

Interrogating Politics & Society: Twentieth-Century Indian Subcontinent

Suranjan Das

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Suranjan Das's *Interrogating Politics & Society: Twentieth – Century Indian Subcontinent* is a timely compendium of a range of essays exploring three themes that are of immense relevance to contemporary India, and indeed, to South Asia as well: communalism, nationalism and the criminal underworld, a labyrinthine of zones declared illegal and criminal by both the colonial State and respectable indigenous communities. The eleven essays in the volume were published at various stages of a long, committed and discerning intellectual engagement, tracing the pressing problems of the formation of community identities that had entered the political domain during the colonial period.

Certain characteristic features and demarcating specificities of all regions are produced through historical processes and unique socio-political, economic, and other interrelated cultural dynamics. In this collection of essays, Suranjan Das chooses a region that he understands thoroughly – Bengal.

In the first two essays, Das focusses on the manner in which propaganda works at four levels. He takes the reader through the long period, from 1905 to 1947, and carefully lays out the modes in which political passions that legitimised communal ideologies and helped to stake out the political positions of the two warring communities, the Hindus and the Muslims, were whipped up. The third essay connects the running leitmotif of growing communalisation of politics and increasing polarisation between the two major communities to the Calcutta riots that flared up in 1947. Here, he traces the historical trajectories that had been present in the political environment of Bengal since pre-Independence days –

and demonstrates that the past shapes the problematic legacies of the present.

Slightly shifting his line of vision, Das then focuses on the discipline of history, that was garnered in the service of building nationalistic narratives of both India and Pakistan, a pernicious trend which lays “claims” to “truth” through authentic historical “facts”. This, he argues, ensures that the deep fault-lines created during the Partition continue to haunt the Indian (and certainly the Bengali) mindscapes.

The next four essays explore the close links between nationalistic identities, which struggled with regionalisms, and the forging of a broad-based nationalistic platform that tried to include regional variations, leading to political agitations out of which the Indian nation-state emerged in 1947. The political struggle finally did achieve Independence from British Imperialism, but at the cost of enormous loss of human lives, as the territorial bifurcation of the Indian subcontinent created the two nations of Pakistan (West and East) and India. Reading between the lines, Das feels that there was a deeper national tragedy, as there was an ever-deepening line of distrust between the two communities, within the hidden spaces of the collective minds of the communities, fostered through a kind of pig-headed historiography, just like there was a visible fencing between territories separating the two nations.

The last two essays explore the growing “criminalisation” of political protests, which the colonial state contained with its harsh use of law-and-order apparatus. These two essays, however, just stop at the colonial state's response to criminality – both to middle-class political action, and also aimed at the separate domain of ‘illegal’ pursuits by the underprivileged. One might have expected a little more cogitation and reflection

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on the process of “criminalisation” by the State, and no less by the civil-society, in post-independence Bengal.

In the book on the whole, Das zeroes in on “communalism”, an emotionally-charged, angst-ridden hate, directed at the cultural and political ‘Other’. Das, with a wealth of historical detail, demonstrates that communalism inevitably rode piggy-back on the equally emotionally-charged discourse of “nationalism”. In fact, Das successfully shows that it was this copula that produced communalism’s lethal punch. Further, such communal discourses were also very often read by antagonistic communities — the Hindus and the Muslims — as nationalism. Despite this shadowy equation between communalism and nationalism, Suranjan Das draws in the reader to share his cautious hope that in Bengal, at least, there is some room for optimism: “We in West Bengal have been fortunately relatively free of communal violence ... Yet it would be wrong to deny the existence of communal tensions in Bengal” (p. 15).

Thus, while not downplaying pan-Islamic tendencies, the growing popularity of the VHP in the face of infiltrations from Bangladesh, and also acknowledging

that communalism, as a phenomenon, is like a rogue-virus that is difficult to contain, and impossible to eradicate, for it spawns ever-new forms of insecurities on which to feed, Das maintains that in Bengal communal tensions do not inevitably lurch toward blood-baths.

The reader feels a slight sense of disorientation, as the book first explores the theme of “communalisation” of identity politics during the colonial rule (deliberately encouraged by British policies), moves to the 1990s, and then suddenly wheels back to the early years of the Congress, and begins the reconnaissance of the ‘Rise and Growth’ of nationalism in India.

Apart from these small discomforts, the fact that these essays, previously flung across various journals and publications, have been brought together in one volume is indeed an academic gain. The volume will be a welcome addition to studies on communalism, its close links to nationalism, and also on a submerged terrain of “criminalisation” by the State. The first and the last themes, indeed, are crucial as they produce the lenses with which to study the contemporary developments in post-colonial India.