsensual in the sense that it is a culture not with any grass-root origins *but one which is sought to be imposed from above* mainly through advertising, and TV advertising in particular. An American adult is made to watch some 21,000 commercials a year which impel him to buy *something* and to buy it NOW. With the TV coming necessarily to homogenize perspectives, the consumer does not have a chance to exercise his own power of discrimination and discernment. In fact, advertising is meant primarily to diminish if not to altogether destroy that power.

This could well give the impression that the rich and the very rich overconsumers manage to spend more because they happen to *earn* more. Actually, they spend more only partly because they earn more. But they spend more *also* because they manage to preempt more and more of funds in the form of what are known as entitlements. *Korten's indictment of consumerism does not make even a passing reference to these.*

Herein lies only one of the reasons why Korten's analysis of consumerism seems to me to be lacking in depth. The other, as we shall presently see, lies in his failure to analyse the role of advertising critically enough.

The system of social security of which the entitlements of the rich are a major component was brought into being in 1935 in the United States as an integral part of president Roosevelt's New Deal. But by now it

has grown into an albatross hung around Uncle Sam's neck: that is, something that in spite of being entirely unaffordable even by the richest country in the world can still not be rationalised and reduced in size. Payments made by way of unemployment insurance to workers happen to be a very small fraction of 'welfare' payments as such, around one dollar in twenty-five. Most of the welfare or entitlement spending goes to the rich and the very rich who do not have to bother much about saving it, in particular because they are relentlessly goaded by the mughals of Madison Avenue into spending it. In fact, they manage to spend a good part of their entitlement *even before* they receive it.

This is how: A sum of around \$ 200 billion gets distributed in the form of tax subsidies, also known as tax expenditures, to the rich every year so as to enable them to claim tax deductions on account of *several kinds of expenses already incurred*. Covered in the process, that is heavily subsidised by the state, are home-mortgages, built-in saunas, au paris, expense account cocktails, gluttonous orgies and other forms of fat-city consumption. C. Wright Mills once wrote about people who are too rich to need to have a look at the right hand column of the menu. One reason why they do not have to do this lies in their ability to get most of such expenses taken care of as deductions while filing their tax returns. Evidently, in order to meet these and the rest of the tax expenditures, the state has to raise other people's taxes or increase budget deficits. Taken together, tax expenditures, gold-plated pensions of the corporate executives, Congressmen and Senators and the rest of the welfare spending on the well-to-do had already become in the early 1990s around a trillion-dollar per year bonanza to the rich and the merely affluent. To change the metaphor, this was a river three times as large as the Pentagon 'drain' itself.

But surprisingly Korten does not take any notice of the entitlements of the rich which stoke a good part of the fires of consumerism in an affluent society of today like the United States. Equally surprising is his neglect of the economic chaos which advertising must perforce bring about sooner or later. To be sure, he does recognize advertising to be enough of a societal menace to demand specifically that schools be

declared advertising-free zones. Still he fails to take to its logical limits his point about corporations spending between 200,000 and 300,000 dollars for *every thirty seconds* of prime time TV advertising. To do that, one would do well to note that (a) corporations would need to spend that kind of money *if and only if they know* their advertising to be tendentious and mala fide in motivation, and (b) they would be hell-bent on selling their products at prices high enough to help them recover several times over what they had spent essentially on misleading people. What we have in advertising, and TV advertising in particular, then, is an engine of relentless and remorseless inflation. Which, being an exponential and ongoing process, cannot but spell socio-political and economic breakdown. Sooner rather than later.

### Pluralism

Korten's major regret revolves round the demise of what he calls 'pluralism' in the contemporary world. Only, he does not tell us what exactly he means by this term. There is only a suggestion to the effect that the ascendancy of pluralism in the United States took place during the Roosevelt era so that the share of total wealth held by the top half per cent of American households fell from a high of over 32 per cent in 1929 to a low of just above 19 per cent in 1949. A reversal of pluralism, we are told, began with Nixon in the 70s with the induction into the Supreme Court of judges who gave it back its earlier pro-business bias. Which means that during the 50s and 60s pluralism continued to 'flourish'. This word is Korten's and it doesn't seem to throw much light on 'pluralism' *as such*. So, going to *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* for help seemed to be the only thing to do. Of the many definitions of this word that it gives, the one relevant to the present discussion is the following: 'A theory advocating increased devolution and autonomy for individual bodies in preference to the development of monolithic State power. Also, the belief that power should be shared among a number of political parties.'

In anticipation of Korten's concurrence with this particular definition of 'pluralism', one would expect him to presume the American state of the 1950s and the 60s vintage to be more or less devoluted, sensitive and responsive to criticism,

accountable to people at large and extremely wary of monolithism. But by not one of these criteria would the American state of those decades appear to be committed to pluralism. Eisenhower's [or rather his speech-writer Emmett Hughes's] oft-cited description of every gun, every warship and every rocket as being in the final analysis a theft from those who are hungry and remain unfed and are cold and remain uncovered might suggest some empathy for the poor on the part of Power. It might even lend some support to Korten's thesis about the ascendancy of pluralism during the 50s. But as against a pious *sentiment* like this is the *fact* of the US as a superpower having brought about (if in collaboration with the late Soviet Union) a situation, and precisely during the 50s and 60s, in which the very existence of the human race cannot be taken for granted anymore. This also happens to be a state which could dump into sheer neglect at least 250,000 of its *own troops* who had been *directly and deliberately exposed without their knowledge or consent to radiation* during the seventeen years of nuclear testing. A Pentagon official dismissed the problem claiming 'We are not in the health effects business—we are in the defence business' (Harvey Wasserman and Norman Solomon, *Killing Our Own*, 1982). Some 300,000 people living around the Hanford nuclear weapons production complex were similarly used as human guinea pigs also without their knowledge or consent. Tom Bailie, one of the victims of this 'experiment', asked years later in an op-ed article in *The New York Times*: 'Is this what it feels like to be raped?' Pluralism indeed!

#### Entropic Innocence

This is the world which the corporate libertarians, as David Korten designates them, have over the years come to globalize with disastrous consequences for the planet and the people living on it. It is a world of high finance, of remorseless manipulation, of corporate cannibalism, of unboundable greed, of job-elimination, and is *also* a world doomed only to self-destruct.

Still, I can only remain intrigued by the author's complete unconcern with the second law of thermodynamics or the entropy law. Indeed, throughout the book, he does not make even a single reference to this law. My point is that unless one

remains self-consciously fixated on the overarching fact of entropy, one's perception of the existential reality *which happens to be entropically defined* will continue to be inadequate, no matter how deeply and abidingly may one be interested in the relentless erosion of our habitat, which has of late been taking place and some of the more glaring manifestations of which Korten himself has specified. He reminds us, for example, that each year we lose twenty-six billion tons of topsoil to sheer erosion, six billion hectares of productive agricultural land to deserts, and eleven million hectares of tropical rain forests to deforestation. Besides, acid rain has already damaged thirty-one million hectares of forest area in Europe alone. Also, and concomitantly, 5 per cent of the ozone layer over North America, and probably over the entire globe, has been lost from 1980 to 1990. Moreover, over the past century there has been a 25 per cent increase in the atmospheric carbon dioxide which in itself would be enough to carry us to the very threshold of a major catastrophe.

Making what he calls a 'Disclosure Statement', Korten specifies his value system as one informed by the liberal's compassion for the disenfranchised, commitment to equity, concern for the environment and sustained aversion to 'collective suicide' which remorseless environmental degradation portends as a reduction in and even a breakdown of the ecosystem's regenerative capacities.

Still, one cannot emphasise the crippling of the ecosystem's regenerative capacities properly, much less fully, without a concomitant or rather a preceding and overarching concern with the second law of thermodynamics. For that alone could help one comprehend the nature of the reality it defines.

It is not just a personal and whimsical view that I am trying to put across. Rather, it is a plea for recognising the entropic nature of the existential reality as the only meaningful context within which an in depth analysis of the doings of the transnationals can be undertaken. This is easy to see. Entropy signifies a spontaneous, inexorable and irreversible degeneration of order into disorder. But it is still not known to have produced, until very recently, any holes in the ozone shield in the stratosphere, certainly no holes as tenacious, gigantic and menacing as

they now happen to be. This is not surprising. For ozone holes, which are a most serious manifestation of the entropic degeneration taking place in *our own time*, are a post-CFC and therefore a post-*Du Pont* phenomenon. Indeed, earlier on the dissipation and the regeneration of ozone in the skies was fairly well matched so that no one had to worry about the gigantic holes which have now appeared over various parts of the planet.

The entropy law is generally perceived to be the most powerful scientific insight into the way nature works and Einstein found it to be part of the only physical theory of universal content which would never be overthrown. And, then, in a 1929 lecture, Arthur Eddington, a towering scientist of the century now coming to close, had this to say: If your theory is found to be against the second law of thermodynamics, I can give you no hope; for there is

nothing for it to do *but to collapse in the deepest humiliation*. What we are dealing with here is exceedingly more serious and ominous than just a counter-entropic *theory*. It is a recklessly and relentlessly *counter-entropic, growth-oriented, civilisation*. A civilisation, moreover, the dynamizers of which happen now to be the transnationals of our time. They are the primary agents of ecological degradation now being effected more or less wilfully, and, as such, they are also the agents of the artificial, i.e., purely man-made, acceleration of entropy. David Korten has critiqued the globalized economy all right. But in ignoring entropy *altogether* he has managed only to reckon without the host.

Narindar Singh is the author of *The Keynesian Fallout* (Sage, New Delhi, 1996) and retired as professor of economics from Zakir Husain Centre, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He lives at Panchkula, Haryana.

### Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences

Vol. VI, No.1, Summer 1999

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# Antinomies of secularism

ADITYA NIGAM

## Secularism and Its Critics

edited by Rajeev Bhargava

Oxford University Press, Delhi

1998; 550 pp; Rs. 695

Sometime in the mid-80s the first salvoes were fired, that sparked off the debate that continues to rage today with ever increasing ferocity. To begin with, there was the colourful attack on secularism launched by Ashis Nandy in 1985, in what he called 'The Anti-Secularist Manifesto' published in the *Seminar*. This was soon followed by the more sober terms of T. N. Madan's critique 'Secularism in its Place' in *The Journal of Asian Studies*. This was the time when the rise of the various 'secessionist'/'divisive'/'fissiparous' movements was an accomplished fact and some of them had already challenged the inherited idea of Indian nationhood. Recall, for example, the Assam and Punjab movements whose distinct edge by the mid-80s was already anti-'India' (as distinct from 'anti-national' of the officialese)—in the sense that whether or not they were explicitly secessionist, they sought to renegotiate and redraw its cultural-political boundaries. Also visible on the horizon was the masthead of the Hindu right—especially after the intensification of the Ayodhya movement, following the opening of the locks of the temple at the site of the mosque on the orders of a Faizabad district court. 1986-87 also saw sharp controversies on the Shah Bano case and the *sati* incident in Deorala (Rajasthan) which came to occupy the attention of secularists. These were the early signs that the terms of political discourse were on the way to being irreversibly transformed. From then on, secularism itself would be under tremendous pressure to defend itself in an atmosphere that was becoming increasingly inhospitable to it.

The essays collected in this volume respond to this sense of crisis. Many of these have already become landmarks since they were first published: an updated version of Madan's article mentioned above, an important later article by Nandy ('Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Toleration' published in an edited volume in 1990), and many

articles published in a special issue of the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1994. Among the writers in this latter set are political theorists Partha Chatterjee, Akeel Bilgrami and Bhargava himself. An article by Stanley Tambaiah and a major statement from Amartya Sen complete the section entitled 'The Recent Debate'.

### 'Impossibility' of Secularism

Most of the essays in this volume—both pro- and anti-secularist—are extremely sensitive to the crisis of the creed and of the need for ways to redefine it (the secularist position) or find an alternative to it (the anti-secularist position) so that the challenge of communalism can be adequately met. Nandy's is the most uncompromising critique. It argues that it is the split in religion between religion-as-faith and religion-as-ideology and the dominant public role assumed by the latter that is at the heart of much sectarian intolerance. This split is a result of the logic of modernity and of modern statecraft. The modern nation-state fears the 'definitionally non-monolithic' communities of faith and prefers to deal with ideologies—centralized and with a single voice. So does the nonstate elite that seeks to take power in the name of a religious identity similarly intolerant of the catholicity of everyday, lived religions. Such attitudes born out of naked, secular calculations of power are indispensable for the logic of modern nation-states but utterly incompatible with the fluid definitions of the self in many South Asian cultures. This makes secularism ethnophobic—and often ethnocidal. It then becomes incapable of making use of the resources of toleration that all religious faiths necessarily have. The marginalization of faith inherent in this process leads to the rise of sectarian tendencies. T. N. Madan agrees with Nandy that it is the marginalization of faith—which is what secularization is—that makes the rise of fundamentalism possible. Secularism, he argues, is essentially born out

of Christianity with its clear separation of the sacred and the secular. It is 'untranslatable' into South Asian cultures which either do not make such distinctions or unequivocally privilege the sacred. Even though Madan insists that he only wants to put secularism 'in its place' and that cultures *do* change in dynamic interaction with one another, it is unlikely that his argument about the 'impossibility' of secularism can be sustained without falling back on cultural essentialism

Partha Chatterjee's is a response that shares in the project of modernity, and tries to 'look for political possibilities *within* the domain of the modern state institutions as they now exist in India.' However, he believes that a specific feature of the resurgent Hindu right is that it '...is perfectly at peace with the institutions and procedures of the "western" or "modern" state.' It seeks to 'mobilize on its behalf the will of an interventionist modernizing state in order to erase the presence of religious or ethnic particularisms from the domains of law... [and] project itself as a principled modernist critic of Islamic or Sikh fundamentalism.' It, therefore, 'accuse[s] the "pseudo-secularists" of preaching tolerance of religious obscurantism and bigotry.' The Hindu right is trying, in other words, to find a modern solution to a modern problem.

There is a shared ground between Partha's position and Nandy's, to the extent that the latter also sees the secular principles of statecraft as lending themselves to right-wing mobilization. But there is also a difference between the two: while for Nandy there is a *necessary connection* between these principles and the rise of fundamentalism, for Chatterjee this is a *possibility*, not necessarily realizable everywhere. Chatterjee then believes that a simple defence of the principles of secularism cannot be fruitful for precisely this reason. The real question is of finding ways of living in mutual toleration and of the state's responsibility in ensuring it. This search must be informed by an acute awareness that there exists no common ground between the perceptions of different communities: often enough there is a refusal by some to enter the deliberative space of reasonable discourse.

### Alternative Secularism

Two other original contributions to the debate from the secularist side—those of Bhargava and Bilgrami—can be read as partly responding to

this question. For Bilgrami, Indian secularism was an 'Archimedean ideal' and, in that sense, an imposition. He disagrees with both Nandy and Chatterjee that it was an imposition in the sense of being a post-enlightenment artefact. It was rather one in the sense that it was never allowed to be negotiated along with other substantive political commitments among communities. In his postscript, Bilgrami takes the point a step further by stressing the need for internal dialogue within communities. He illustrates this by stating the case of his own involvement in the debate on the Rushdie affair—where he found that there was no choice but to 'drop the pretensions of standard... liberal theory and engage with Muslims in an internal argument, finding reasons within their other value commitments.'

Rajeev Bhargava casts his vote for 'political secularism', which is distinguished from what he calls 'ethical secularism' in its exclusion of *all ultimate ideals*, religious and nonreligious, from the domain of the state. He believes that there is a 'deep, quite irreconcilable conflict between ethical secularism and religion.' His political secularism conceives of a state that accommodates 'religious orthodoxy', 'heteronomous interdependence', and 'tradition' because 'it does not presuppose a high degree of autonomy, full-blooded egalitarianism or mandatory and intense political participation.' Against the anti-secularist position he argues that its advocates seem to be barking up the wrong tree: rather than look for an alternative for secularism, they should be looking for an alternative conception of secularism. He also develops a notion of an ethical secularism, grounded in a politics of rights that does not exclude 'constitutive attachments or religious communities from the political arena', but rather *brings them in*. That 'secularism is fully compatible with, indeed even dictates, a *defence of differentiated citizenship*.'

### The Overlapping Consensus

It is to these concerns that Bhargava makes the western contributors to the volume speak. Charles Taylor, in his 'Modes of Secularism', for example, argues that though the secular state is an imperative in modern conditions of a 'horizontal, direct-access society' (as distinct from a nonmodern, 'hierarchical, mediated-access society'), this secularism cannot be simply assumed. He makes a threefold distinction

between what he calls an 'independent ethic model', a 'common ground model', and the 'overlapping consensus'. The first assumes a high ground of an independent ethical norm, abstracted from all religious belief, while the second wishes to establish a certain ethic of peaceful coexistence among different religious communities. This common ground approach could work within the kind of overall Christian context of the west, for instance, by charting out certain grounds of obedience, based on principles common to all Christian faiths. But, says Taylor, 'with the widening band of religious and metaphysical commitments... the ground originally defined as common becomes that of one party among others.' And, the 'very diversification that has undercut the common ground approach also challenges the independent ethic.' He therefore argues for a different model that he calls, after Rawls, 'the overlapping consensus' model—one which is superior to the 'old post-Enlightenment independent ethic' because it does not prescribe any justification. It is 'susceptible to conflicts of a new kind—or perhaps to a multiplication of these conflicts... It will be hard to manage. It will require a change of our mindset which will only settle for the single right answer generated from unchallenged foundational principles.'

*These essays contribute to shaking us out of the complacency regarding our political-theoretical categories—a complacency so common among secularists even today.*

T. M. Scanlon writes on 'The Difficulty of Toleration' while Michael Sandel discusses the question of freedom of conscience and religious liberty in the context of the US constitutional experience. Jean Bauberot discusses the French experience of secularization and the revolution—the process of 'laicization' through two centuries and more. Joseph Carens and Melissa Williams, in another interesting article on the 'Muslim Minorities in Liberal Democracies', uncover the prevalent myths around Islam and the so-called 'clash of civilizations' in the west.

The editor has also included a relatively unknown but important exchange that took place in the early 60s, between two western social

scientists, Donald Smith (whose *India as a Secular State* remains an important reference point even today) and Marc Galanter. The former highlights the deficiencies of Indian secularism from a high secularist perspective but predicts that in twenty years these 'anomalies' would sort themselves out. The latter, with his work on law and the backward castes, provides a different view that criticizes dominant theories of secularism in the west or derived from the west.

In a significant way these essays contribute to shaking us out of the complacency regarding our political-theoretical categories—a complacency so common among secularists even today. They repeatedly call attention to the fact that we simply cannot take 'secularism' for granted, and whether we wish to retrieve it or to find an alternative to it, we must make the first move of acknowledging the roots of its crisis. They remind us that the old liberal dream of abstract citizenship, unmarked by external signs of difference (the insistence on erasing all markers of difference), no longer has the self-evident emancipatory ring to it that one thought it had. They underline the necessity of a secularism constantly aware of difference. They speak of differentiated citizenship, and of an overlapping consensus without reference to any first principles. They remind us of the fact that erasure of difference may really lead to results very different from what we expect.

The otherwise exciting book is, however, marred by extremely shoddy production with as many as three or four proofing errors on a page (pp. 308, 309, and 422 among many others with less number of errors). The errors are often grievous where 'pogroms' becomes 'programmes' (p. 299), 'impotent' becomes 'important' (p. 438), Hedgewar is spelt Hegdewar, and the title of the notoriously well known book by Golwalkar is wrong (p. 434). Even articles that are reproductions from OUP's own publications, like Nandy's piece, suffer from new errors, such as the word *sangha* in the original which becomes '*sangira*' (p. 333). And, if one may venture to add, recent OUP publications that this reviewer has been reading have been similarly produced.

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## Intersexuality and the rise of medicine

KAREN HAYDOCK

### Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex

by Alice Domurat Dreger

Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London  
1998; xiii+268 pp; price not mentioned

As a school child can testify, the very structure of our language, be it Hindi, Punjabi, or English, makes it difficult for us to even speak about someone if we don't know whether they are male or female. Most languages do not allow for indeterminate sex.

