

Corbridge Stuart, Harris John, and Jeffery Craig (eds.) (2013) *India Today: Economy, Politics and Society*. Cambridge, UK. Polity Press, 361pages. ISBN: 13:978-0-7456-6111-7.

How do we make sense of emerging economic-political and social patterns in India today? Answering this question presents a daunting challenge as India at the current juncture presents a paradox. Paradox of existing realities which run both ways: economic growth on the one hand and laggard socio-economic indicators on the other. This necessitates the Indian state to strike a judicious balance between the committed welfare considerations which are socially and politically advisable on the one hand, while simultaneously pursuing an economic policy which is in line with national and global economic compulsions. At the same time emerging social and political formations are putting new set of expectations and demands on the state. In the backdrop of these 'pulls and pressures', 'twists and turns,' the book "India Today" presents a rigorous attempt to unravel the paradox of what India is today by presenting some specific existing and emerging socio-political and economic trends since 2000.

More precisely, the authors address the 'why and how' of such changes and its impact on society and polity (p. 2) through a set of thirteen questions related to the economy, politics and society: India's take off, why, when and how? What does it mean for the poor? Impact of growth for the Indian worker; whether the commitment to 'inclusive growth and social justice' is a reality or a rhetoric; weak state promoting reforms; success of India's democracy; responsiveness of Indian government; the rise and halt of Hindu nationalism; rural dislocations as well as the rise of Maoism, the existence of civil society, the relevance of caste and the status of women in India, the possibility of India reaping its demographic dividend. These questions form the core of the analysis and arguments presented in the book.

The authors present two contrasting narratives about India Today: one of "shinning" and the other of "whining" India. They give us the good news first by concluding that India has taken-off. Take-off was due to the solid foundations provided by the legacies (holding the nation together and creating some credible institutions) left behind by formative nation-building efforts during Nehru's and Indira Gandhi's ruling. The authors challenge the idea of a "singular take-off" which characterizes the pre-1980 in terms of "Hindu rate of growth". On contrary, the growth rate in the early years was an improvement from the colonial era and in line with the global norms then (except for East Asia). Additionally, India's capitalist class was liberated from the earlier shackles of a 'dirigiste' state aided by strong central institutions but more importantly due to the 'elite revolt' led by India Inc. and supported by a strong upper middle class.

Good news must always be followed by more bad news which is evident from the fact that in spite of the take-off, Indian growth has not been able to pull millions of people out of poverty. Though the incidence of income poverty has fallen down it has not translated in enhancing the poor's "capabilities" to improve their living conditions. Jobless growth is accompanied by destabilization of earlier structures such as public Distribution system (PDS) threatening the food security of poor households. Authors opine that the cumulative effect of exclusion and the resultant grievances of tribals, dalits and the rural poor from the mainstream development can be attributed to the rise of Maoism in India. The authors challenge the dominant perception of "300 million strong middle class in India" by arguing that "there is a 'missing middle' in India today" (p. 78) as everyone with an income of above \$10 a day is in top 5% (World bank defines middle class as people with income of above \$10 a day,

excluding top 5%). The middle-class, comprising 300 million plus of people, is missing from the analysis since, according to the World Bank definition, a population above US\$10 per day, hence a non-issue.

The poor masses are facing various challenges. First, there is a crisis in Indian agriculture accompanied by the rising trend of “informal labour” which excludes a major chunk of labour force “outside the sphere of capital accumulation”. At the same time one can see a perceptible move towards state granting rights such as education, food, and livelihood originating from the earlier Supreme Court rulings. Middle class activism is the driving force behind the demand for the economic and social rights represented by various fractions of the middle class. A similar trend is evident in the case of “audacious reforms” promoted by the “weak Indian state” which demonstrated remarkable negotiating skills and political prudence on part of the ruling elites in “making deals” with the elites in business, bureaucracy and in the countryside and provide them with opportunities to accumulate wealth. However, the exclusion of the masses from the fruits of these reforms might lead to mass politics which can be seen in the emerging struggles over land, labour and resources. Interestingly, later in their account on civil society, the authors point towards a vibrant, effective and large civil society in India with cross-class collaborations with no stark divide between the urban educated classes and the poor.

It is argued that India’s democracy is a success with free and fair elections, established institutions, free speech and an increase in number of people participating in the democratic process. However, challenges of corruption, police harassment, and ineffective lower courts pose as hindrances to the process of deepening and perhaps developing democracy. The situation of women has improved in terms of literacy, life expectancy and direct participation in democratic processes but their social status remains stagnant. On the caste issue, the authors boldly conclude that, “there is no longer anything like caste system in India today” (p. 256) as caste structures have been rearranged horizontally rather than hierarchically. The rise of Hindu forces might have halted politically as BJP has tempered down its tone but both “banal hinduvta in its violent and extreme form” will stay as a part of Indian socio-political landscape. India fails to take advantage of its “demographic dividend” as the inclusion of young in the workforce remains limited due to the “poor quality of mass education” and the absence of “secure salaried jobs”.

The authors cover a wide canvas covering a whole range of mainstream policy issues and challenges facing India today. While the narrative is delivered with robustness of seasoned “Indianists” that the authors are. Care has been taken to engage with academic debates both at the empirical and conceptual level while providing relevant comparative examples from other countries. It is because of my own inclination that I am compelled to point out some pertinent omissions. Firstly, there is scant discussion on the Right to Information Act (RTIA) in India except in few instances (pp. 155–56, 167, 233). Perhaps, a section on RTIA in Chapter 5 was in order as it signifies a revolutionary change in opening Indian process of governance in India. Secondly, some new patterns are emerging in the governance realm in India today. Citizens groups from the grassroots up to the central level are playing an active monitoring role by not only ensuring policy implementation but also participating in policy formulation. This can be seen in the recent participatory framework of the process of preparing the 12th Five Year Plan approach paper. New tools of governance monitoring are being used such as the social audit, public hearing, citizens report card at the village level about the public delivery of programs such NREGA etc. There is perhaps more to the story of

decentralization and civic action in terms of these social and political innovations. Thirdly, though processes are important it is equally important to evaluate the role of institutions of governance (E.g. Parliament, Judiciary, Executive and other related institutions such as planning Commission, CAG etc.) in India as they are central to the policy landscape where patterns of governance take shape and are taken forward. The performance and health of these institutions will perhaps provide an indication of policy patterns emerging in the future. Lastly, social scientists focusing on India have dealt extensively with the questions and issues discussed in the book. Still the utility of the book to the readers is to transcend the familiar terrains of enquiry in providing new perspectives. In this regard this book seems to be dealing with familiar questions and paradoxes more than providing answers to them. It must however be pointed out that answers to these questions are admittedly as complex as the questions themselves. These omissions, notwithstanding, "*India Today*" is an important and timely contribution to the scholarship of Indian studies providing a comprehensive picture and an excellent resource base of contemporary socio-political and economic trends and crosscurrents.

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