

Speculations across Millennia

India: Another Millennium? edited by Romila Thapar, Viking, India, 2000.

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India: Another Millennium? comprises quite fulcral contributions on some central themes of 'modern' India as also sentiment summations of the exploratory coordinates which provide the contexts for those contributions. It is indeed an important volume, not least also because, by and large, it skirts overly subtle immersions into tertiary scholarship, making its communicative apparatus to a readership that may be intelligently interested without being terminally specialised.

It is just as well to recognise at the outset that the claim, in the title, of a millennial reach is an understandable part of productive packaging; after all, any abatement that may make a good book sell is welcome. Substantively, speculations across millennia can only be abstractions, however absorbing. In Mahesh Rangarajan's sensible words, "it still takes a brave man or woman to predict the future". After the collapse of the erstwhile Soviet Union on the one end and of the 'south-east Asian giants' on the other, it is indeed a bad time for teleology beyond a point.

Such awareness clearly overlays Romila Thapar's very engaging and, needless to say erudite introductory considerations if not of the history of time then of the history of the naming of time, as she takes account of the politics of calendars from the ancient to the very recent attempts by civilisational participants to hegemonise usable time. That process leads Thapar to the question whether "the shift from the saviour-figure to men and women allows us now to speak of the coming of what might be a millennium, but brought about through human effort". Importantly she argues that if the idea of a millennium may thus be construed as a makeable historical future, we must "learn to protect that which takes us closer to it".

This, then, prepares the ground for more

concrete enunciation of themes that seem to be seminal to any consideration of an improved collective Indian future, namely, "issues relating to identity, social and economic inequality, democracy, the role of groups currently marginalised such as dalits and minorities, the meaning of culture, education, the technology of communication, the media and environmental problems". And, the offerings in the volume bear precisely on these themes, including the latter part of the introductory chapter where Thapar underscores with ease the qualities of urgency which attach to them.

The 14 contributors to *India: Another Millennium?* besides the editor are people who have a record of sustained and significant work on the political, economic and cultural aspects of the nation's life. Setting aside millennial anxieties, they assess and critique India's frustratingly problematic contemporaneity by locating and evaluating, in the main, influential residual and dominant formations (if I may draw upon Raymond Williams). Fully cognisant that the residual is never quite residual, and the dominant never wholly unchallenged, emergent probabilities are expressed in terms of how each contributor expects – sometimes wishes, as explicitly in Kaushik Basu's case – the contests between the residual and the dominant formations to turn out. Common to the contributions, thus, is a sense of histories, whether as creeping endeavours or as more forceful dynamics. What also characterises the volume – and this must be a tribute to editorial sensibility – is an internal debate which in some areas, for example, political economy, spans a sharply defined ideological spectrum. Not the least justice can be done to either the richness or the importance of that debate in review space; some features may be pointed to.

It is Kaushik Basu's argument that with time in the productive history of men, as new technologies happen, more labour is released from basic sectors like 'food, clothes, and houses' to attend to 'the other whims and fancies of the people'. Instructively, it is left unsaid as to fancies of which class of 'people'. This process, Basu

acknowledges, “causes unemployment and lower wages”. Also, more labour tends to be diverted to the ‘knowledge sector’. Since the major breakthroughs have tended to occur – in Basu it does not seem that such occurrences are furthered by specific social agents – in the area of information technology and communications, “globalisation is a natural part of this”. Thus, as it were, Silicon Valley and Bangalore are connected by a neo-Darwinian necessity. An aspect of this supervening necessity is the impulse to ‘colonise the future’; thus patent regimes and so on. Although adverse cultural invasions are likely to push nations towards ‘autarky’, in the long run, Basu stipulates, “there seems to be something inevitable about globalisation”. So that the much-maligned ‘inevitability’ doctrine now acquires an endorsed respectability in the opposite ideology camp! Basu recognises that there will be nations “that fail to partake in this global growth, causing the chasm between rich and poor nations to grow. And, of course, such inequality is likely to create political instability and turmoil.” Almost to say tough luck, for nobody will be to blame but inevitability. Basu’s supportive documentation comes, predictably, in the main from the World Bank. Overall, some sense of a *deja vu* here, as though Malthus were revisiting to teach how the hot flows of international finance across so-called national boundaries represent the exertions of Nature in the new millennium.

In passing, the theory in Basu’s presentation is supplemented by Narayana Murthy’s rather tediously outlined optimism that ‘Indians’ can “marshall the will and determination and bring about the changes required to make India a significant IT player in the world market”. Thankfully, ‘market’ is not capitalised; but the preferred future imaging of India – why there should be a nation state at all, one doesn’t know – would seem to be Chandrababu Naidu bent upon laptop even as the Godavari inundates Hyderabad and farmers commit suicide.