You can tell a young child that the word 'man' doesn't mean man, but when their history book (*Man Through the Ages*) takes six pages to talk about 'primitive man' and 'stone age man' and how he went to hunt and how he ate roots, and how he learned to cook and what clothes he wore (and then mentions one sentence about the Stone Age woman—how she learned to help the man, etc.), it's not hard to see how confusion arises in the student's mind.

But what is the difference between a girl and a boy? And what sorts of things are included in the definition? People ordinarily have very little choice in deciding whether they will be a girl or a boy, a housewife or a truck driver, a bride or a groom, whether they will go to school or clean floors, wear a *sari* or walk around with bare chests, whether they will be able to cry in public, etc. All of these things have something to do with being a girl or a boy.

#### Ambiguous Genitals

In her book, Alice Domurat Dreger describes some examples of people who cannot easily be categorized as being either male or female—it may not be clear whether they have a small penis or a large clitoris, they may appear to have testicles but no penis, they may have some unusual chromosomal pattern, they may have a beard as well as breasts, or whatever.

Actually, early in embryonic development there is no anatomical difference between girls and boys—they both have two 'proto-gonads'. Then there is a divergence in development, and depending on whether the embryo is genetically male or female the organs either take one path to

become ovaries, or another path to become testes. And either the male penis or the female clitoris becomes the centre of sexual sensation. Even at eight weeks, the external genitals are indistinguishable. In a few cases, genital ambiguity remains throughout a person's life. (However, there are no cases of people who have fully functioning genitals of both male and female type.)

Based on this evidence, Dreger goes on to claim that we are utterly unable to answer the question, 'How can you tell if you are a boy or a girl?'

*After reading the book, one is struck by how important sex categorization is, especially to the lives of people with any sort of ambiguous genitals. Such people are now referred to by the medical community in the west as intersexuals, although they are commonly called hermaphrodites.*

But is this really the case? Isn't it like saying there's no such thing as cats or dogs just because you find a few animals who you have difficulty as defining as either a cat or a dog? In most cases it is quite easy to tell if you are a boy or a girl. There is only a very small minority for which the question is difficult (the highest estimates are still less than 2 per cent of the population—more commonly it's thought that only about one in 2000 people have ambiguous genitals). Perhaps this is not really so strange—after all in this age of uncertainty there are many questions for which clear cut yes or no answers cannot be given. The important point is rather, why should such uncertainty in such a minority of cases bother us so much? Why should the inability to determine a person's sex necessarily cause such immense problems for that person? And why should it be so difficult for society to deal with a person who it cannot classify as either male or female? Why is sex so important?

The answer is clearly that there is more to being a boy or a girl than just the anatomy of one's genitals. There are also social aspects.

According to Dreger, there are three aspects that are now considered separately when discussing the nature of sex. First, there is the sex of a person—a definition based on physical anatomy. Second, there is the gender—a whole set of characteristic behaviours. And third, there is a person's sexuality—whether they are heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, etc. The failure to realize these distinctions in the past (particularly in the late 19th century in Britain and France) has brought on a myriad of problems in the categorization and treatment of hermaphrodites in the west, and has resulted in far reaching problems in defining the roles of the sexes and the norms of sexuality as well. This book is in large part a history of the struggle over who would define sex, gender, and sexuality. As such, it is a discourse on the rise of science and medicine in the west.

After reading the book, one is struck by how important sex categorization is, especially to the lives of people with any sort of ambiguous genitals. Such people are now referred to by the medical community in the west as intersexuals, although they are commonly called hermaphrodites.

When talking about hermaphroditism, the importance of language and definitions cannot be overlooked. The word itself has been applied to a variety of people—ranging from people with a large range of physical variations to homosexuals, transvestites, and even feminists. At times medical professionals have even decided that there is no such thing as a hermaphrodite—everyone is either male or female.

Dreger confines her somewhat academic study to a rather narrow place (France and Britain) and period (1868-1915), although she also mentions the present situation and perspective in the west. The book is full of accounts of particular case histories of hermaphrodites culled mostly from the medical literature, presented from her own post-modernist, western point of view. As the author puts it, her goal is 'empathetic listening'. Her main point of view is that western society has had an unnecessarily rigid agenda of making people conform to strict male/female categories (and this has been harmful).

For the past 40 years in the US and

other industrialized countries, medical intervention has been used to try to make people of questionable sex conform more closely to one or the other sex. Infant genital appendages between 0.9 and 2.5 cm are in effect unacceptable. At most hospitals in the US, surgeons will remove clitoral tissue from a child born with such in-between genitals, to try to make the person a normal female. In others, surgeons transfer tissue from other parts of the body to try to build up a larger penis so the person can be a male. It is not clear what the long term effects of these practices are, however.

In one case that was widely quoted throughout the medical community as a proof that sex-changing operations can be successful, one of two identical twin boys had his penis accidentally cut off (when he was seven months old) by a doctor who was trying to circumcise him. The doctors at Johns Hopkins (a very reputable hospital in the US) advised that he should be reassigned as a girl. This was done. They used plastic surgery to make his genitals appear more female (they even constructed a 'vagina' by plastic surgery), and when he reached adolescence they gave him female hormones. Medical reports on his case were published when he was 11 and 13 years old, reporting the sex change to be successful. For the next 20 years his case continued to be cited in the standard text books, and was used to support the medical treatment of intersexual babies (if a baby has a penis that is too small, the baby should be assigned as a girl by giving the proper surgical and pharmacological treatment).

*Examples of hermaphroditism have been used by postmodernists like Michel Foucault to show how sexuality is a social invention. In particular, according to this point of view the homosexual, as a distinct human type, was an invention of late 19th century Europe.*

But a few years ago a doctor traced down this patient and found the results were actually not so happy. He had refused to grow into a woman—gradually refusing the hormone pills and, at 14 years old, refusing additional surgery to deepen the 'vagina'. The doctors told him he would never find a spouse

unless he had the surgery and continued to live like a female. His response to the doctors was, 'these people have got to be pretty shallow, if that's the only thing I've got going for me. That the only reason people get married is because of what's between their legs. If that's all they think of me, I've gotta be a complete loser.' So he went to another hospital instead, where he had surgery to remove his breasts and rebuild a penis, and began a regimen of male hormones. Although the doctors at John Hopkins were aware of his refusal to be female, they instead reported that they had lost track of him, and they let his case continue to be cited for the next 20 years as a successful example of a sex change operation.

#### Intersex Advocacy

There is now a growing 'intersex advocacy movement' in the west. There are groups like the Intersex Society of North America, Hermaphrodites with Attitude, and the Ambiguous Genitalia Parents Support Group, etc. In large part their emergence has been possible due to the internet—widely dispersed individuals are able to 'meet' each other and communicate with others. These groups are challenging medical treatment protocols for intersexuality—speaking out against harmful genital surgery, advocating freedom of choice for the patients (they suggest that surgery on infants and young children can be postponed at least until puberty unless there is a real medical problem), and pushing for social and political changes that will make intersexuals acceptable members of society.

Interestingly, a number of intersex advocacy groups cite places like India as an example of a place where intersexuals (*hijras*) are accepted. According to them, Indian culture has a 'Third Gender Philosophy', which is what they also want in the west. Perhaps they don't realize that the *hijras* are outcasts in India, and are in fact fighting for their own rights at even more basic levels—the right to make a decent living, etc. (They held a convention in Chandigarh a couple of years ago where they aired their demands). Even an educated middle class or upper class family in India may willingly give up their own baby in shame if it is found to be of indeterminate sex. Just a few months ago a new facility in Delhi for surgical treatment of intersexuals was welcomed as answering a long felt need.

It does strike someone who has

not jumped onto the postmodernist bandwagon as somewhat absurd to say (as Dreger says) that sex is an invention of the medical profession. Perhaps men of medicine have attempted to define the boundaries between the sexes, but the basic categorization has always been around. Besides, as illustrated by numerous examples in the book, people have never unthinkingly accepted whatever doctors have told them.

The author goes to great lengths to try to fit her story into a modernist/postmodernist framework. She claims that the medical establishment is modernist (which is 'troubling')—they are defining a singular notion of global truth by trying to fix their patients so that they conform to their idea of normal sex. But, she says, the postmodernist world prefers to see things in a state of chaos and confusion—there is no true male or true female identity.

But aren't the intersexuals also being reductionist and determinist when they say that intersexuals should have the freedom to decide their own treatment, or their refusal of treatment? Isn't self-determination just another form of determination? And isn't such determinism okay? If they were behaving in a chaotic or confused manner they would not be linking together to demand their rights. They do have a definite agenda. If according to post-modernism it is not possible to say whether or not it's all right to be an intersexual, intersexuals are saying that it is all right to be so.

Examples of hermaphroditism have been used by postmodernists like Michel Foucault to show how sexuality is a social invention. In particular, according to this point of view the homosexual, as a distinct human type, was an invention of late 19th century Europe.

The important point in my mind remains, why should sex, sexuality, and gender be so important? Why must women's lives be defined primarily by their sex? Why is even homosexuality defined only in terms of sexual relations? Is a woman who loves another woman without desiring sexual relations a homosexual? Why should it be impossible to relate to a person without first knowing whether they are male or female? The importance given to this categorization has been and continues to be oppressive. Why can't we see people as people?

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# The question of caste

KESAVANVELUTHAT

## Caste: Origin, Function and Dimensions of Change

by Suvira Jaiswal

Manohar Publishers, New Delhi,  
1998; xii+278 pp; Rs. 500

The question of caste stares in the face all social scientists who seek to understand and explain Indian society. This 'enduring, baffling, complex, controversial and fascinating' institution has been an enigma to all, irrespective of whether the concern is with the past or the present. It has been with us, to use a cliché, 'from time immemorial', surviving epochal transformations in society. Each successive social formation has found the institution still around, and has had its own use for it. It was a decisive social force in the past; it is so in the present as well, in spite of the hopes of those who, with the naive notions of progress that were part of the enlightenment world-view, believed that 'modernization' would place the funeral wreath on this obnoxious institution. In the contemporary polity of India where numbers count, caste has become a point around which millions rally; it makes and mars the fortunes of governments. Therefore, any serious academic exercise on caste, particularly when it addresses problems such as its 'origin, function, and dimensions of change', is welcome and not merely on academic grounds.

