

BOOK REVIEW

RIGHTEOUS REPUBLIC – ANANYA VAJPEYI

Reviewed by

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The selfhood of India, mystic and complex as it is, has in its description inspired both romance and despair. “India a nation! What an apotheosis!”, proclaimed E.M. Forster in *Passage to India*, “Last comer to the drab nineteenth century sisterhood! She whose only peer was the Holy Roman Empire, she shall rank with Guatemala and Belgium perhaps!”. There is the famous pronouncement of Winston Churchill, “India is merely a geographic expression. It is no more a single country than the Equator”. And from Salman Rushdie, one of India’s own sons, “The selfhood of India is so capacious, so elastic that it accommodates one billion kinds of difference. It agrees with its one billion selves to call all of them India”.

India’s selfhood, as reimagined through the variegated vision of five founders of modern India, is the theme of Ananya Vajpeyi’s ‘Righteous Republic’. It is a uniquely textured scholarly work that casts a new light on the political foundations of modern India by relating them to a quest by the country for an authentic self from the 1880s to 1950. Jawaharlal Nehru’s ‘Discovery of India’ is the most widely known instance of this search by the best and brightest of India’s founding fathers. But indeed the beginning of it all was the ‘Swaraj’ advocated by people like Bankim Chandra and Tilak in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and elevated to a manifesto for freedom by Gandhi’s tract “Hindu Swaraj” in 1909.

Unique to the Indian freedom movement, Swaraj as its core concept went far beyond a plea by a subject people for self-rule; in the full plenitude of its meaning the term signified rule by the self and rule over the self. It involved recapture from the British of the sovereignty that India had lost. But more fundamentally it also

involved a conscious determination of the Indian selfhood by Indians by addressing the primordial question: what is India? Now it is with this profound search for the self by a sub-continental country of inter-linked cultures and diverse religious traditions that Ananya Vajpeyi engages herself, bringing into her endeavour a fine sensibility and scholarly diligence. In her own words about how other analyst have dealt with modern Indian political thought and how she herself has attempted to do through her own oeuvre, “Accounts of (India’s) quest for sovereignty I found plenty; I wanted to track it’s still elusive search for the self”.

An ambitious pursuit no doubt, but somebody should do it. Ananya Vajpeyi’s point of departure in the study is her use of the concept of ‘epistemological crisis’ a la Alasdair MacIntyre in describing the state of the Indian political traditions around the turn of the century, a crisis that typically lead to a widespread crisis of the self. According to MacIntyre’s logic, the extant tradition would need to undergo an “epistemological break” to survive such a crisis, which was what happened to European science in the wake of Galileo. Gandhi likewise caused a pivotal epistemological break to the Indian political tradition with his book “Hind Swaraj”; there were other developments both before and after the noughties of the twentieth century to reinforce the strength of the epistemological break. This was the intellectual and cultural context in which the Indian search for the self and sovereignty, as subsumed by swaraj, took place.

In tracing the search for the self by Indians during this epoch, the author gives the pride of place to five of India’s founding fathers, Gandhi, Rabindranth Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Nehru and Ambedkar. In each of them she sees an ethical and epistemological engagement with the self and sovereignty of India. Each of them, moreover, in his own search for norms and values in Indian traditions had a distinct text (e.g: Gita for Gandhi and Kalidasa, particularly Meghdut, for Tagore) providing its own resource and power to fashion a sense of Indian selfhood and finally, each of them in engagements with traditional texts (and their contexts) derived for himself one of the five categories found in India thought from the earliest stages of history: for Gandhi it was ahimsa (non-violence), for Tagore viraha (separation), for Nehru artha (the self’s purpose) and dharma (the self’s

aspiration) and for Ambedkar dukkha (the soul's burden). The author separately privileges Kabir as one of the valuable sources of the self for the makers of India and observes in a penetrating passage that for modern India Kabir represents "the ultimate telos – an ability to simultaneously acknowledge irreducible differences and overcome them; an unflickering flame of faith that burnishes the gold of an equally precious scepticism".

