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Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on 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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ORATION AND NARRATION: FASHIONING INDIA THROUGH PRIME MINISTERIAL
SPEECHES

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Anandita Bajpai, *Speaking the Nation: The Oratorical Making of Secular; Neoliberal India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018, 335 pp. (ISBN: 9780199481743).

Oratory occupies a crucial position in electoral and mass politics in many countries around the world, including India. This is so much so that certain speeches become stately rituals themselves; for instance, the Prime Minister's Independence Day speech on 15 August every year in the case of India. Such speeches, especially when made by the heads of government, contribute in no small measure to imbuing the nation's polity with certain ideals and characteristics. In other words, political oratory helps produce the discursive framings of a nation.

This is one of the main ideas at work in Anandita Bajpai's *Speaking the Nation: The Oratorical Making of Secular; Neoliberal India*. As the author puts it, the book «is an attempt to trace how some of the prominent authors of the nation, its elected political heads, who, at the same time, are the protagonists and vanguards of the state, speak India into being» (2). The main subject of the book is the post-1991 developments in India. This was the period when neoliberal economic reforms were institutionalised in India by opening up the economy to international trade and foreign investment. The year 1991 marked the beginning of the premiership of PV Narasimha Rao who became the first Prime Minister of India not belonging to the Nehru-Gandhi family to complete a full term and under whom the economic reforms were put in place. The rise of Hindu nationalism in the mainstream politics of India took its first most explicit form with the Ramjanmabhoomi movement in the early 1990s, which resulted in the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992. This was also the decade which saw the «mass-mediatization of politics» through a proliferation of mass media (4-6). Bajpai argues that all these developments are related to «the story of market liberalization and state secularism» – her two main concerns in this book (6). It is further argued that the onset of economic reforms presented a moment of crisis and anxiety which was sought to be assuaged by the political leadership and converted instead into a narrative of an emerging India – a narrative still active as evident from the numerous books written on India as a rising global power (x-xi). Moreover, the accompanying threats to state secularism in the wake of Hindu nationalism were also addressed by the political lead-

ership in an attempt to argue for the existence of a secular democracy as a precondition for economic growth; in other words, for a successful rising India (36). Lastly, this fashioning of the nation in context of economic reforms and questions around secularism – which I will review in more detail later – demonstrate, according to Bajpai, «the state’s attempts to rearm, recalibrate, and reconsolidate its position as the legitimate unifier, overarching problem solver, organizer, and voice of the nation» (15).

How then does political oratory come into this story? Bajpai turns to the speeches of Indian Prime Ministers, the highest functionary of the executive, to study how the state profiles the nation with respect to the challenges of market liberalisation and state secularism from 1991 onwards. She argues, «The prime ministers, through their spoken word, may thus be viewed as the sensemaking and meaning-lending actors who translate the transforming politico-economic scenario to wider audiences» (31). To do this, she primarily analyses the speeches of four Prime Ministers who held office after 1991. In addition to Rao, these were Atal Bihari Vajpayee of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Manmohan Singh of the Indian National Congress – the party to which also Rao belonged – and the incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the BJP. Over a thousand speeches in English and Hindi are studied including Modi’s speeches up to 15 August 2016. The book seeks to make a point for the value of using prime ministerial speeches as sources and objects of study «in their own right» (29). Hence, a large chunk of the source material in this book for analysing how Prime Ministers fashion the nation comes from their speeches.

The book is organised into an introductory section, five chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction lays out the basic idea and approach of the book and gives a brief breakdown of the chapters.

The first chapter in many ways contextualises and sets the foundation for the rest of the book. In this chapter, the author deals with traditions of orality and aurality in India not only in the fields of political mobilisation but also ancient modes of teaching, learning and knowledge dissemination. It is argued that this cultural background along with more recent historical experiences in mass politics need to be understood to make sense of political speech-making. The author also spends some time detailing the tenure of the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, under whom the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) was elevated to the highest position in the government and the figure of the Prime Minister emerged as a kind of «teacher» for the nation (68). These Nehruvian traditions and styles of engagement with the national population, Bajpai argues, exercise a persisting influence over prime ministerial oratorical practices in India even today (64).

The second and third chapters focus on what the author calls «temporalizing tactics», that is, methods used by the Prime Ministers to justify and legitimise the economic reforms of 1991 in a temporal sense. In other words, Bajpai shows how the Prime Ministers present the promise of a better

future based on economic growth while the reforms are sold as an inevitable means to reach that future (94-95). At the same time, the reforms are not presented as something radical or exclusively benefitting only certain sections of the population. The reforms are both promoted as humane and inclusive (108) and are couched in the vocabulary of Nehruvian socialism, making use of terms such as «self-reliant» and «self-sufficient» to legitimise them (116).

The fourth chapter then considers «spatializing strategies» of legitimation by making references to the macro processes of globalisation and the subsequent need for India to not be left behind. Bajpai also argues that under the sway of globalisation, a sense of security is sought to be provided by the Prime Ministers by claiming that economic liberalisation would not be detrimental to India's sovereignty and cultural identity (172). Moreover, she draws out a difference in the content of the speeches depending on the target audience. For internal audiences, she argues, the reforms are «underplayed» so as to not make them seem like a strong break from the past, while for external audiences the nature and scope of the reforms are exaggerated to make them more attractive to foreign investors (188).