### Defining Caste

Jaiswal's book is a collection of essays written on different occasions, obviously under different provocations. They are bound together by an introductory essay written for the purpose. In this essay, Jaiswal takes up the arduous task of defining the institution of caste and critically examining earlier attempts to understand and explain it. The book claims to argue 'that the present morphology of caste is the result of transitions and transformations the institution had to undergo in specific social contexts through centuries of its existence'. The thrust of her argument, which rejects the essence of caste in endogamy, is that even endogamy was intrinsic to the process of patriarchy and state formation, which 'assertion' is

justified by 'enough evidence' provided by Vedic rituals. Jaiswal has no sympathy with those who believe in the possibility that the roots of caste may lie in the non-Vedic, non-Sanskritic, tribal components of society. She thinks instead that the origins of the 'varna-caste structure' (is the one a synonym of the other?) can be located in the early Vedic period itself.

The leitmotif of the book seems to be the idea that caste is an 'Aryan' institution, emerging as varnas and then getting crystallized as castes. This is apparent from the dust jacket on, with its calligraphy of the title and its background which gives two verses, in Devanagari script, from the *Purusasukta* relating to the 'origin' of varnas. It is this, and Jaiswal's rejection of Irfan Habib's idea that when tribes were absorbed they brought with them their endogamous customs (which happened only after the division of labour had reached a particular level of development within the 'general society'), that smack of 'the racial explanation of caste so vigorously propounded by Herbert Risley'—not the views of Kosambi, as the author tries to show. When she rejects Morton Klass' thesis on the brahmana caste in somewhat sarcastic language ('the caste system can hardly antedate the caste of brahmanas!'), she leads us to the same understanding.

Chapter II, on 'Caste and Gender: Historiography', is the lengthiest in the book, consuming more than one third of its size. It contains a competent survey of the historiography of caste, not only telling us what different scholars have thought about it from time to time, but also identifying the assumptions and ideological preoccupations of each scholar. Some recent theories of caste are left out here, but they are taken care of in the previous chapter. The significant work edited by M. N. Srinivas, *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar* (1996), and the inspiring book of Declan Quigley, *Interpretation of Caste* (1993), are left out. Similarly,

the failure to mention C. J. Fuller's work, *Caste Today* (1995), is a serious omission.

In this historiographical discussion, too, Jaiswal appears to be somewhat adamant on the 'Aryan' character of caste. She rejects the possibility suggested by scholars that caste may have had some of its genetic factors in the Harappan civilization, and alleges that 'such a view derives from the concept of a static Indian society presumed to be incapable of any fundamental change'. This is simply not the case. On the contrary, it suggests that society did evolve with factors that were present and were introduced at various stages. In fact, Jaiswal's argument can be turned against herself: with equal justification. It may be suggested that she is under the influence of the old colonial notion that any agency of change in Indian society has to come from outside.

About an eighth part of this lengthy chapter is, according to the table of contents, on 'Women, Kinship and Caste'. It does discuss literature on women and related problems of marriage and kinship, but their relationship with caste is hard to find here. This reminds the reader of an army-retired English professor who, lecturing on *Arms and the Man*, spoke for 45 minutes on varieties of arms and the next 15 on man!

### Three-fold Division

After these two chapters, which take up nearly three-fifths of the body of the book and which are concerned largely with what others have written on caste, Jaiswal proceeds to discuss in the third chapter 'Stratification in Rgvedic Society: Evidence and Paradigms'. Here too, she considers what others have thought about the subject. Of the five sections, the first is a detailed consideration of G. S. Ghurye and the second, of R.S. Sharma and Romila Thapar. Jaiswal sees clear evidence of a three-fold differentiation in early Vedic literature, a tripartite functional division mentioned presumably in a hierarchical order. There are chiefships, and 'at least in some cases succession to chiefship was hereditary'. The office of the priest and the chief inhered in certain privileged families. There were persons who possessed more wealth than others. The greater availability of surplus and enforced leisure as necessary conditions for the proliferation of rituals and the growth of a class of specialists, who first establish their control over the

great fertility rites and then assume the role of intermediaries between clans and ancestors and deities, may be seen in the *Rgveda*. In the latest stratum of the *Rgveda*, the priesthood acquired the characteristics of a separate order claiming the highest position in society. All these statements help us know Jaiswal's position in relation to the process of stratification in Vedic society: she is, once again, at pains to show the priestly, brahmanical origin of the institution of caste. In fact, she rejects the suggestions of Harappan antecedents for the brahmana and sudra groups, which suggestions treat them as addenda to the substantial subdivision between what came to be known as ksatriya and *vis*. However, it sounds like a contradiction to read about the three-fold differentiation and a hierarchy, chiefships following hereditary succession, persons possessing more wealth than others, a class of specialists who had acquired control, the chiefs and priests constituting a separate order, etc., in an essay which concludes by saying, 'Rgvedic society was a simple society in which ranking depended more upon personal qualities and skills, not wealth or status inherited at birth.'

There is an appendix to this chapter, with the title, 'Mystifying the Aryans'. This is a rejoinder to an article which Romila Thapar wrote in response to this chapter and another essay by R. N. Nandi. Much of Jaiswal's appendix fails to make sense to a reader who has not read Thapar's piece. So also, the points raised here cannot be entirely described as relevant to the larger problem addressed in the book. And, long after it is read, a bad taste lingers in the mouth.

The next chapter is a detailed analysis of the changing concept of *grhapati/gahapati* in Buddhist sources. Jaiswal maps the transformation of *grhapati* from a leader of the extended kin group taking care of its ritual and material needs, to the head of a complex household structured on the patrilineal principle. She connects this with the shift from nomadic pastoralism to sedentary agriculture. She has, more or less, accepted Uma Chakravarti's understanding of the *gahapati*, but, at the same time, she endorses those who look upon *gahapatis* as a counterpart of or members of the vaisya varna. The change in the status of the vaisya and sudra varnas, according to Jaiswal, does not symbolize a deliberate change of occupations on account of status

considerations for 'such mobility would depend largely on material circumstances'. What she intends, on the other hand, 'is to account for the shift in the conceptualization of varna categories, as these had to be in harmony with the changing material milieu and emerging social groups which acquired their identity on a regional and occupational basis rather than in terms of varna'. Jaiswal looks upon the present case as an instance of 'the proliferation of jatis within the varna system'. This is very much within her scheme, the precedence of varna over jati, the latter being 'within' the former. And it is this that may not find unanimous acceptance.

#### Caste and Hinduism

The last chapter, 'Caste and Hinduism: Changing Paradigms of Brahmanical Integration', examines the complex relationship between caste and Hinduism. How far is caste a badge of 'Hinduism'? Jaiswal's definition of it takes an 'integrated view of Hindu beliefs and practices and regards the social system not only as an underpinning providing support to the edifice of Hinduism but as its important constitutive element.' This would make caste an integral part of 'Hindu' doctrine and practice.

There are two difficulties about this. For one thing, it identifies a single Hindu religion subsuming Vedantic metaphysics and the cult of the anthill. Secondly, by taking caste as a 'Hindu' institution, it will fail to explain caste among 'non-Hindu' communities such as Christians and Muslims in south India. What Jaiswal argues, however, about movements which were spearheaded against caste, such as Virasaivism in the medieval period, is true: they ended up as separate castes themselves! This is partly true of modern movements such as the Arya Samaj as well, which Jaiswal takes up for discussion.

Jaiswal's heavily researched book is extremely useful for those who want to make a study of the various problems raised by her. How far the book itself can throw new light on the 'origin, functions and dimensions of change' of this phenomenon, however, is open to question.

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## Obituary

### MICHAEL ARIS: scholar, writer, gentleman

The death of Michael Aris, fellow at St. Antony's College, Oxford, on his 53rd birthday has left the world of Tibetan scholarship the poorer. Born in Havana, Cuba, where his father served in The British Council, he was educated at Worth School in Sussex and then went on to read modern history at Durham University.

He first met Daw Suu when they were undergraduates and she came to study at Oxford. From 1967 to 1973 he was a private tutor to the royal family of Bhutan and this was how his lifelong interest in the Bhutanese language and culture began. As head of the translation department of the government of Bhutan he was favourably placed for research into Bhutanese history and his studies eventually bore fruit in his book *The Origins of Buddhist Monarchy in Bhutan*.

**During this last decade of his life Michael attained a certain poise and tranquillity that no friend could fail to notice. Long years of research on Buddhist thought had left their mark.**

He was married to Daw Suu in a Buddhist ceremony in London. After studying for a Ph.D. in Tibetan literature Michael and Suu and their two sons travelled widely in the Himalayas. In 1973 Michael led the University of California expedition to the Kutang and Nubri districts of north Nepal. After his return to Oxford he was elected to a research fellowship first at St. John's College and then Wolfson College. His publications during this period of his life included *Bhutan: The Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom; Views of Medieval Bhutan; The Diary and Drawings of Samuel Davis, 1983; and Sources for the History of Bhutan*. By the time he joined Indian Institute of Advanced Study at Shimla he already had a worldwide reputation as a scholar in Tibetan studies and was most sought after at conferences on various aspects of the culture of the eastern Himalayas in particular.

His gentle manner and modesty in scholarly gatherings endeared him to all who knew him. Very much the man who loved the mountains, he was a familiar figure along the wooded tracks that surrounded the Institute. He so often mentioned to me in later years in Oxford that his stay at the Institute was really the last time the family could be together and he valued those two years, 1985-87, in a very special way. His researches while he was there resulted in *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives* which was published both in India and Britain. What I remember most of all during his stay at Shimla was the enormous help he was in organizing the seminar on the Western Himalayas which we held at the Institute. The breadth of his sympathies and his unflinching devotion to the cause of assisting people of different cultures to understand each other was never more evident than at that time. Suu was at the Institute as a fellow in her own right, with her own programme of research.

I can still remember the day when news of the grave illness of her mother came from Burma and the family made preparation for her to attend on her as soon as possible. It was this event that ushered in Daw Suu's involvement in the political life of her home country and the long years of separation from her family that followed. Michael's support for all that she did marks one of the most extraordinary relationships of this century. The telephone and the scanty messages through various sources were for the most part the only ways in which news of Suu could filter through to the house in Oxford.