After making the compelling hypothesis that the most prominent founders of the Indian nation had drawn their understandings of selfhood from Hindu and Buddhist texts as well as from Buddhist and Mughal artifacts, Ananya Vajpeyi proceeds to review in detail the outcome of engagement of each of them with his respective Indian categories of thought. Among the political categories of thought associated with Gandhi's life and work she emphasises swaraj and ahimsa as the ones that are fundamental to modern India, rooting its modernity in a number of Jain, Buddhist and Hindu texts and discourses. But in his use of different texts, Gandhi was not inclined to much rigour or consistency; swaraj and non-violence themselves underwent a reinvention in his hands, neither category had ever meant exactly what Gandhi got them to mean as the freedom struggle moved to a new stage under his leadership. According to the author, Gandhi derived the concept of ahimsa not from Jainism, but paradoxically from the Gita, the text associated timelessly with the most sanguinary conflict in Hindu imagination. Non-violence appears there as part of knowledge (jnana), of divine property and of austerities that constitute restraint. Briefly stated, Gandhian conception of ahimsa is absence of the desire to wantonly harm another just for the sake of harming him; while ill-intentioned or thoughtless violence is 'glani'; putting up a fight in one's right mind, with fearlessness and purpose and without the desire to harm others is non-violence. The important point that the author makes is that Gandhian non-violence underlines the profound unconventionality of the ethical sense of its exponent, a product of his radical, original and deeply personal choice, as described by political theorist Sunil Khilnani. Yet Ananya Vajpeyi takes the view that a correct reading of Gandhi's texts today requires consideration of the context, the utmost philological care, sometimes even deconstruction. It is unexceptionable as counsel, but hardly makes the reading any easier.

The inclusion of Rabindranath and Abanindranath Tagore among those who reinvented India's selfhood gives the theme of this book a wider sweep than might have been expected. Rabindranath Tagore is brought into the scheme of the argument in an intriguing way. For Tagore was a disavower of nationalism, but was ineluctably subjected to nationalist appropriation by his Nobel Prize. His poetic vision of India or 'poiesis', as termed by the author, however, makes for a sublime Indian selfhood on which she lavishes some of the most elegant prose in the book. Viraha or the self's longing is pictured as the poet's consciousness of a "certain vision of the past" of India from which he is exiled and to which he will never return", with the self of modernity yearning for the past like a lover. In Tagore's Meghduta, one of the principal texts that the author delves into, the poet is seen trying to convey "the insurmountable temporal gulf between now and then, the present and the past, this India and that India through spatial imagery". The India thus Tagore evoked through Kalidasa is neither the space of history nor power; it is "rather the space of poetry and of Indic poetic tradition from which (he) feels exiled". In a scholarly exposition of Tagore's poetry, where Ananya Vajpeyi writes more the language of a literary critic than that of a political theorist, the viraha mood of this extraordinary poet is lucidly captured. But an easier explanation is what many readers may opt for: that the Gurudev who left his imprint on the Righteous Republic is less the esoteric Tagore as described here than the bard of the Indian heritage who combined the lyrical beauty of Meghdut, Dream and Yaksha with the sublime evocation of the dispenser of Bharata's destiny in what became the national anthem.

The portrayal of Abanindranath Tagore, on the other hand is as a man associated with the category of "samvega": "the self's shock" or "aesthetic shock" (experienced about the promise and loss of a truly Indian art due to the British colonisation). Abanindranath Tagore's then was a search for an Indic tradition and idiom, thereby becoming the centre of the renaissance in Indian art about the turn of the twentieth century. Along with Bankim Chandra's 'Bande Mataram' and Rabindranath Tagore's novel Ghare Baire, Abanindranath's painting of 'Bharat Mata' is seen by the author as part of

“an evolving conversation in colonial Bengal on the meaning, imagery and volume of a feminine deified figure of the nation”.

When it comes to Nehru, Ananya Vajpeyi believes that his search for the self, unlike that of others, was structured around, not one but two, categories of selfhood, both time-honoured in Indic discourses, dharma (norm) and artha (purpose), while the texts considered are *Discovery of India*, the writings on the national symbols and letters to Chief Ministers (1947-64) – across these there is a gradual transition and shift in the case of Nehru to an uneasy balance between dharma and artha, and finally the burden of signification comes to rest on artha. Nehru is seen as being torn between the normative and instrumental aspects of selfhood. Correspondingly, there is also the tension between Asokan and Kautilyan paradigms of sovereignty in Nehru’s own ideas of rule. The Janus-faced modern state, as theorized by MacIntyre provides a key to the contradictions in Nehru – the dharma-oriented and artha-oriented tendencies of the man who, through his choice of the nation’s symbols like the Asoka pillar sought “to appropriate the antiquity of the Mauryan imperium to equip the new republic with a historical ancestor that had adequate political weight as well as desirable ethical standards”. But, alas, the wars with Pakistan and China, the dilemmas in Kashmir and the compulsions of the need to consolidate the reach of the Indian state to the northeast against popular resistance meant “a world more given to strike than reconciliation” with all that it meant for history’s verdict on the Nehru era.

