

Makarand R. Paranjape, *Altered DestiNations: Self, Society, and Nation in India*. Anthem Press; London and New York, 2009. 196 pp. \$99 (hardback).

Beginning with Mahatma Gandhi's *HindSwaraj or Indian Home Rule*, published in 1909, Makarand R. Paranjape uses the centenary of its publication as a useful occasion upon which to revisit Gandhi's thinking as a means of addressing the vexed concept of India's national identity. The unique combination of diverse religious and social traditions of which the Indian nation consists, while it produces a country that is characteristically Indian, threatens, nevertheless, to produce factionalism, at the very least, or at the worst, violence and social conflict. Paranjape looks for a unifying concept that can bring about a peaceful reconciliation between the various religions and cultures which include not only Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Tamils, Bengalis, as well as regions as diverse as Nepal, the Eastern Punjab, Kerala and others, not to mention the communities defined by the one hundred and fourteen languages spoken in India. In spite of this immense diversity, Paranjape contends, certain characteristics do unify the people of India, which he believes might find expression in a focus on the essentially religious character of the people. In so doing he asserts religiosity against a history of Nehruvian secularism and advocates that the destination of India as a cohesive nation lies in the religion. This is important politically and historically, of course, as it eschews the influence of the West and of commercialism, both of which, Paranjape asserts, have threatened to take away India's distinctive character, and it revives the spirit that led to Indian Independence.

Indic faiths' emphasis on practice and experience, and in particular responsibility, becomes the focus which Paranjape sees as a useful part of the "remarkable unity underlying [the] immense diversity" (3). Responsibility, or *svaraj*, which formed the basis of Gandhi's teaching, is also a concept which many Indian faiths share as a central tenet. Paranjape explains, "The expanding circles of responsibility also suggest a beginning at the lexical or semantic, then an extension to the conceptual, and a final synthesis that is philosophical, social, cultural and spiritual" (3). Exploring the etymology of the various Indian languages' terms for responsibility, and their interconnected roots, Paranjape notes that the word conveys a sense of duty and an answer to others, suggesting that responsibility means being answerable to others. He elucidates, "To restrain ourselves, be charitable, and be compassionate, then may be considered to be at the heart of what it means to be responsible in the Indian tradition" (5). Also, the word in

Bengali, “*dena*,” suggests a debt, and the weight or burden of responsibility. In its relation to Dharma, or the “regulating principle” as Paranjape describes it, “[r]esponsibility is thus the key to the pursuit of a good life in India” (5). Dharma also carries overtones of resistance, however, as has been seen at times of rebellion against the caste system. In another sense, Dharma means responsibility to the self, as well as to the occasion, or the age, and to non-violence. To Paranjape this might be construed in the present era as an ecological responsibility to the planet. Among Indian Muslims the similar concept of *iman* prompts them to an engagement with “virtuous and responsible action” (6). Closely related to Dharma, Karma needs to be regarded as the need to shape the future by present actions, not passivity as it is sometimes construed in the west, but “the freedom to act and reshape one’s destiny” (7). At the same time, “to be responsible is to perform the right Karmas, the right actions,” which in turn lead to “the carrying out of Dharma” (7). Clearly then, Dharma and Karma place responsibility at the center of human existence in both the practical and the spiritual senses.

At the level of governance, however, Paranjape argues, India fails to enact its responsibility to the very poor, the migrants, the homeless, and the low caste. This disregard for responsibility at the level of governance he charges to the western influence of the “discourse of rights” that came to India by means of the European Enlightenment and colonization. Paranjape argues that the Indian Constitution, “the authoritative text[,] ignores India’s own cultural traditions, which form the ‘unwritten’ code that governs our lives. In this code, responsibility is paramount—responsibility, duty, giving, sharing, and the extension of the ‘self’ to include and embrace the ‘other’” (11). Traditional India’s social structure would have provided care for the weakest, but as Paranjape says, “Traditional hierarchies have been overturned with the process of democratization, or what V. S. Naipaul called ‘a million mutinies’” (11). Paranjape worries that “To all appearances, Dharma and pleasure (*kama*), Dharma and profit (*artha*) are in a perpetual state of conflict” (11). The way forward, he argues, is a synthesis of modern state systems which embody social responsibility with traditional actions that promote responsibility. Gandhi’s *svaraj*, or self-rule, like responsibility, could move in ever-expanding circles from the individual to the collective. On the national level, *svaraj* for India, to Paranjape, can “suggest that the underlying cultural matrix of India promotes social cohesion and harmony through the idea of three circles of responsibility” (14).