After leaving Shimla Michael Aris resumed his scholarly career in Oxford and made a home for his two sons. At the same time he was known as the husband of Burma's national leader and was called upon to receive the honours that came her way but which she was prevented from receiving in person. Visits to Rangoon stopped. During this last decade of his life Michael attained a certain poise and tranquillity that no friend could fail to notice. Long years

of research on Buddhist thought had left their mark.

Michael's career as an academic in Oxford was never interrupted. He was a research fellow and member of the governing body at St. Antony's College, and during 1990-92 a visiting professor at Harvard, but—and this is my personal impression—he felt closer to Suu in Oxford and also wished to keep a home there for his sons, and so decided not to move to America. He continued to maintain links with world leaders in the cause of peace, and embarked on fund-raising in order to eventually set up at Oxford a Centre for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies.

The corpus of scholarly work kept growing. He edited *Lamas, Princes and Brigands*, Joseph Roek's *Photography of the Tibetan Borderlands of China*, and Hugh Richardson's *High Peaks, Pure Earth*. He edited a collection of Daw Suu's speeches and works in the Penguin *Freedom from Fear*. This carried forewords by Vaclav Havel and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. One last meeting with his wife was not to be. His sons were with him when he died on March 27, 1999—scholar, writer, gentleman. The community, past and present, of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study are privileged to number him among their own.

Margaret Chatterjee  
Westminster College,  
Oxford  
May 3, 1999

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# Ingredients of a decent society

T. R. SHARMA

*The Decent Society*

by Avishai Margalit

(translated by Naomi Goldblum)

Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London

1998; xi+304 pp; price not mentioned

'State came into being for the sake of life but continues for the sake of good life,' observed Aristotle over two millennia ago. Human history since then has been witness to myriad attempts to evolve competing models of a virtuous state and society that could ensure good life. Avishai Margalit, a philosopher by training, is the latest to join this search. Written in Rawlsian vein *The Decent Society* is a plea for institutional political ethics. The book identifies nonhumiliation as a necessary condition of a decent society. Placed along a continuum ranging from anarchism, which considers the very existence of institutional authority as humiliating, to stoicism that holds the contrary view, the author's characterization of a decent society proximates to neither. A decent society for the anarchists is one that is without any permanent governing institutions because any institutional breach of individual's autonomy and sovereignty is tantamount to humiliation. The stoics, on the other hand, consider every breach of a person's autarchy (autonomy of thought) as humiliation. Navigating between the two, Margalit conceives a decent society as one whose institutions do not violate the rights of people and render them incapable of demanding their rights.

## Eschewing Humiliation

While clarifying the concept of humiliation the author contrasts it with the notions of self respect, honour, human dignity, self-esteem and integrity. He distinguishes between a society which is civilized and the one which is decent — the former being micro-ethical (absence of humiliating individuals) and the latter macro-ethical (absence of humiliating institutions and structures). Thus, what makes a society decent is not the absence of humiliating individuals but of structural and institutional humiliation. The notion of a decent society is also contrasted with the notions of a

'proper', 'respectable' and, more importantly, 'just' society. Three justifications are offered for respecting all human beings: positive, in terms of certain traits; skeptical, which prioritizes respect to traits; and negative—why humiliation is wrong.

The author's exposition of concepts is elaborate and brings out the nuance of various terms which at first sight appear to be identical. While at one level humiliation signifies lack of control as distinct from self discipline, at another it is the rejection of human beings as humans. Humiliation is different from insult in so far as it is the extreme form of insult amounting to injury to one's self-respect, honour and dignity. Margalit juxtaposes the notion of a decent society to a nonshaming and a nonembarrassing society. Humiliation can also arise due to someone's rejection from or by his/her encompassing group and treating him/her as a lesser citizen, particularly in matters relating to distribution of goods and services. Institutional snobbery and encroachment on privacy of individuals constitute humiliation, even though what is private and what is public is time, space and culture specific. Institutional gossip and pornography are humiliating and violate the norms of a decent society. Personal encroachment on privacy of individual and personal gossip are also humiliating acts but they are relevant to the question whether a society is civilized or not, rather than whether it is decent or not. Bureaucracy which treats people as 'numbers' or 'application forms' is dehumanizing and hence humiliating. Whereas a society which gives symbolic citizenship to every one is a decent society, a totalitarian society is most humiliating and blatantly nondecent.

Is welfare society a decent society? It would seem that the principal motive for the establishment of a welfare state was the desire to

eliminate the humiliating manner in which support was given to the poor in the form of alms by relying on philanthropy. But a welfare state is also humiliating in so far as its institutions create dependent people lacking self respect who are willing to sell their autonomy and pride for a bowl of lentils from the public kitchen. In so far as it attempts to eradicate institutional humiliation a welfare state is a necessary condition for a decent society; but it itself is debasing in nature and its institutions are equally humiliating. Despite all this, it is a complement of a decent society because it provides safeguards against degrading life conditions—poverty, unemployment and illness—all of which are humiliating conditions. Although poverty may have some ennobling effects as well, yet in essence it is humiliating. A decent society is one which is without unemployment because the social and economic effects of unemployment are very humiliating. But any forced labour, any coerced labour of slaves, serfs and workers is irreconcilable with a decent society. In fact, there is an inherent connection between exploitation and humiliation. Is punishment humiliation? It is and it is not. In so far as it involves suffering and disgrace, it is humiliating, but when it implicitly acknowledges that the person being punished is a moral agent worthy of respect, it is nonhumiliating.

## Justice and Decency

The most significant question posed by the author relates to the relation between a just society and a decent society. Is it possible to have a just society which is not decent? And how about a society which is just to its members but unjust to others? A just society, in Rawls' view, ought to be a decent society both to its members and to the nonmembers. Can a society be said to be founded on justice and yet contain humiliating institutions? The author's position, which broadly corresponds to the Rawlsian position, is that a just society is one which does not tolerate systematic humiliation by its basic institutions. But Rawls is also concerned with establishing rules for the society's basic institutions. It is this part of the Rawlsian argument that Margalit finds difficult to accept. He particularly disagrees with the Rawlsian position which considers the religious institutions of society as nonbasic ones. In Margalit's scheme of things the state's religious institutions are very important and basic and go a

long way in determining whether a society is decent or not.

The author's style is lucid and he does not tax the reader's patience despite his long-winded argument. The book is thought provoking and a useful addition to social, moral and political philosophy. Although Margalit does not attempt to produce a theory of a decent society in the sense in which Rawls propounded a theory of justice, he does identify the ingredients of a decent society by telling a story about it—a story whose heroes are concepts and whose end-product is a utopia through which the social reality may be evaluated.

Nevertheless, it's quite a puzzle as to why the author chose the theme that he did overlooking some of the more perennial questions of political and moral philosophy like freedom, equality, justice and political obligation? Fred Dallmayr argues that a thinker is neither fully available nor totally inaccessible. To the extent his concerns are universal, he is available, but if his concerns are rooted in a particular societal practice or tradition, he is inaccessible and cannot be fully comprehended without understanding his tradition. This considerably applies to Margalit's choice of a decent society as the theme of his work. It is not difficult to see that almost all the traits associated by the author with humiliation are typical of a Christian society that raised etiquette and social practices to the level of social ethics.

It also needs to be borne in mind that the whole question of humiliation is a subjective question. It is, after all, a matter of perception and feeling. It can be looked at from three alternative angles: from the viewpoint of the object of humiliation, from that of the humiliating institution, and of an outside observer. These viewpoints may converge but in most situations they are likely to diverge. Paternalism, for example, may not be viewed as humiliating either by the subject or by the object but only by the outside observer. The viewpoints of the colonizer-subject and the colonised-object may not converge. What is crucial and needs serious consideration is the viewpoint of the sufferer who is the object of institutional ridicule and humiliation.

T. R. Sharma is professor of political science at Panjab University, Chandigarh.

# Deficient labour

NASIRTYABJI

Miners and Millhands:

Work, Culture and Politics in Princely Mysore

by Janaki Nair

Sage Publications, New Delhi,  
1998; 325 pp; Rs. 450

Janaki Nair's book appears at a time when interest in the working class is probably at an all time low. It is low in terms of the political significance of working class action, as evidenced in the coverage given to strikes and lockouts by the financial and economic press in the country. It figures equally low as far as serious research projects are concerned. These, at least, one might expect to be less susceptible to the political fashions of the day. All the three books published over the last five years that deal with working class issues are outcomes of Ph.D. theses. The topic does not seem to be one that would otherwise sustain monograph-length research efforts.

The question that arises, of course, is whether the working class deserves attention, given its numerical strength within the working population. In earlier periods, perceptibly heroic actions by the working class impinged on the public consciousness, arousing some curiosity that led, in turn, to the impulse towards research into the background of these actions. Since the Mumbai textile workers strike of the early 1980s, no similar action has aroused particular public attention. This phenomenon itself is worthy of some thought: in the eight years since the process of economic deregulation began there have been significant worker's protests, but these are evidently seen as of little interest even by those who are critical of the entire reform process.

## Division of Labour

Part of the reason lies in the division of labour within the social sciences in India. History ends with 1947 and independence, from which event sociologists take over. But sociologists in India have, with rare exceptions, taken no interest in industry or workers, and so the field lies quite unsurveyed, except in largely tentative newspaper reports of 'labour problems'. But why are historians keeping aloof even from

their anointed period of the colonial era?

Janaki Nair suggests that the answer lies in a paradigm shift (p. 27). The earlier optimism about the destiny of the working class has suffered a jolt with the collapse of the socialist world. This is also true about the possibility of what she somewhat demurely refers to as 'certain political outcomes' for us all. She makes this point very briefly, but one may elaborate it somewhat as follows. Earlier it was possible to investigate working class actions, and the strategies their political leadership followed, to discover what had gone wrong, or more rarely, right. Now that the working class has no perceived larger role to play, its actions are definitionally purely self-centred. Industrial workers are not even poor or wretched, at least when compared to the other sections of the working population.

