

## **Reinventing India. Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy**

Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss. Cambridge: Policy Press, 2000  
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This book is many things at the same time. It is an historical account of India's political (and sometimes political economic) developments in the past 50 years. It is a review and critical discussion of many ideas that have been developed by political scientists and others to explain and interpret these political developments. And it is a particular interpretation of what has happened to India in the past 50 years. The book is therefore of interest to various types of audiences: starting students who want to familiarise themselves with India's history and politics, but also those who are already very knowledgeable and who follow and perhaps even participate in the debates described and commented upon in the book.

The main argument of the book is that the idea of what India is and should be has fundamentally changed in the 1990s. The earlier image, constructed by Nehru and other 'tall men' half a century ago, was based on ideas of democracy, federalism, secularism and (to some extent) socialism. Bringing an end to backwardness and poverty, generating growth and development – all this was seen as the main mission of the modern post-Independent state. In the 1990s, according to Corbridge and Harriss, this image has been seriously challenged, and a 're-invention' has taken (and is taking) place. In particular, there have been two kinds of 'revolts': the neo-liberal reform, which meant a fundamental change in the economic development model, and the Hindu nationalist project. The book describes the invention of modern India fifty years ago, the failure of this development concept, and the re-invention in the 1990s.

While the re-imagining of India is the main theme of the book, another running theme is continuity – i.e. the deep-rootedness of the Nehru model and its on-going relevance. The model was a myth and has failed, but, according to Corbridge and Harriss, this does not mean that it has not produced important results and that it has lost its meaning altogether. Apart from the concrete effects on economic development and standards of living (far from negligible, as the authors show), it is still an important reference point for many people of what the state should be and should do. So, a new vision and a new discourse have emerged, but the old ones have not ceased to exist.

This raises the question of the importance of the new vision as compared to the old one. Will the new one ultimately replace the old one, or not? With regard to the economic revolt, the authors seem to think that the new model has become dominant, but they have their doubts whether the *Sangh parivar* will be fully successful in re-inventing India as a Hindu state. Too many Indians who have long been the victims of caste, class and gender oppression have benefited from state-sponsored processes of secularization or economic development, and might therefore not find the Hindu vision sufficiently convincing. In the end, the authors expect, this reinvention of India will be constrained (p. xix, p. 193). (One

could wonder why the same people do not oppose the economic reform process for the same reasons, but this question is not addressed.)

One issue that only hardly surfaces in the book, surprisingly, is the relationship between the two revolts. There is a historical connection in the sense that both could emerge in the 1990s, partly because of the political spaces created as a result of the failure of the Nehru development project. Furthermore, on page 174, the authors state that the “success of the minority Congress government of the earlier 1990s in negotiating economic reforms was aided by the fears of the remainder of the opposition about the BJP and its project of redefining Indian society”, an argument elaborated in more detail by Varshney (1999). These arguments, however, do not show a substantive relationship of the two revolts, but rather suggest a contingent one. The question remains whether Hindu nationalism is not intensified by globalisation and the economic reform process (as Patnaik, 2000 argues). Or whether it is just a coincidence that a new economic policy with a clear anti-poor bias goes together with ‘new’ ways to appeal to majorities (i.e. not in economic terms, as the Congress in Nehru’s or Indira Gandhi’s days did, but in religious terms) (cf. Kohli, 1989).

Nevertheless, despite the fact that one would wish the authors to probe such questions a bit further, the book is a very interesting piece of work, to be recommended to anybody with an interest in south Asian politics and development.

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Dr. Jos Mooij, visiting scholar, Centre for Economic and Social Studies; Nizamiah Observatory Campus; Begumpet; Hyderabad 500016; Andhra Pradesh; India.  
Tel. ++ 91 (0)40 7806711 or 3410906; Email: josmooij@sify.com