

BOOK REVIEW

RIGHTEOUS REPUBLIC

BOOK: *Righteous Republic: The political foundations of Modern India*
AUTHOR: *Ananya Vajpayee* **YEAR:** 2012 **FORMAT:** *Hard Cover* **EDITION:**
First **PUBLISHER:** *Harvard University Press* **PRICE:** \$39.95

RIGHTEOUS REPUBLIC: THE POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN INDIA- REVIEW

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There is safety in distance. There is safety in texts about texts/ representations about thoughts and ideas, for they mostly pertain to an author's readings, and not necessarily the 'out there', the earth from which pasts and futures rise. Problematic things like 'how does one know' can be gently side-stepped. In the sub-continental context, even more problematic things arise – given the very limited sector of society that has held hegemony over text and textual readings. That the sector that produces text and that which derives meanings of real things from such texts often belong to the same sector, is not surprising. Whether such an obsession with the text can lead to any kind of understanding of some notion of self and selfhood, is questionable. It can at most produce a critique of the sectoral self that is text-obsessed. So, when you approach something from afar, if the cover is done right, front and back, it may be quite impressive, and may evoke a sense of awe. But the point is to continue to approach and cut right through. What comes undone and what remains is what matters.

Shakti Chattopadhyay, a renowned Bengali poet once said something, which when translated, means something like this:

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“Nobody is actually big,

They just appear so.

With the real and the unreal, they appear big.

Go stand near the tree

You will see the smallness.”

If one starts walking from the Harvard University Press on Garden Street, before long one will find oneself in the vicinity of Harvard Square. This is a hub where the elite and gawker rub shoulders unknowingly. In this square, I was once witness to something bizarre. From a distance I had seen a white woman, in her late 40s dancing in that very clichéd new-agey faux-Indian style. Again, from a distance, it all seemed quite deep – that the dancer was engaged in an understanding of some sort and was beckoning to onlookers to be a part of this ‘experience’. Only when I came nearer could I understand that the music she was dancing to, was a recent hip-gyrating Tamil hit, with some sita-esque twangs. At that moment, one could walk away or look at the performance and create a meta-narrative out of it. It is a matter of choice.

‘Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India’ by Ananya Vajpeyi is largely a text about texts/representations and the book is quite honest about that. What it makes of those texts being read and what questions it digs out for the answer it presupposes, is another matter.

The book itself, 368 pages long, is neatly organized. A preface aimed to provide a context to the whole project, titled ‘The Search for Self in Modern India’, sets the tone. In the Introduction, ‘Swaraj, the Self’s Sovereignty’, the author tried to define or rather, redefine the implication of this concept Swaraj in its fullest import. Then following 5 thick chapters hinge on different supposed qualities of the Self itself – Orientation, Longing, Shock, Aspiration, Purpose and Burden. These together seek to provide an ethico-historical basis of the India project as envisaged by its ‘founding fathers’. These

chapters typically delve into the ‘Classics’, which in this case has meant sub-continental sources of some antiquity that are neither Islamic nor Christian. The book aims to situate older knowledge traditions such as these to be integral to the development of the modern Indian political project. How these giants were influenced and indeed incorporated some of these classical Indic knowledge conceptions and ideas, and by a synthesis, produced what was a grand pedestal. This pedestal of an Indian Self is reviewed by bringing in different ‘aspects’ of the Self, as thought by the author to have been imagined by the greats, with their cosmopolitan outlook and feet deeply within the classical knowledge tradition of the subcontinent. This fantastic imaginary is in essence the book.

The tact of this book is somewhat different from other books of the ‘idea of India’ genre in the sense that it completely shuns the subcontinent’s people and their thoughts when discussing the Selfhood imaginary that they are said to constitute. There have been books celebratory of the Indian republican project. There have been books that have individually looked at the thoughts and ideas some most of the giants Vajpeyi has picked out. There also has been a narrative that connects the Indian modern project to its ancient underpinnings. Vajpeyi has attempted a synthesis of these three strands.