One issue that did come into the forefront from the mid-80s onwards was that of identity. This was partly a result of what appeared to be an inexorable rise of a communal consciousness amongst a large section of Indians. It was also a reaction against the view that a truly (secular) Indian consciousness left no room for more localized senses of identity. On both counts, the working class became the subject of scrutiny. It was no longer a privileged social group in terms of its revolutionary transformative role. Was it then at least free of a permanent adherence to divisive ideologies, whether based on religious community or on caste status? Again, given that it had in many cases been mobilized by individuals working within a pan-Indian political philosophy, had the working class itself become a vested interest in the propagation of a monolithic Indian identity?

These are some of the issues that Janaki Nair discusses through an empirical examination of the major segments of the working class in Mysore, the Kolar goldmine workers,

and the industrial workers of Bangalore city. Apart from providing, in a sense, a history of the industrial development of Mysore from an angle that has remained untouched, the work addresses two more interesting issues. The first is the close overlap between caste and class observed in the preponderance of workers from the 'Bahujan Samaj' in the Kolar mines. The second is the historical development of 'gentlemanly' trade unionism in Bangalore city.

## Social Identity

In Kolar, the identification of the workers with the liberatory features of industrial work, despite the terrible conditions in which they physically survived both in the mines and in their homes, created an ambivalence towards the nationalist-minded trade union organizers who first took up their cause (pp. 152-53). Even the communists, who, unlike the Congress trade unionists, were not interested in tempering their mobilization strategies with the need to secure the support 'and approval of the powerful lobby of Indian industrialists,' were not able to develop an enduring relationship with the mine-workers. Janaki Nair believes that this was due to the distrust that the communists retained of any noneconomic aspiration amongst the workers, and their unwillingness to grant that dalit workers had a legitimate need to assert social as well as economic goals in their struggles. For dalit workers, a new social identity did not follow from any measure of economic gain.

Although Bangalore represented a more industrialized environment, there was little homogeneity in its industrial sector, in the way cotton and jute textile mills provided to Bombay, Ahmedabad, Kanpur and Calcutta. This factor, of the differing conditions under which the Bangalore workers worked, appears to be important to the argument of the book. 'Gentlemanly' trade unionism is a characteristic of a situation where any industrial action that spreads beyond a given industrial unit has to bring about a commonality of interests amongst workers in units engaged in diverse activities.

In fact, Janaki Nair makes an intriguing but passing reference to the fact that the prominent Congressman K. T. Bhashyam's interventions showed little understanding of the labour process, technological change, and changes in the

organization of production (p.285). This points to an important way in which the effectiveness of industrial action may be assessed. For if the resolution of situations of industrial conflict results in advances in the labour process, through changes in the organization of production, then even in the absence of any major political outcome, the mode of production is also advanced. It is then a separate, though surely critical, issue of how the benefits of this more productive organization are distributed across social classes. It is clear that managers of the Kolar goldmines had no vision, or even wish, to advance the labour process, and the tragedy of unemployment that the mine work force now faces is the biggest indictment of that management. In the Bangalore case, the data provided in the book makes any assessment a hazardous exercise. However, it seems that in individual cases the industrial units did respond in technologically positive ways.

Many of the methodological comments that Janaki Nair makes are well worth serious consideration. She is, however, handicapped by the fact that the material she had at hand from official sources was not collected with a view to answering the questions she raises. Sometimes the discussion, interesting in itself, has a tenuous connection with any larger thesis. However, there is one point that might have benefited the argument in the book if Nair had developed it further. The Kolar mine workers, dalits largely employed on a contract basis, seemed to consider work in the mines preferable to other options open to them. This is an indication of the kind of life they had to lead in their traditional occupations.

This would suggest that the process of mining of material, such as gold or diamonds, necessitates a degree of surveillance that would in normal situations be unacceptably degrading. In other words, the degree of surveillance in the Kolar mines was not merely the result of the paranoia of the mine management. It was intrinsic to the operation of a capitalist mine dealing with minerals that lie at the core of the capitalist process itself. This surveillance would be unacceptable to a working class with the social and political option to refuse work under such conditions. Dalit workers in Kolar did not have these options.

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# Mughal Agra: Aligarh view and beyond

CHETAN SINGH

Agra: Economic and Political Profile  
of a Mughal Suba, 1580-1707

by K. K. Trivedi

Ravish Publishers, Pune,  
1998; 246 pp+10 maps; Rs. 495

Alongside an historiography that followed the fascinating but ephemeral political fortunes of medieval sultanates, rulers and nobilities, there was the work of W. H. Moreland and K. M. Ashraf which examined the material life and economic activities of that time. It was the appearance of Irfan Habib's *Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707* in the early 1960s that marked a major shift towards a systematic and an entirely new approach to the study of medieval India. Over the ensuing twenty-five years or so, the efforts of a group of historians based in Aligarh University—or having close academic links with it—contributed substantially towards a fuller understanding of the economic and administrative structures which supported the Mughal empire. From this resulted a sophisticated and detailed depiction of methods of Mughal governance and resource appropriation which were implemented practically over the entire subcontinent. With the creation of this general picture, it seems that interest gradually converged on developments that had occurred within the various regional constituents of the Mughal empire. Interest in regions probably arose from the realisation that an empire of subcontinental dimensions would necessarily encompass considerable geographical and social diversity. It also grew from the need to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of how Mughal imperialism intermeshed with older, but smaller, polities and economies. In terms of its origins, the book under review is rooted in a scholarship that first constructed an impressive model of overarching Mughal imperialism. Its specific engagement with the regional peculiarities of the Mughal province of Agra, on the other hand, makes it more than a simple restatement of an imperial system operating at the *suba* level.

## Puzzling Conclusion

*Suba* Agra, Trivedi argues, was created by the merger of 'three diverse macro-regions' and was primarily the result of political decisions made by Akbar and some of the Delhi *sultans* who preceded him. Considerations that influenced these decisions included the strategic importance of places such as Kanauj and Kalpi and the economic significance of the copper mines of Narnaul. Perhaps the most important factor here was the 'resource potential' of the area included in the *suba*. Quite interestingly the core of *Agra suba* coincided with the area in which the Braj dialect was spoken. The author, however, refrains from drawing any conclusions and simply states that this linguistic delineation 'may be mere coincidence than consideration' (p. 24). Trivedi insists that '*suba* Agra presents a clear illustration of the principle that "regions" are not predetermined by natural factors but take their form from human activities and interaction' (p. 25). In this context his concluding statement in the first chapter that 'the formation and demarcation of the *suba* was probably based on a study of geomorphological features of the land' (p. 40) becomes somewhat puzzling.

**The two primary arguments that Trivedi seems to forward are that (1) it was the deliberate creation of the *suba* of Agra that made it an economically and politically significant 'region', and (2) the inability of the Mughals to harmonise the imperial power structure with shifting local power equations 'progressively alienated the zamindars'.**

In dealing with agricultural production and revenue, Trivedi

examines the statistics on 'measured area' provided by various contemporary sources and on that basis works out the relationship between 'cultivated area', 'measured area', and the total area of the province. What is important here is his argument that 'the measured area, as given in the *Ain* denoted the demarcated area of the respective administrative/fiscal division of the province'. His estimates of crop yields show that they were higher than those of the late 19th century. Perhaps the most interesting part of this chapter is the detailed description (pp. 77-80) of the technology of processing sugarcane and indigo for the market.

Trivedi's description of the *zamindars* and *jagirdars* in the third chapter brings alive the features of landownership and social structure that were specific to the *suba*. It is contended that due to the policies followed earlier by Allaudin (pp. 99-101) the landholdings of the upper castes in Delhi became smaller than those in Agra. Despite the marked dominance of the Rajput *zamindars* of Agra, they were denied access to the privileges of the *mansabdari* system. The Mughal emperors preferred to grant *mansabs* to Rajput chieftains rather than 'ordinary *zamindars*'. The tenacity of traditional land ownership patterns is the underlying implication. Proving this point is the peculiar case of the Narwaris who, despite technically possessing the area of Narwar as a *watan-jagir*, were not its *zamindars*. The latter position in Narwar was asserted by the older, established Tonwar clan. Further emphasising this is the fact that when smaller *zamindars* (particularly Jats) attempted to improve their position in the hierarchy, 'the Mughal State put to maximum use its repressive military might against them, the older aristocracy fully co-operating to crush those elements' (p. 119).

## Important Contribution

Nonagricultural production and trade are the subject of a separate chapter which dwells upon the numerous economic activities in the *suba*: mining, building, carpet-making and a whole range of products of the imperial *karkhanas*. Trade routes, commodities of trade and the means of transportation which are dealt with in considerable detail reveal the extent to which the economy had become commercialised.

Trivedi's description of the administration of the *suba* reasserts

much of what is already well known about Mughal provincial administration. The few obvious differences in the context of *Agra suba* arose from its position as a province in which the imperial capital was situated. Once this position was lost in 1649, even these differences disappeared.

The two primary arguments that Trivedi seems to forward are that (1) it was the deliberate creation of the *suba* of Agra that made it an economically and politically significant 'region', and (2) the inability of the Mughals to harmonise the imperial power structure with shifting local power equations 'progressively alienated the *zamindars*'. Both these arguments also appear to reflect the contradictions inherent both in the Mughal empire and in the historiography that has attended to it in recent times. While the emergence of the 'region' is seen as the successful result of politically centralised decisions, the unrest that the *suba* witnessed during this period is regarded as having emerged from a powerful socio-economic logic at the local level. The tension between the two positions that surfaces in some parts of the book perhaps emphasises the need for a more dynamic model that can accommodate the contesting historical forces that actually confronted each other in the region.

A substantial part of the book conforms to the understanding of Mughal India and the rigorous methodological standards that have been followed by the 'Aligarh historians'. That in itself makes the book an important addition to the 'regional' history of Mughal India even if it focuses on the very heart of the Mughal empire. At the points at which it differs, the painstaking reexamination of earlier research—particularly of statistical interpretations—promises to change some existing beliefs.

Chetan Singh teaches history at Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla.