Fitting Ambedkar’s thought into the framework of the book is a hazardous undertaking. But the author carries it off confidently, providing in the process some incisive insights into the mind and the mission in life of this eminent founding father who was also an unsparing castigator of Hindu spiritual traditions that are the staple of this work. The author finds in the Buddhist canon, especially the *Dhammapada*, Ambedkar’s pre-modern text, with *duhkha* (suffering or the self’s burden) as the key category of Indian thought being central to his engagement with the text. But the *duhkha* that emerged from Ambedkar’s engagement with this traditional Indian text was not individual suffering but social suffering springing from caste that embraced not just untouchables but all the people of India. In Buddhism, therefore, Ambedkar found both a part narrative and a considered solution to the

predicament of the dalits. But while Ambedkar found in the wealth of the socially diverse characters in Dhammapada, Tipitaka and Buddacarita “the resonance, the presence and the participation that he sought on behalf of the inarticulate and excluded untouchable self”, his rejection of the significance of Siddhartha’s renunciation – “one of the most iconic moments in all of India’s self-understanding” – betrays, in the author’s view, “a failure of the imagination”, his being “in some fundamental way..... tone-deaf to the Buddha”. On the other hand, Ambedkar rethought Buddhism not only by making his own version of it, navayana, a religion oriented towards collective deliverance rather than individual liberation, and the betterment of this life rather than nirvana, but by questioning such basic features of the faith as the structure and purpose of ‘sangha’, he arguably made the future of this religious enterprise in India actually problematic. The author’s bottom line, however, is the crux of the matter and in line with the main argument of the book: in turning to Buddhism as the moral alternative for the dalits, Ambedkar [who was both attracted to and repelled by the Indian tradition] underlined that “no individual or community could flourish in India without constructing some kind of relationship to tradition, some narrative of selfhood compatible with India’s quest for its proper self.....”. It is an incisive view on Ambedkar’s engagement with Indian traditions, but it also misses the enduring significance of Ambedkar’s dukkha – that the swaraj of other founding fathers, who were part of the upper caste Hindu elite, left unresolved what is perhaps the world’s oldest institutional injustice or oppression and the future for untouchables under swaraj only offered the prospect of a long and determined struggle for their own freedom.

Righteous Republic as adumbrated here has left out of its ambit one important part – the place of Muslim traditions of inquiry into self and sovereignty in the making of India. The author acknowledges the omission, to the extent of terming it as ‘the elephant in the room’. Her reference to the Islamic content of the Indian nationalist heritage briefly raises the overwhelming question whether there could ever be a selfhood for Muslims that might weld the pious individual, the community of believers and the pluralistic nation into one integrated structure and, specifically, where there was an ‘epistemological break’ in Muslim knowledge traditions on the subcontinent anytime between 1857 and 1947. And she makes the larger

point that within “modern India’s genealogy for itself, the Islamic heritage is not handled in any meaningful way”. Valid arguments, all. On the other hand, there is less justification for the scant treatment that the south of the Vindhyas receives in regard to the search of self in that part of India nor in terms of founding fathers like Bharatiyar in Tamil Nadu.

De Gaulle said that France cannot be herself without grandeur. With more justification and certainly with little presumption, Indians could say that there cannot be an India without spirituality. India’s freedom movement was unique in the sense that it featured spiritual concepts that had been long established in Indian religious traditions like truth, non-violence and renunciation. Hence the relevance of the categories of thought that form the core of this book’s appraisal of the role of the five founding fathers of the country. The Righteous Republic has been very much in the political imagination of modern India no matter how different has been the political practice itself in post-colonial India.

Against the backdrop of the unremitting tumult of Indian politics – corruption, naxalite violence, the ebb and flow of separatist movements, the politics of the Hindu right – the author finds India’s sense of self appearing to be again under stress in the third decade of globalization and neo-liberal economic policy. This is the time for India to reflect on the crisis that she had gone through in the context of the swaraj a century ago and to be reminded of “the intellectual breadth and ethical commitment” of the founders of modern India. Nor is that all. Ananya Vajpeyi has an even more fundamental point to make about the understanding and description of Indian reality. While in the media like music, films and literature, the distinct nature of Indian reality is expressed eloquently and their context is very much Indian culture “it is now next to impossible to find the scholarly language” for the same in the field of political theory and in a history of ideas. “We have to retrain our minds to enter an imagination from which we are almost terminally estranged”, she says. She may well be right, but we need to know more on the scholarly language she has in mind for political theory.

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