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COMPLEXITIES OF CULTURE AND TENSIONS IN THE PAST

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The review critiques the book titled *Ancient India – Culture of Contradictions* authored by Upinder Singh. The book presents a novel approach towards the study of ancient India. Singh focuses on the co-existing contradictions of Indian culture to break the stereotype of its monolithic past. Singh also attempts to illustrate that the historians of ancient India can contribute to contemporary debates through analogies. The review evaluates the efficacy of the idea of dialectic tensions to explain the history and idea of ancient Indian culture and examines the connections of ancient trends with current developments as evidenced in the book.

Keywords: ancient India, Indian culture, dialectic tensions, historians

The book under review (Upinder Singh, *Ancient India – Culture of Contradictions*, Aleph Book Company, New Delhi, 2021, 263 p.) presents the history of ancient India through dialectic tensions in areas central to understanding ancient Indian culture and thought. The book deals with five co-existing contradictions – social inequality and spiritual inclusivity, desire and detachment, goddesses and misogyny, violence and non-violence, debate and conflict. The exposition of these conflicting strains emanates from two premises – first, ancient India was neither a monolithic past nor crystallised in an unchanging mould; second, some of these contradictions seem to have considerable impact on the present. By addressing some opposing facets of ancient times, Singh seeks to break the stereotype of steadfast values intrinsic to the history and culture of ancient India. For this, the book does not use the trope of diversity but meticulously exposes the co-existence of contradicting ideas and practices. Very often, when history is relegated to the service of nation-building, it focuses on one dominant tradition. The present volume is an attempt to move beyond such a concept of unidimensional history without undermining or being overwhelmed by neither “the perspectives imposed by the sources” [Le Goff 1992, 182] nor by the political rhetoric.

Singh makes it amply clear in the introduction that the book connects with a lot of contemporary events and as a professional historian she takes the responsibility to enrich the recent spate of public interest in engagement with history, particularly that of ancient India. To that end, her language is accessible and prose lucid. Though Singh stays clear of technical terms (sometimes called academic jargon), or explains them unflinchingly, the merit of the book lies in ample use of primary sources, both textual and visual. It has been a longstanding gripe of archaeologists that predominance of textual evidence has

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skewed the perspective of ancient history-writing to that of minority literates. It is an asset that the author can navigate scriptures and sculptures with equal ease and uses variety of sources. The colonial tradition of history-writing regarded literature and art worthy of admiration, but of questionable legitimacy as sources of history. Singh questions existing paradigms and furnishes new evidence through art and also literature. “Collectively, they bring home the point that ancient India has not only produced a great abundance of exquisite art, but that the ancient past has formed a rich source of inspiration for a remarkable range of creative expression down to the present...” [Singh 2021, xv].

Ancient India for Singh is not an exotic silo in the past. She introduces her chapter on social inequalities by invoking the memory of Dalit student Rohith Vemula, who killed himself in 2016 and makes a mention of many contemporary academic writings on the subject. Through the bases of slavery, varna, caste and untouchability, Singh examines origin, development, and perpetuation of inequalities. While recounting the experience of slaves, she pertinently points out that scant references to their upward mobilisation were certainly exceptions and not the rule. The subordination of slaves was an accepted metaphor as a shy person could be described as a meek slave girl. Though a separate chapter is devoted to gender inequalities but the engagement with gender in all issues is a stellar point of this work.

Though *varna*, organisation of the society based on four professions, was a sacred duty (*dharma*) for ancient Indian society, the book presents examples of deviations. There is a sincere attempt to clarify the confusion between *varna* and caste. “Caste is not a simple division of labour” [Singh 2021, 16]. The socio-cultural aspects of caste tied to identity are examined through socio-political historical developments. Singh, conscious of incorporating history of the South, assiduously brings out the difference in how these institutions and practices pan out in South India. Jainism and Buddhism have a different approach than the normative texts of Hinduism, yet a simplistic generalisation is not possible. One finds examples of being swayed by pragmatic considerations or compulsions of existing and depending on a particular society even in these caste-averse religions. Singh posits that these religious traditions along with Bhakti movement present examples of inclusivity as far as the highest spiritual goal of salvation is considered. Singh also provides a glimpse of satires, probably forming part of the theatre repertoire of the times that make fun of the upper classes and their rituals. The tension produced by the counter-narratives to caste hierarchies becomes more evident in Bhakti literature. Singh cites from a Tamil text *Tirumurai* [Singh 2021, 35],

*Or outcastes
Of the lowest breed
They may even skin the cow
Or eat its flesh
If they but love Shiva –
To them I bow*

Singh makes ample use of the literature and art of ancient India for analysing the expression of desire in different forms. From erotic sculptures outside temples to explicit sex manuals, the chapter treads a wide range. For example, we discover that the great love story of Dushyant and Shakuntala shies away even from an explicit kissing scene. Singh, in her inimitable style, finds an analogy in the Hindi films of the 1960s and 70s that used to show two flowers colliding to hint at a kiss between lovers [Singh 2021, 54]. The informal style, yet solid scholarship, and ample references to primary sources, shall endear the book to both academic and general readers. The spiritual teachings that extoll the conquest of desire are traced, as well as the tantric attitudes, which coalesce desire with spirituality. Such plurality of attitudes of yore towards sexuality press us to re-examine the contemporary portrayal of Indian culture.

While dealing with love and sex, there is a sensitive description of incidents of gender-based violence but the theme of gender is explored in detail through the cult of goddesses on one hand and misogyny in social relations on the other. The analysis of the gendered experiences of historical developments presents a brilliant feminist critique supplemented by compositions of women bhakti saints.

The book then moves on to recounting incidents of political violence to demolish the myth that Indian civilisation is inherently non-violent. Questions of vegetarianism, the inevitability of violence by the state, the punitive nature of taxation, etc. ring a contemporary bell. Wars were central to the political canvass of those times, but the repercussions must have raised concern. There is a passing reference to popular uprisings against the iron hand of state machinery, but that aspect could have benefited from more rigour and a little more space. There was an intense intellectual conversation, mostly emanating from religious traditions that sought to counter violence. The constant and consistent focus has produced a rich legacy and we are offered nuances of the ideal of non-violence and its tension with political realities.

The last theme of debate and conflict looks at the dialogic tradition and the existence of heterodoxy. Buddhists, Jains, agnostics, and atheists were competing not only with each other but also with mainstream Hinduism. The multiple sources of Indian culture vied with each other, but they were all getting a chance to have their say. In fact, many historical sites like Mathura, Nagarjunakonda, etc. had incorporated a “plurality of traditions” in their sacred landscape [Singh 2021, 184]. The robust tradition of the debate was not a guarantee of a total absence of conflict. The rivalries of sects depicted in art and literature present a picture of animosity, sometimes mild, sometimes bitter. The concluding section of this chapter is quite illuminating and presents evidence of “making fun of religion”. The details of an elaborate sculpture showing a man and a cat in almost similar postures performing austerities are speculated by the author to hint at a humorous story [Singh 2021, 220]. This may seem hard to believe today but plausible in the backdrop of the lively tradition of philosophical debates.

The book presents some very significant facets of ancient India in all its complexities and contradictions. It is an account of ideas and arguments that have been passed on for centuries and bear contemporary relevance. It is a laudable effort to bring the rigours of history in such an accessible manner to non-specialists. The specialists might pine for more but the detailed treatment, extracts from ancient texts, and illustrations of archaeological sources will not let them be disappointed either.

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