To Paranjape, Indian thought escapes the binary in western thinking which divides the Self from the Other. By asserting the importance of the Great Revolt of 1847 central in the study of history,

in which it has often been overlooked, Paranjape aims to reconfigure the Revolt as “a quasi-religious uprising or a rebellion in which religious forces played a crucial role” (27). He asserts that the “Christianizing mission” at work on the eve of the Revolt, “with its threat of cultural and religious subjugation, . . . became the precipitative cause of the Revolt. Indians, in other words, could tolerate economic and, to an extent, even political domination but . . . when it came to religious matters they did not wish to yield” (22).

In a rejection of secularization that becomes central to the book, Paranjape argues that the British sought cultural hegemony by means of the “conversion” of Indians by “*secular*” means rather than religious, and he argues, “It was English education and modern learning that helped to create consent rather than widespread religious conversion” (22). Gandhi saw “western civilization to be the real enemy, not British imperialism” (22). Paranjape says, “For Gandhi, the reengineering of a God- or Dharma-centric civilization such as India into a modern Godless and desacralized society was a cause of deep distress and alarm” (22–23). So although Indians never relinquished spiritual authority to the British, spirituality was, nevertheless, central to their purpose in rebelling, and he agrees with William Dalrymple that religion played a central role in shaping Indian history, and must be placed centrally in any attempt to understand India’s history.

So Paranjape’s definition of nationalism is not a sense of national identity which asserts its country as superior to all others, but “as suggestive not just of a national spirit, but the sense of belonging, which gives us the feeling of being part of a collectivity” (xiv). To counter the potential divisiveness of a multiplicity of versions of India, seeking to define the nation in various competing ways, Paranjape urges “Dharmic nationalism.” He defends it saying, “The result is not an endorsement of ‘Hindutva,’ but a new kind of nationalism that is culturally and civilizationaly grounded in India, at the same time as being modern, liberal and plural” (xiv–xv). Modernity can become problematic here, however, since it is, according to Paranjape “a regime of instrumental rationality. Scientific and technological innovation” entered India, he asserts, “in the garb of colonialism” (31). So it is necessary then that “India’s road to modernity . . . lies in the forging of a special kind of nationalism [in which t]he national becomes an oppositional space where the fallen god of rationality may be resurrected into a civil space that is free, egalitarianism and tolerant of diversity” (31–32). By this means Indian nationalism might shake off the oppressive nature of colonialism and address India’s particular problems.

Offering an examination of Sri Aurobindo’s perception of the nation as spiritual, and B. R. Ambedkar, who as “a modernist and

modernizer” saw Gandhi as “an unrepentant and dangerous traditionalist,” and the Bharatiya Janata Party’s recent experiment with “an alternative to Nehruvian secularism in the form of modified Hindutva,” Paranjape offers a sustained discussion of what he calls “three snapshots in the trajectory of Indian nationalism” (32). In spite of his conversion out of Hinduism and his criticism of the ruling Congress Party, Ambedkar continued, Paranjape argues, to be “a fellow-traveler of the mainstream of Indian thought and politics” (46). A “critical Hinduism” like this is what Paranjape believes led the Indian electorate to mistakenly elect the BJP, and this is a direction that Paranjape would endorse, although he would repudiate its outcome in this instance. Paranjape argues that the BJP arose from what he sees as the “defeated” part of the Hindu psyche—that which was wounded “first by dominant Islam, then by the imperialist west” (51). He asserts that conversion to secularism as a means of escape from the stigma of being Indian is not a viable option, and so no alternative to Nehruvian secularism has arisen. At present, then, he claims, “It is [the] complex and nuanced negotiation with rationality that marks Indian modernity as different from other modernities, as does Indian nationalism, which is the main constituent of Indian modernity” (53).

Education might mobilize the *svaraj*, which comes from a distinctly Indian way of seeing and placing the individual in relation to the world. Secularism, he argues, needs to accommodate itself to the predominantly religious and spiritual, or Hindu, character of India, instead of the demand that religious India be accommodated to secularism. The “neo-Gandhian praxis” that he advocates would involve a return to Gandhi’s teaching and writing, and a renewal of that thinking which might even allow a sense of shared origins between India and Pakistan. The unification of social responsibility and spirituality which his teaching allow might serve as a reminder to academics that they cannot appropriate Gandhi’s teachings, and Paranjape urges, “It is our role and function as postcolonial intellectuals that we must interrogate through such exercises, [as the pursuit of *svaraj*] not Gandhian ideas alone, “which entails an accountability to the community” (178). Crucially, Paranjape comments, “Personally, I do not consider a belief in God as essential to a neo-Gandhian praxis as long as God is substituted by Dharma. Dharma refers to a cosmic law, to a pattern, an order in accordance with which we must regulate our lives” (183).

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