

Book Reviews

The Inner Mirror: Kannada Writings on Society and Culture, compiled and edited by A. R. Vasavi, New Delhi: The Book Review Literary Trust, 2009, pp. x+205, Rs. 395, ISBN: 81-88434-04-3

In the contemporary Kannada writings "Mirror" is one of the metaphors that reflects Kannada's negotiation with other languages. "No more Mirrors only Lamps", *When Window becomes Mirror*, are the titles of an article and a book respectively in Kannada published in 1990s and 2000s. Whether we have started seeing ourselves through other languages is the concern that K.V. Narayan is expressing in his article when he calls for other languages to perform the role of a lamp rather than a mirror. Similarly Sanskrit, which was supposed to be the window through which various kinds of knowledge were supposed to enter into Kannada became a model for Kannada, thus molding Kannada like Sanskrit - this is the theme of a book by another scholar T.R.S. Sharma. The book under review aptly titled "The Inner Mirror," takes an informed position in the ongoing debate on language and knowledge.

The present decade has also seen an intense debate on the status of social sciences in India, and a sense of crisis of social science research is being perceived. In an empirical fashion, scholars have attributed the "decline" of social science education in India to the vernacularization of higher education, whereby the students and research scholars are unable to seriously engage with the knowledge produced in English and which consequently gets reflected partially or superficially. To get over this anomaly, the Knowledge Commission of India had recommended setting up of a National Translation Mission (NTM) in the XI plan period which is now busy in translating "social science" knowledge thus far available only in English into Indian languages.

Since the publication of Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978), and the advent of Post-colonial theory

coupled with post-structuralism, it is said that the social science knowledge on India produced since 19th century on India has been complicit with colonial power. It is also well demonstrated that this knowledge was derived from often obscure Sanskrit texts rediscovered by the Indologists in 18th and 19th century, which were hardly in current circulation or practice. Though the postcolonial discourse was able to rewrite some of our understanding of colonialism and nationalism, it couldn't escape the language bind of the colonial creation. It was in Anthropology that some serious debate on the issues of language in understanding other societies was raised and the debate on subject-object relations was renewed. Location of the researcher and the language of the researcher were put into critical scrutiny re-examining the "truth claims" of such research.

Even the new Dalit studies scholarship that is emerging in Indian social science is problematizing the notion of theory and practice and argues for theorizing the practices through the experiential knowledge of the researcher rather than relying on the existing theories to comprehend the experience of self or other. In a sense this debate reminds one of categories such as "critical insider", "organic intellectual" etc.

The book under review has come out in this context and assumes a lot of significance for the above mentioned debates. The book was published under the series "Present Continuous" which is a corollary to the series "Past Continuous" published by The Book Review Literary Trust. It is compiled and edited by A.R. Vasavi, a well known social anthropologist, working on Karnataka. The volume provides fresh inputs and points of reference to the ongoing debate. It has 15 articles translated from Kannada into English under 5 rubrics uniformly including 3 articles under each rubric. The rubrics under which the articles have been arranged deal with contemporary issues that social sciences in India have taken up for research in the last couple of decades or so, and are related to the burning issues in the Indian society too.

Vasavi, the editor of the book, drawing upon her social science training, argues for seriously considering the insights that society obtains through its own mechanisms, along with the knowledge one produces through “objective” analysis. In her introduction she refers to her extensive fieldwork to argue that we need to take this body of writing as “social commentaries” if not as social science. The book seems to be making a case for social scientists to seriously take this body of literature within the ambit of their research work. She in effect argues for “pluralizing the Sociology of India” by taking into account Indian language writings on society and culture.

The selection of essays from Kannada, focuses on the current debates in social science in general, thus aiming to provide the social scientists in India, an “inner mirror” where they can cross-check their understanding of these issues. These issues are highly topical in the contemporary Kannada/Karnataka scenario. The essays that Vasavi has chosen for translation into English are writings from the 1980s onwards. Most of the writers have in a way performed the ‘critical insider-outsider’ role in Kannada society since the 1970s (Tejaswi, Subbanna, Devanoor Mahadeva, D.R. Nagaraj, Baraguru Ramachandrappa, Ananthamurthy, Kambar etc., all of them acclaimed litterateurs; the last two have been awarded with Jnanapeeth). But it has also chosen, apart from this 70s intellectual crop, people who started writing in 80s like Murari Ballala, K.V.Narayana, G. Rajashekar, H.S. Raghavendra Rao, and people who came to prominence in 90s such as, Rahamat Tarikere, T.R. Chandrashekar and Mogalli Ganesh. In that sense it reflects the critical edge that Kannada society has developed to introspect in the past three decades. The issues covered range from Kannada nationalism, language issues covered under the rubric “Contestations: Region, Language and Religion”; questions of religion, secularism, spirituality covered under the rubric “Religiosity: In Moral, Rational and Fundamental Worlds”; issues of social hierarchy and challenges to it under the rubric “Re-casting Caste: New Identities and Mobilisation”; issues of Gender under the rubric “Women: Personhood, Identity and Agency”; and issues related to Modernity and Development under the rubric “Modernity and Development in Locality”. Thus the selection is fairly representative both in terms of issues covered and the choice of the authors. One could argue that there could have been more women in the section related to Gender, but it is not a comment on the essays that are included in the section.

In sum *Inner Mirror* tries to contribute to the corrective measures that Indian social science need to take up in the context of several crucial issues raised within it, which

I have mentioned in the beginning. It is high time that we move away from the colonial frame and see our society not only through external mirrors but also through our inner mirrors. Language, of course, has to play a crucial role in it. We must dismiss the idea that knowledge exists only in English and perceiving Indian languages as passive recipients. The Indian language writings on society have much to offer to English in general and social sciences in particular. The series editors have aptly called this series “Present Continuous”, where Indian language writings engage, along with English, on equal terms in the production of knowledge.

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G. D. Gulati, *Central Asia under the Mongols*, New Delhi: Dev Books, 2010, pp. 209, Rs. 600.

The issues relating to the history of the Mongol empire, its social, economic life, trade and interaction with the neighbouring cultures within the vast spaces of Asia and Europe were always a subject of analysis by various scholars worldwide, such as V. Barthold, T. Allsen, R. Foltz, H. Yule and many others. The book by G.D. Gulati deals with the topic of the history of the Mongols in Central Asia, in particular of Chaghatai Khanate, its interactions with the contiguous China and India and the role the commercial network played in this part of the world.

In his introduction the author defines Central Asia from both geographical and historical perspectives. It seems to be valuable since throughout ages the concept of Central Asia changed dramatically, depending on the twists and turns of its history and political mapping. Gulati rightly suggests that from the historical geography viewpoint the definition of Central Asia as a region comprising of 5 former Soviet, now independent republics, is a narrow definition (p.2).

Although there is no unanimity among scholars about the region’s precise definition, delete, it could be referred to the vast area stretching from China (Tibet and Xinjiang) and Mongolia on the east; northern India, Afghanistan in the south; north-eastern Iran and Caspian Sea in the west; Ural mountains in the north; with its so called “heartland” comprising of five republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, different parts of which in history were variably known as Transoxiana (or Mawarannahr in Arabic), Desht-i-Kipchak, Turan, Turkestan.