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## Freire's dream of freedom

ADITI MUKHERJEE

*Pedagogy of Freedom:  
Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage*

by Paulo Freire

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Lanham

1998; pp. xxxii+144; \$ 19.95

Published posthumously in 1998, this book was originally written as preparatory lecture notes for a graduate seminar course that Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo were planning to jointly teach at the Harvard Graduate School of Education during the fall semester, 1997. Freire died in May 1997 and the course was subsequently not offered. As Patrick Clarke, the translator of the book, points out, it was up to the close associates of Freire—Donaldo Macedo, Stanley Aronowitz and Patrick Clarke, among others—to 'carry the torch' that he had handed to them. It is their dedicated work which has made possible the completion of the trilogy of pedagogies—*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Pedagogy of Hope*, and now *Pedagogy of Freedom*. The foreword and the introduction by Macedo and Aronowitz respectively review the lifelong academic struggle of the philosopher-educator who, despite undue criticism, exile and intellectual ostracization, continued to 'dream' of freedom from 'ideological determinism' and 'organized hopelessness'.

### Ideology and Neutrality

Freire offers in this book, as in most of his earlier works, a counter discourse on the emergence of 'scientism' (rather than 'science') predominant among many social scientists who tend to adopt 'hard science' modes of analysis into empirical research in social sciences. The absolute 'objectivity' and social 'neutrality' taken as characteristic of 'scientific rigour' are uncritically adopted without the essential and inherent scope for self-criticism, skepticism, and rigour of hard sciences. Freire is critical of this 'scientism' which often leads to fragmentation, if not atomization, of knowledge in the positivistic mode of social science research done by 'specialists' who essentially encourage a reductionist view of the act of knowing. Reductionist specialization inevitably reduces the intellectual task to mere technicism (with absolute faith in statistically

accurate evaluation results) developed and refined to study narrow and disembodied units of knowledge in utter segregation from other discourses. Freire contests this disarticulation of knowledge which guarantees that the interrelation of information, so essential for critical reading of the world, is left outside the purview of educational research.

The total objectivity or impartiality in social science research entails the researchers' detachment from any ideology as though they were approaching the real world wearing 'gloves and masks' (Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*, 1985) in order not to contaminate or be contaminated by it. This is, for Freire, an impossible proposition because prioritization of a certain body of knowledge in isolation from other discourses itself points to an ideology that tries to make itself invisible by false claims of neutrality.

At the risk of being repetitive and somewhat didactic, Freire reiterates his position that ideological and social neutrality in education cannot but be self defeating. Teaching requires that education is ideological, has the capacity to be critical, and involves the recognition of our conditioning, and humility and critical reflection. As Macedo points out in the foreword, *Pedagogy of Freedom* 'courageously challenges us to break with the rigidity of a technicist training approach to education to embrace those fundamental knowledges that will prevent us from deceiving our conscience.' The educator is ethically bound to take cognizance of the existing unjust social order and strive towards its transformation. Unless the educational enterprise is linked with larger critical and social issues, it will prevent the educators from engaging in a general critique of the social mission of education and oblige them to perpetuate the values of the dominant social order leading to domestication rather than change.

In the utopian world that Freire dreams of in this book, the question of the educators' ideological neutra-

lity does not arise because they constitute the vital agents in bringing about radical changes in society. He rejects the neoliberal pessimistic belief in the historical inevitability of exploitation, inequality and cultural enslavement. Freire concedes that we may be conditioned genetically, culturally and socially. Yet, he insists, it is different from being 'determined'. 'History is time filled with possibility and not inexorably determined...the future is problematic and not already decided, fatalistically.' Belief in absolute determinism would absolve us of any responsibility for our action in the world. But, as a conscious presence in the world we cannot hope to escape the ethical responsibility for our action. We are not only responsible but also have the 'freedom' to think critically and act accordingly towards a juster dispensation. The human agency is of significant value. The educator can and must be involved in the 'specifically human act of intervening in the world' by keeping alive the hope and continuing to dream for the emancipation of men and women. The call is for a commitment to this 'ethical ideal' and seeking freedom from the despondency of historical inevitability. Though Freire makes it clear that educational activity is not the same as revolutionary transformation, he insists on its being a necessary and significant step to break the status quo.

### The Pedagogical Process

As in his earlier works, particularly *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this book makes an appeal for an openness to dialogue. Education is an ongoing dialogue between teachers and learners, both bringing knowledge to the participatory endeavour. Both are engaged in the production and sharing of, and critically evaluating their own and each other's, knowledge. Freire reiterates his distrust of the unfounded but conventionally accepted belief that the teacher is the repository and transmitter of received knowledge and the learner is an empty organism that merely awaits filling by the teacher. The pedagogical process is reciprocal. In fact, there is no teaching without learning. 'Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning...to teach is more than a transitive-relative verb...simply to "teach" is not possible in the context of human historical unfinishedness...teaching that does not emerge from the experience of learning

cannot be learned by anyone' (p. 31). It is the dialogical process that counters the 'banking system' of education and within it the devaluation of the creative and critical potential of the teachers and learners. This 'process' guarantees that the learners are not fated to stagnate. 'Not because of the "teaching" they have received but because of the very process of learning itself, learners can circumvent and outmaneuver the authoritarianism and the epistemological error of this "banking system."'

*Pedagogy of Freedom* echoes Freire's earlier concern (*The Politics of Education*) about the tendency to de-link theory from practice that ends up preventing a full understanding of the power imbalance that controls our practices. He is in total agreement with Marcuse that '...the divorce of thought from action, of theory from practice, is itself part of an unfree world' (Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 1960). The reluctance of the educators belonging to the dominant groups to theorize springs from a desire to shield themselves from the self-critical reflection that might challenge the dominant ideology protecting their privileged position. The aim of critical educational practice would be to integrate theory and practice so that it will 'recognize the right to express appropriate anger against injustice, against disloyalty,...against exploitation' and thereby question the power-resource asymmetry.

In his seemingly simple style, Freire once again urges us to understand that critical educational practice would also create the conditions in which the learners can 'engage in the experience of assuming themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons; dreamers of possible utopias.... Capable of assuming themselves as "subject" because of the capacity to recognize themselves as "object". All this, while bearing in mind that the assumption of oneself does not signify the exclusion of others. Because it is the otherness of "not I" or the "you" that makes me assume the radicality of the "I".'

*Pedagogy of Freedom*, with all its complexity of vision and profound insights, is easier for the uninitiated to read than Freire's earlier works. Yet the 'passion', 'love', and 'caring' that Freire has always advocated come through more poignantly than ever before.

Aditi Mukherjee is a fellow at IAS, Shimla.

# A bumpy ride through medieval Bengal

SEEMA ALAVI

Adventurers, Landowners and Rebels: Bengal c. 1575-1715

by Anirudha Ray

Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Private Ltd.  
New Delhi, 1998; xi+273 pp; Rs. 475

Medieval Bengal has been one of the best researched areas of Indian history. Historians have effectively explored the social, economic and cultural spheres of its history. This has generated a rich historical literature that derives primarily from contemporary Bengali sources or English factory records. Anirudha Ray's book is a welcome addition to the dense corpus of Bengal studies. The refreshing aspect of the work is its extensive use of French documentation on Bengal. When this is juxtaposed with Persian and contemporary Bengali material, a richly textured social history emerges. The book looks at issues of state formation in the coastal areas, and the making of a Bengali identity with its interstices in national identity formation in the 19th and 20th centuries. Ray explores the construction of regional heroes, and their selective appropriation in nationalist and imperialist literature.

### Three Revolts

Ray engages with his themes through a study of three revolts in medieval Bengal that occurred within a span of 140 years (the end of the 16th century to the beginning of the 18th century). Two of these were zamindari resistances in eastern Bengal against the suppression of their rights by the Mughals, and the third was concentrated in western and northern Bengal, almost wiping out Mughal rule from the region. This revolt was led by Sobha Singh and Rahim Khan.

The first part of the book locates the fragile resistance of an independent coastal zamindar, Pratapaditya, in the complex interplay of the Mughal, Portuguese and Arakanese attempts to dominate the coast in the 16th century. Ray weaves a fascinating account of the fashioning of coastal polities in the wake of the decline of the Afghan sultanate and the emergence of Mughal rule. Here, Mughal colonization is explained in terms of its negotiation with different

sects and religious groups who already had a history of close interaction in the region: the Afghans, the Portuguese and the Arakanese. Ray shows that the local zamindars, like Pratapaditya, used the variegated political manipulations to their advantage. They too entered the fray, increasing their power and resisting the Mughals with assistance from Portuguese adventurers. 'One could see such employment not only at Sripur, Bakla and Jessore, but also in the interior such as Sonargaon.' In this struggle Arakan, too, often made use of Portuguese adventurers, who in turn tried to exploit the situation to carve out their own areas of control. The Mughal conquest of Chittagong in 1666 ended the struggle even though the Arakanese and Portuguese pirates continued their sudden attacks on the Bengal coast for slaves. The Mughal victory revealed the complete alienation between the peasantry and the zamindars (like Pratapaditya), and 'an economic relationship of exploitation in which the sympathy of the peasant was never with zamindars'. Nevertheless, the power play between various ethnic groups left its cultural imprint on coastal societies.

*The book has several exasperating loose ends. Particularly frustrating is the lack of a coherent discussion on the social base of the rebel zamindars, the articulation of their agendas, and the reasons for their failure. Answers to these basic queries do lie scattered in the dense text, but it is left to the reader to piece together diverse bits of information*

The second half of the book discusses the revolt of Sobha Singh, a petty zamindar on the western bank of the Bhagirathi. With the

assistance of Afghan mercenaries, principally from north India, the lower echelons of the rebels began to plunder the rich urban centres while the higher command tried to substitute Mughal authority by issuing coins and permits for trading. Ray shows that the rebellion was suppressed much quicker than was expected as the different sections of society became alienated from the rebels who had no ideology and had failed to capture the Mughal capital. The author locates the reign of Murshid Quli Khan in this background. He links the later revolt of zamindar Sitaram Ray to the ripple effect of the squashing of Sobha Singh's revolt.

The last section of the book looks at the way in which these revolts have been projected in Bengali literature. According to Ray one can discern two principal strands: the first equates the zamindari resistances in Eastern Bengal with 'fights for freedom', in which the Hindu heroes were seen fighting against the Muslim central authority located in north India. The other strand dismissed the protests as 'law and order' problems just as the 18th century Persian writers had done; this view had also been readily appropriated by the British. Much later, after independence, a third strand appears—the development of a subregional historiography which viewed these protests as 'fight for freedom for the whole of Bengal against the central authority'.