Finally, the fifth chapter is about secularism. It is argued that the Prime Ministers draw on a diverse range of resources to articulate the tenets of secularism, especially when speaking to audiences at home. These include civilisation imaginaries, myth, and history, especially from the nationalist movement (228) all in an attempt to «discursively concoct syncretism as the foundational principle of India» (233). With regards specifically to the economic reforms of 1991, secularism, according to Bajpai, is branded as a necessary requisite for growth. «India's emergence is presented as taking place within the framework of a liberal 'multireligious' and 'multicultural' secular democracy. India's distinctiveness is embedded not only in that it is an emerging power, but one that is explicitly secular and democratic», she writes (243).

There is much to unpack in the book, and it delivers less on some fronts than others. The main aspect where the book leaves more to be desired is in its argument about secularism, especially when dealing with how Modi speaks about secularism.

Bajpai argues that while Modi's articulations of secularism in front of external audiences is identical to his predecessors in that all of them present secularism as a «non-debatable asset» and a «statist reality» (259), he strikes a different tone when speaking to internal audiences. Here, his speeches are marked by either an absence or ambiguity regarding the term and, when secularism is mentioned, Modi often uses sarcasm to «empty the term of its meaning» – unless the occasion is a more formal state ritual such as Independence Day speeches (258-259). Still more important is how Modi shifts the discussion from secularism to issues of economic development through statements such as «Secularism to me is India First» (259). Even though

Bajpai mentions Modi's tactic of eroding secularism of its meaning, this does not seem to form a main takeaway of her treatment of Modi's speeches vis-à-vis secularism. She writes that by Modi's tenure, «secularism becomes a pre-given truth which need not be defended, but whose coordinates are projected as so natural to Indian society that the debate is then shifted to questions of development» (280). The implication seems to be that under Modi secularism does not remain a contested issue because it becomes «so natural to Indian society» in the first place, which then allows Modi to focus his speeches and shift the discourse to «questions of development». This is similar to the claim that under Modi the economic reforms become so ingrained that they need not be defended or justified (p. 163) and one gets the impression that secularism emerges as an established indisputable fact. This is patently not true and the givenness of neoliberalism and secularism under Modi is not the same. While the former does indeed become indisputable and an accepted fact of the economy, secularism is much undermined in Modi's India. It might be argued that Modi's more direct challenges to secularism start coming up from his second term onwards which began in 2019,¹ or in any case after 2016, a time period which falls out of the purview of the book. That notwithstanding, given Modi's long political career even before 2016 – and the fact that Bajpai does consider some of his speeches from the time he was the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat (253) – a more critical reading of Modi's engagement with secularism seems warranted. Even if we grant that the author is arguing that secularism is only «*projected*» as being so natural to India that it does not need to be talked about whereas in reality it is actually contested, it still complicates the final conclusions of the book. That is to say, the argument that Prime Ministers paint the picture of an India which *needs* to be a secular democracy in order to attain economic growth does not hold up when one considers Modi's undermining of secularism and upholding of neoliberal market economy at the same time, at least when speaking to internal audiences.

Although, in the beginning parts of the book, one finds a relative lack of attention given to bringing out the differences in the speeches of different Prime Ministers and some blurring of context, this is corrected later where continuities and discontinuities between the four Prime Ministers are drawn out. For instance, it is highlighted that while all Prime Ministers pre-

1. Modi, for instance, did not mention «secularism» in his 2014 speech after becoming the Prime Minister but claimed that no party could “deceive India” under the garb of secularism after his re-election in 2019. See, “Text of Narendra Modi's Speech at Central Hall of Parliament,” *The Hindu*, May 20, 2014, accessed January 14, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Text-of-Narendra-Modi%E2%80%99s-speech-at-Central-Hall-of-Parliament/article11624655.ece>; and “This Election, No Party Could Deceive India In The Veil of Secularism, Says PM Narendra Modi In Victory Speech,” *Outlook*, May 23, 2019, accessed January 14, 2023, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-this-election-no-party-could-deceive-india-in-the-veil-of-secularism-says-pm-narendra-modi-in-victory-speech/330867>.

sent the reforms as inevitable and indisputable, their individual speeches have different points of emphasis. Rao has to «establish a relation of co-equivalence between a promising future and the reforms», while Vajpayee has to justify supporting the reforms because his party opposed them earlier when they were in opposition; on the other hand, Modi has to do neither of this because by his time the neoliberal model of the economy becomes a fact taken for granted (163).

Apart from this, the book does convincingly demonstrate the multiple techniques used by various Indian Prime Ministers to explain the economic reforms to the public. The position of the PMO in this regard is reiterated in line with the premise set by the first chapter. What also emerges is the lasting hold and relevance of prime ministerial conventions and rituals laid down during the Nehruvian era, including the use of the vocabulary of «self-sufficiency» to legitimise market liberalisation. In terms of the writing, the book is well-organised and written in an accessible manner, although some statements feel repetitive at times. Every chapter gives the reader a clear sense of what it will contain and following the author's train of thought is also easily done.

Perhaps the most important takeaway from the book is its extensive treatment of the Prime Ministers' speeches as a source. This of course does raise questions too. One is the issue of context. Even though the book is attentive to who is being addressed in a given speech, especially when the distinction is between internal and external audiences, it is unclear if there are changes in what a Prime Minister says about the same topic at different points of time in their tenure. Two – and Bajpai herself points this out – is the issue of how far can studying just the Prime Minister's speeches accurately illustrate how the nation is discursively produced given the presence of powerful deputies in the government who also command popular imagination and may strike different tones than the Prime Minister (see note 97, p. 253). Nonetheless, a book-length treatment of the Prime Ministers' speeches as a source is methodologically innovative and should be welcomed as a window for doing more research on its merits and challenges.

The book should be of interest to students and scholars of Indian politics, contemporary history, and media as also to the burgeoning field of sound studies in the humanities and social sciences. It should also be accessible by a general readership by virtue of its lucid writing.