In the search for the ‘self’ of ‘India’ (primarily the Union of India), words from 5 ‘founding figures’ are dissected at some length. This honor roll consists of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Rabindranath Thakur, Abanindranath Thakur, Jawaharlal Nehru and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar with the triumvirate of Ashoka, the Magadhan monarch, ShahJahan, from the House of Taimur, and the ‘Booda’ hovering over them. One wonders whether this list would have looked different if something called the BAMCEF, formed by one of the most important visionaries of the last century, had not irreversibly fractured the smugness of a kind of ‘selfhood’. Each of these Big Five is then tethered to a ‘concept’ – dutifully *tatsama* for vintage depth. The five concepts are – artha, samvega, ahimsa, artha and dharma. If you are a sentient citizen of the Union of India, you know which ‘founder’ ahimsa is connected to. For matching the others to their famous men, the book is essential reading. It will tell you

exactly why. Each of these famous men's works represents different aspects that help us understand the ideas of 'selfhood'. These representations by big men have long shadows in so far as they have something to do with the brick and mortar pedestal on which the Ashok Stambha (the Indian Emblem) stands, or ought to stand.

The 'idea of India' like grand stories seems to be the latest dependable formula for a soft-landing on that coveted planet whose inhabitants have the right of speaking about 'India' to certain kinds of 'well-bred' 'Indians' performing a certain kind of 'Indian-ness' (some variant of the 'unity in diversity' thing) from their perches in the 'National' 'Capital' Region. Sometimes 'cosmopolitan' Mumbai provides an alternative perch.

What 'idea of India' might emerge from beyond the text? For one, one might 'discover' that the 'Indians' (one assumes they might have something to do with 'Indian' 'selfhood') have not been sitting idle, acting as nude models with their stories exposed to the writer and the painter to draw from and imagine. One might even 'discover' that from certain vantages, such 'selfhood' projects may appear very different. The difference is not one of exclusion or over-representation. It is not one of incompleteness where the 5 blind men might have caught different parts of the elephant but not all parts. It might be about the particular text production and reading about the elephant that is made possible when sighted people do their feeling over the picture of an elephant held up high by animals whose bodies don't even reach the surface due to the weight of this mighty picture and the might of those who produce such pictures about pictures about pictures.

As the nation-state gets more and more confident about its legitimacy, it needs more of the 'idea of India' genre to provide depth and gravitas to its foundation myths. Just like the best myths or lies are those that have a speck of random detail-oriented truth in them, the republic at sixty-plus seems to revel in the critical courtier genre of writing about itself – the high and mighty idea of 'self' then serves as the ultimate destination to which the republic ought to be headed. Since some of the 'founders' has no small role in the wheeling-dealing

that led to the power structure of the riyasat as it stands, their 'original' vision serves to connect the present state to the beautiful destination. Structural policy can then be paraded as faulty tactic. The 'righteous republic' has its heart (or should one say 'self') at the right place.

Earlier, the market of native 'selfhood' was mostly in Rishikesh. Ever since the immense retail potentialities of the billion-plus market have been unlocked, interest in the other kinds of 'selfhood' has risen. If there is an interest, there is a market. There is an audience for this stuff – non-resident natives, resident non-natives, 'India-watchers' (yes, it is a thing!), 'sensitive' searchers for thought continuity with hoary antiquity minus embarrassing Hindutva, foreign executives and native techies wanting a 10 day crash course on 'What is India' given that the college at Haileybury stopped doing that in 1856.

In an increasingly cosmopolitan Union of India, the elite and its scions are also increasingly alienated from the means of production of their eliteness. In the absence of touch with their simhasana or sofa-set, one has a disturbing sense of being in air – at once a citizen of the world and rootless. Such disturbance calls for soothing of the nerves. Texts and narratives provide the haptic basis of a pedestal for the alienated- such can be the irony about root-search from the proudly 'cosmopolitan'. This produces an enchantment with the mythic pedestal - a variety of enchantment that might wear thin if one engages with the natives who don't produce text but produce reality through hard labour and fund the republic and its elites, day in, day out.

Every book has its time. The time for this book had come. This juncture in the Republic's life need books such as these and probably many more such. The Union of India's power elites have been good at playing and securing futures. They sense the depressed castes rising. Positioning themselves are dispassionate interpreters of the lives and philosophies of those with whom the elites share no experiential commonality can be a challenge. The stakes are high and the imagined pay-offs even higher – like a raft in a turbulent ocean. However, coopting this storm won't be easy. It has not been easy till now. But it is worth trying. Or so it seems.