As Sainath in his ‘The Age of Inequality’ – a poignant counter to the foregoing accounts – lays are bare with stunning empirical support and without the least sophistry the havoc wrought by globalisation among the vast mass of people, it becomes obvious that not Nature but social forces are involved in the goings-on. And be it the post-apartheid, representative government in South Africa, or the BJP-led Maharashtra government in India, despite pre-power sharing postures and pronouncements, one was to become ‘a star pupil of the IMF’ and the other a votary of the erstwhile detested Enron. Or, be it the successful blackmail by Cogentrix, Sainath does not

see these successes as expressions of inevitability but, indeed, of class collaboration across national boundaries, although he may not say so in quite those terms. Sainath then underscores the irony that evolution of political power down to the panchayats should be taking place even as the Indian state itself becomes hostage in its decision-making of international financial institution.

The clutch of four essays – Dipankar Gupta on ‘India’s Unmodern Modernity’, Sunil Khilnani on ‘The Balance of Democracy’, Gopal Guru on ‘Dalits in Pursuit of Modernity’, and Javed Alam on ‘A Minority Moves into Another Millennium’, examine the disjunctures between desired and available forms of community expression and institutional control across a differentiated spectrum of social identities. A broad historicity, informed by acute attention to concrete particularities of class, caste, gender, region, ethnicity, religious identity, impels these essays as they speculate both on the specified failures of current systemic political and institutional arrangements to address their need and on the likely concatenations that either seem likely or ought to emerge both vertically and horizontally. The claims of constitutional republicanism are on test in the analyses they make. The essay ‘Thinking through Culture’ is another consideration of these concerns. Consequent upon what seems some needlessly obscure preparation, Rustom Bharucha makes the point that ‘multiculturalism’, often deployed as an ideological counter-point to majoritarian hegemonisation, is not mechanically equivalent to a desired democratic ‘pluralism’. That sort of questioning furnishes a difficult but necessary agenda to secularists who would transcend both an easy subaltern or postmodernist entrapment in either identity or resistance politics as well as preserve the authenticities of diverse cultural expression within a non-abrasive political unity. I may also note that in line with the democratic urgency of the above presentation, Dhruv Raina argues that any future science in India must both create and employ itself at the grass roots level of experience.

In speaking of ‘Gender Equality’ Bina Aggarwal retrieves a salutary central concern – property rights for women. She examines persuasively why it is this one right which despite affirmations of legal will remains socially the most obstinately denied. That leads her to investigate the claims made for ‘family’ by patriarchal ideologies which fear that women as a propertied class would spell the ruin of the ‘family’. Aggarwal both contests that view as well as, most straightforwardly, proposes that where most claims made for ‘family’ turn out to

be mythic as far as women are concerned, its dissolution now and then may not be such calamity as is made out to be. But, in line with Sainath’s findings, Aggarwal shows how in every arena of labour, low waged and high waged, women’s work has receded drastically in value as globalisation advances, since globalisation, apart from being a supposedly pure market phenomenon is also, at the bottom, enemy to democratic forms of assertion and accountability in polity and governance.

For reasons not too far to seek, this reviewer turned to Prabhat Patnaik’s ‘The Future of Marxism’ with tribulation but only to be both well-instructed and delighted. The particular theoretical tactical finesse with which Patnaik places Marxism in the contemporary local and global context is entirely free both of unanalysed wishfulness and deterred hesitation. Patnaik achieves this by simply foregrounding some forgotten truths – that Marx’s ‘central concern’ is ‘human freedom,’ and that given the spontaneous need and impulse of Capital to centralise, capitalist social organisation, despite the claims of *laissez-faire* liberalism, can never yield freedom. Patnaik acknowledges that capitalism has sustained itself primarily by reinventing itself, often at the cost of undermining its grounding theoretical postulations, in the face of challenge (1914-1950 offers a conclusive enough evidence for this, as well as Capital’s post-second war manoeuvres locally and internationally), and that socialist thought and practice have not kept up with necessary reinventions. On the other end of Kaushik Basu, Patnaik’s analyses are suggestive of fresh opportunities for such reinvention as ‘globalisation’, far from constituting the ‘end of history’, leads up to a world-historical moment when the claims of Capital come crashing. If, after all, the rational is the right, there ought to be little space given to exhaustion, to cynicism, to self-delusion. The task is to be able to identify what is that is rational and right within any particular concatenation of historical occurrences, and then to be able also to forge linkages to other arenas of praxis. Patnaik’s essay may then be read as a centre-piece to, on one side, the empirical substantiations by Sainath of the already apparent ravages wrought by globalisation, and, on the other, sedately masterful account of the actual state of the world’s natural resources by Mahesh Rangarajan, who stipulates that, indeed, the many big and small battles to come in many parts of the world may not in future have to do with petroleum and the like but just plain water. This triad of essays, along with the rich critique that obtains ~~if~~ the others, can become the nucleus to a fecund debate in the days to come.