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Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN INDIA: VIEWS FROM BELOW

RFI Smith

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John Harriss, Craig Jeffrey and Trent Brown, *India: Continuity and Change in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020, pp. xv+384. ISBN-13: 978-5095-3970-3; ISBN-10: 5095-3971-0 (pb).

This review of social change and persistence in India is a timely study of transitions and attempted transitions. It is by authors from development studies, human geography and sociology/anthropology. With events from pre- and immediate post-independence years as foundation, and the impacts of a centralising and nationalistic Union government as immediate background, the authors focus on the last four decades. Their account is of a country with a large and diverse population, hungry for opportunities, yet to be realised economic power, deep and protean cultural and intellectual traditions, and determined to engage with the region and the world on its own terms.

They draw on a broad selection of local level social research (including their own) in a bottom-up review of contemporary social, economic and political conditions. In their analysis social change cohabits with adaptive and persisting traditions. The benefits of economic opportunities and service improvements since the 1970s and 1980s are counterpointed by continuing inequalities and exclusion. Further, as seen from below, governance and policy making suffer from disjunctions in working relationships. They describe an awkward fit between central intentions and state and local results.

That disjunctions between levels of government and between strategies for effective political mobilisation and performance in government are often linked is a compounding issue. Disjunctions limit performance in the public and private sectors. Civil society strategies to drive improvements in social policy through rights-based legislation meet with limited results and continuing disappointment. Energetic international diplomacy is yet to be rewarded.

Themes are signalled by chapter headings in question form. These include: “Why Isn’t India doing Better at Realizing ‘Inclusive Growth?’”, “Why Hasn’t Democracy Made Indian Government More Responsive?”, “Has India Become the Hindu Rashtra” and “Is India Witnessing a Social Revolution?”

In the first section the authors relate the difficult search for economic growth with failure to reform agriculture. They reflect also on the adverse impacts on the natural environment. Immediate post-independence

reliance on centralised direction, import substitution and state sponsored heavy industry built up skills and industrial capacity. But it did not foster labour intensive, export-oriented manufacturing. Nor did it create jobs for rural workers, or an empowered workforce supported with accessible systems of health care and education.

From the late 1970s and early 1980s improved economic growth took place. It followed more positive official approaches to private business. Cuts in restrictions by the Narasimha Rao government in 1991 were followed by a string of high growth years. However, these ended after 2009, during the second UAP government, in a web of preferential deals with business houses and non-performing business lending by state owned banks. Allegations of corruption and general discontent with policy directions ensued.

The authors suggest that the middle class formed in the growth years was not as extensive as earlier thought. The small scale of many firms provided limited employment opportunities. Jobs in service and IT based industries went mainly to those with good education and from the more advantaged castes. The risk of falling back into poverty continued. Lack of reform in agriculture and rural migration to the cities exacerbated concern about jobless growth. Sections of the agricultural workforce were 'dalitized'. Meanwhile demand for land for factories and other infrastructure disrupted established communities. So did mining in remote areas inhabited by tribal communities with cultural attachment to the land. Inclusive growth and sustainable development remained elusive. Following Karl Polanyi, the authors emphasise that proposals for economic change must recognise that economic activity is embedded in society.

In the second section the authors ask why governments act as they do and why they do not achieve more. They identify problems in the working of a federal system adapted from the pre-independence colonial administration and fragmentation of administrative effort in civil services constricted with formal procedures. They suggest also that factors that assisted consolidation of formal democracy- 'an expansive network of patronage founded on caste and class inequalities'- militate against substantive democratisation. Tellingly, they suggest that political leaders, with exceptions mainly in the south, have given up on 'good governance'. As they note the public sector does do many things very well. But health and education that build human capital are not among them. For many politicians well-constructed policies and programs that work over the longer term cannot be relied on to win votes. Popular appeals can. So too can use of IT and mobile phones to deliver benefits direct to individual citizens. Civil servants and institutional obstructions are bypassed. Relations between ministers and civil servants are often difficult. They tend not to include embedded habits of collaboration. Recurrent problems of implementation follow.

In the third section the authors examine shifting aspirations and potential changes in society. These include the role of civil society and the

ambitions for change of youth. They are particularly interested in decentralisation in government, growing civic awareness and the impacts of rights-based legislation. While the authors are sceptical of globalisation and the neo liberalism they see travelling with it, they recognise the impact of digital communications technology and the access it gives to external ideas and trends. They recognise too that people may use it to influence directions in society in very different ways. Constraints on claims for equal rights and freedom of expression remain. An extensive list is identified. In a hierarchical and patriarchal society caste and gender remain limits too. While both are challenged the costs of challenging can be high.

The authors show that rights-based legislation has provided citizens and community organisations with paths to engagement with governance. They can pursue claims and get favourable court judgements. Successful claims for access to official information have armed citizen protests. Rights of access to food have also been declared. But incorporating rights in legislation is often the beginning of a long journey. Securing recognition and cooperation from officialdom is hard. Securing social recognition may be even harder. The authors recognise this but argue that whatever its disappointments rights-based legislation is a resource for citizens, communities and non-government organisations. They are interested especially in rights to education and the Draft New Education Policy, which they hope is a basis for change. Similarly, they counterpoint the 'blighted hope' afflicting young people with the willingness of educated young people to take part in public action.

This is a most useful book for an overall view of what is changing in Indian society and what is not. The authors provide readers, new to South Asia as well as experts in their fields, with thought provoking insights into the social context in which governments operate. They recognise the current electoral strength of the Union government led by Prime Minister Modi. But their examination of government as seen from below reveals again a system of governance both strong and weak. Their examination of communities and their aspirations reveals activists eager to make demands on government for the space and resources with which people can make lives as they choose. While they worry about the influence of inappropriate ideas from abroad, particularly on economics, their book nevertheless suggests that the most important drivers of directions in India are internal.