Ray discusses the first two strands through an elucidation of some historical poems coined in 19th century Bengal—*Padmini*, *Sura Sundar* and *Karna Devi* of Rangalal Bandopadhyay, and *Birbahu* of Hemchandra Bandopadhyay—to show that the dominant trend of Bengali narrative poetry remained rooted in an anti-Muslim drive. The historical novels were relatively mild in tone. For instance, the famous novel of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee on Sitaram, the rebellious zamindar of Muhammedpur, shows an attempt to carve out a larger national identity for the Bengalis and to move beyond the narrow Hindu confine. However, Ray suggests that in the 20th century, in the wake of Hindu nationalism, Bengali identity acquired a communal tone. The partition of Bengal in 1947 and the bitter sufferings that followed only served to encourage this trend.

### Loose Ends

This book is a valuable contribution to the fast growing literature on

Bengal studies. It adds significantly to the ongoing debate on Mughal state formation as it explores the revolt of the zamindars in eastern, as well as northern and western Bengal, and establishes its linkages with the Portuguese and Arakanese presence. This is particularly useful to ongoing studies of Mughal expansion that are making a plea to widen the terms of the debate from mere agrarian expansion to imperial encounters with the Portuguese, the English, and the Dutch. The book also provides substantial meat to 18th century 'revisionist' studies of Bengal that are trying to understand British colonialism in terms of building a complex picture of the political economy of that province. Ray's well-documented and rich study highlights effectively the tensions inherent in precolonial Bengali society and polity.

However, the book has several exasperating loose ends. Particularly frustrating is the lack of a coherent discussion on the social base of the rebel zamindars, the articulation of their agendas, and the reasons for their failure. Answers to these basic queries do lie scattered in the dense text, but it is left to the reader to piece together diverse bits of information. The book could have done with some rigorous editing. The narrative is bumpy, repetitive, and reader unfriendly. Chapters are peppered with convoluted sentences that convey nothing! It is a pity that a seminal study should be marred with such casual production.

Seema Alavi teaches history at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

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# Home that fades away like a dream

MALA PANDURANG

## Going Home

by Lakshmi Kannan  
(translated from Tamil by the author)

Disha Books, Hyderabad, 1999; 160 pp; Rs. 140

Lakshmi Kannan is a recognised name in modern Tamil fiction. Writing under the pen-name Kaaveri, she has published a number of short stories in Tamil. *Going Home* is translated from the original *Athukku Pogannum*. First published in 1986, *Athukku Pogannum* was received as a strong piece of feminist writing and a novel 'out of the ordinary.' Its translation into English will contribute to ongoing discussions on the construct of the middle class female subjectivity in fictional narratives by Indian women writers.

The novel, written in two parts, alternates between the childhood years of the young Gayatri in Mysore (third person narrative) and the modern urban reality of the adult Gayatri in the Delhi of the 1980s (first person autobiographical mode). The line '*Athukku pogannum*' (I am going home), spoken by the child Gayatri eager to return to the liberal atmosphere of her grandfather's home, becomes the leitmotif of the story.

### Elusive Home

The metaphor of the house is central to the narrative. Kannan speaks in her preface of a number of women who do not necessarily feel 'at home' in their houses, and to whom home remains an 'elusive concept'. She makes it clear that her intention is to attack the 'facile use of smarmy, mealy-mouthed statements' like 'home is where the heart is', and to demythify the given of the happy home—*Grahine griham uchyate* (the housewife is the house).

The central protagonist Gayatri now lives in a D.D.A. apartment. She is haunted by childhood memories of her grandfather's sprawling mansion (the Retreat) in Mysore. In contrast to her carefree movements as a child in the sanctuary of 'Thatha's' home, the claustrophobic interior of the Delhi flat becomes a symbol of frustration and repression. Hot and cramped, the flat 'agitates the nerves'. 'Will these flats squeeze

the inhabitants and cut them down to size so that they become small enough to fit into small enough spaces?', she asks in despair. The metaphor of the house is further concentrated and reduced to that of the bathroom, a very basic everyday amenity: 'When it comes to designing bathrooms, Delhi architects are suddenly stricken by the most parsimonious instincts. The only way to avoid getting bruised and scratched everywhere in those bathrooms is to squeeze and shrink one's body as small as possible.'

Kannan draws attention to the legal rights of a woman to family property, and the actual reality of control of assets. Gayatri's mother (Meenakshi) is denied her share in her father's ancestral property but refuses to petition the court for the sake of the family's 'honour'. On a visit to Mysore a few years later, Gayatri stands 'homeless' outside her grandfather's house which now belongs to her uncle. There is a sense of great pain at 'a house that had faded away like a dream', and slipped through her mother's and her fingers, because they were the daughters of the family. There is also an analogy between the house and the human body. After the loss of the Retreat, Gayatri is filled with a 'restlessness', and an 'unhoused feeling' takes over her which she cannot verbalize. As a woman she feels neither at home in the physical house, nor in her personal 'cage-body'.

*Going Home* is an anti-suburban text on women in the metropolis. Burdened by emotional pressures from within the home and physical strains from without, Gayatri is representative of the educated middle class Indian woman whom inflation has left with little choice but to assume the double role of housewife and career woman. She slogs untiringly in a white collar job to meet monthly installments to sustain her family's dream of owning a home of one's own. What finally

materializes is 'a matchbox flat with small rooms fitted with tiny windows that look like beady cunning eyes.'

The crossing from the private sphere to the public, and the emerging out of the *zenana* into the outer world is not translated into freedom of any worth. *Going Home* is a (rather too direct) statement on the plight of the average married career woman, and deconstructs the myth of the working woman as a liberated and empowered person equipped to make the necessary transitions over her life's courses.

In her preface to the novel, Kannan explains that she had waited for a while before writing the book, with 'a kind of hope as uncertain as it was unsure' that the life of the middle class Indian woman would change for the better. *Going Home* is an angry reaction, 'not unmixed with guilt and shame', to the 'humiliating, misogynous and belittling experiences that educated, upper class/caste women face at the hands of their parental and conjugal families.' Here is an irate writer whose fury is directed at the 'reductive criteria of the genital.'

### Realistic Rendering

Written in a clear, lucid style, the novel succeeds in raising disturbing questions on systemic aspects of patriarchal oppression. Gayatri however remains conservative in revolt. When her boss repeatedly makes subtle advances by asking her out to dinner, she opts for vague excuses rather than direct confrontation. Neither is she able to totally bid good-bye to traditional mindsets. If she does eventually find release of some kind, it is through what is traditionally conceived as one of the most basic of life's satisfactions—the arrival of the grandson—perpetuating in turn the myth of (grand)motherhood.

Kannan's women in *Going Home* are unhappy and lonely. Filled with a sense of futility, they give in to a tacit and silent acceptance of their vulnerability inside and outside the home. There is the unmarried Sheila whose outstanding looks are a liability in her professional and social interaction with men; Shoba, the mistress of an M.P., who has been installed in a lonely large house 'in which time was slowly inexorably wasting away the woman inside'; Gayatri's daughter-in-law Girija 'insulated within an event called marriage, a home.. with no grip on life'; and the newly-wed Kiran Agarwal whose determination to

fight sexual harassment ends in the termination of her services, and who has a husband who suggests that she 'compromises'.

Rama is Gayatri's friend. She is a successful writer who struggles to create against an intolerable work schedule. Rama stoically suffers the indifference of her parents towards their 'third daughter'; a husband who is envious of her fame; and in-laws who are resentful of her career. Rama must write for Gayatri to survive: 'I won't let the writer within you [Rama] die,' Gayatri promises herself, 'Because if you die, then so will I....' Rama may write with a 'sharp incisive mind' and 'a clarity of vision' of the dilemma of the salaried middle class, but her writing does not lead to self-catharsis. Her act of the breaking of silence through her acclaimed novel *Driftwood* is nonliberatory. Unlike Padma (perhaps one of Kannan's most remembered protagonists) in an earlier short story 'India Gate', Rama cannot break free.

*Going Home* is a realistic rendering of the lives of educated Tamil brahmin women in an urban milieu. However, what emerges from the text is a sense of victimhood that highlights the powerlessness and helplessness of Kannan's women. As Gayatri grows older, she turns to yoga to strengthen her body so that she may cope with the burden of work. Ironically, her involvement with yoga develops within her a gradual detachment from the physical structures of her home, and her body. 'Tired of living within the body like a tenant,' she prepares herself for the final and 'ultimate home'. The philosophical slant at the end of the novel forecloses the option of praxis. Freedom of the woman remains utopian.

Lakshmi Kannan's language springs alive in poetic/descriptive passages that resonate with the original in Tamil. As, for example, in the depiction of the 'resplendent *deeparadhana*' in the ancient Nataraja temple in Chidambaram (pp.77-8), and in Gayatri's description of the tender relationship shared by her parents (pp.52-3). Equally delightful is the sudden appearance of unique phrases, the context of which a reader from a Tamil background responds to immediately: 'It takes a saint-like Auvaiyar to recognize a Murugan concealed inside!'

Mala Pandurang teaches English literature at Dr. B.M.N. College of Home Science, Matunga, Mumbai.

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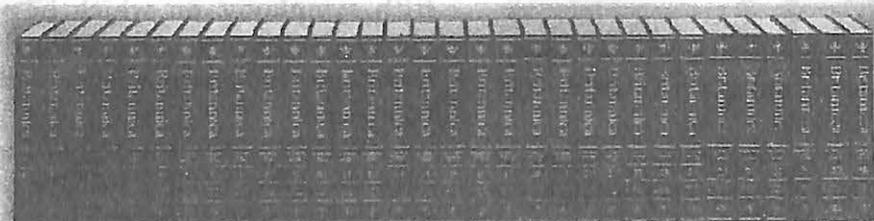
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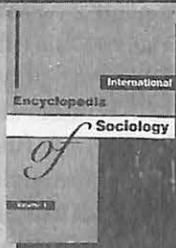
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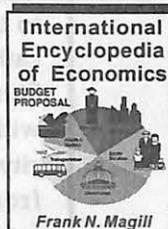
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