

BOOK REVIEW

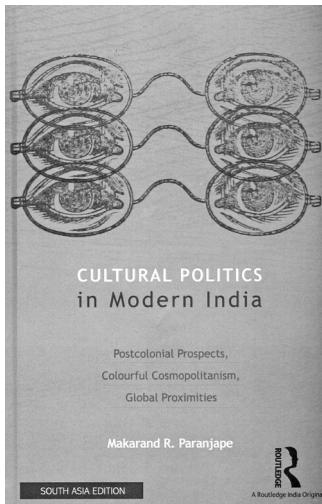
CULTURAL POLITICS IN MODERN INDIA

Postcolonial Prospects, Colourful
Cosmopolitanism, Global Proximities

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**CULTURAL POLITICS IN MODERN INDIA:
POSTCOLONIAL PROSPECTS, COLOURFUL
COSMOPOLITANISM, GLOBAL PROXIMITIES**

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In his most recent critical work, Makarand Paranjape explores ‘the circulations and crossings between Indian and global cultures—in all their novelties and quandaries—that every thinking Indian should reflect upon’.

The volume, firmly grounded in the fields of postcolonial, cultural and global studies, takes a centrist position rarely found in today’s academic circles. Paranjape engages with ‘significant figures from India’s history of thought’, while bringing in interlocutors from the world over. The result is not a set of facile generalisations of the ‘global modern’, but a provocative study that powerfully critiques the very idea of modern Western civilisation based on the primacy of Reason, and the linear view of time and history.

Deploying a whole range of theoretical and methodological tools that are the current pride of the Western academy, Paranjape shows that terms like ‘cultural universals’, ‘essence’ of civilisations, and issues like materiality

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and spirituality need not be seen in dualistic terms as belonging to opposite camps; rather, they ought to be perceived as two sides of the same coin. It is this integral vision and world view that can help us overcome the intellectual cul-de-sac that we have reached. Thus, in speaking of Indian thinkers like Tagore, Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, or texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, the Bhagvad Gita, we need not be bound by the 'either-or' mutually exclusive approach. Tradition and modernity coexist, and do not supplant each other. Indeed, as Paranjape astutely shows, 'historicity and specificity of textual production' can coexist with the sacred readings of texts. Thus, 'Kant's idea of perpetual peace', he tells us, 'is rational and contractual while Gandhi's is based on a higher law, the law of Ahimsa.' Spirit is not the opposite of matter; rather, the work of the spirit encompasses the social, the political and the aesthetic.

Paranjape's style is refreshingly dialogic, conversational and open-ended. He asks us provocatively if the past has a future, and the future a past. The chapters in the volume are varied; many of the papers, in their earlier versions, were presented in seminars and conferences. He shows us that we can learn from the Marxist critic D. D. Kosambi's interpretation of the Gita while not necessarily accepting all his conclusions. Arguing that 'modern life is founded upon science and freedom', Kosambi maintains that 'there is no need to dig into the Gita or the Bible for an ethical system sandwiched with pure superstition'. Paranjape infers that 'by confining ourselves to only one analysis alone, we rob the Gita of its lustre and grandeur. Moreover, it does not exhaust the possibilities of that text.'

Similarly, in the essay that deals with the Tagore–Gandhi debate on the Bihar earthquake, Paranjape suggests that we need to discard the stereotypical position that Tagore is 'rational', scientific and modern while Gandhi's is religious-superstitious-traditional'. Instead, we must see that the 'contestations are not as much between rationality and faith, science and superstition, or modernity and tradition, as between two kinds of rationality, two ideas of science and two approaches to modernity. Both Tagore's and Gandhi's positions are intellectually more complex, nuanced and compelling than might appear at first.'

Likewise, the chapter on *Hind Swaraj* brings in Gandhi's critique of modernity and of political violence, reminding us of the abiding relevance of this text. In the same manner, the 'integral

consciousness' of Jean Gebser is taken up for study of the 'other' mind of Europe. The affinity between Gebser and the theory of integral yoga and creative evolution of Sri Aurobindo is closely examined. Clearly, Sri Aurobindo is crucial to understanding Paranjape's zeitgeist, and one wished he had accorded more space to the sage from Pondicherry. Other chapters on R. K. Narayan, Nissim Ezekiel and Ramachandra Gandhi suggest that 'reality is what emerges when the poet is able to cleanse his doors of perception'.

Paranjape, like Duara, prefers the 'dialogical' to 'dialectical', for the former 'permits the coexistence of different levels and expressions of truth', and therefore 'it is to be distinguished from the Hegelian idea of the dialectic where one of the two terms negates and supersedes the other'.

Some parts of the book are digressive and impede the flow of the arguments that show 'how Indian ideas, texts and cultural expressions interacted with a wider world and contributed to the making of modern India'.

Makarand Paranjape does well in this volume. His views and formulations coincide with many of my own and, therefore, it was a pleasure to go through the book. I commend Professor Paranjape for this original effort and hope that the volume reaches a wide audience.

