

tiated by Sakyadhita Sri Lanka in 1996 for Sri Lankan *dasa sil matas* and nuns from different traditions – Thai nuns, too –, desirous of becoming *bhikkhunis*, is missing. This topic has been discussed since 1987, when Sakyadhita International, the International Network of Buddhist Women, was founded, and since then conferences have been held every two years.

Brown focuses exclusively on Thai Buddhism, not dwelling on changes in Buddhism world-wide. Her focus lies on *maechi* Wabi's life as "a prism". So she is interested in the development of this prism, this particular biography. And Brown shows *maechi* Wabi's problems as a nun, living together with other women, the conflicts that occur with other nuns, and her approach to these problems by meditating. This makes it necessary to explain what meditation means. The different methods of insight and calming meditation are also explained. Brown focuses *maechi* Wabi's problems with meditation, for example, her clinging to special visions which made her feel confident (p. 51). So Sid Brown writes, "(...) to understand *maechi*, we must understand the roles meditation plays (...)" (p. 68) And, as far as women are concerned, the most important aspect is that meditation is the only way women, whether *maechi* or laywomen, "could legitimately be alone (...)" (p. 68). And that means being free of all those "social, familial demands on Thai women to interact and nurture others" (p. 68).

After crises and struggles *maechi* Wabi finally came to Dhammcharini Samnak, run by the Institute of Thai Maechi, where Brown became acquainted with her and they became friends (p. 136). She graduated from high school, and is one of those *maechi* "who have been ordained the longest" (p. 115). Living in Dhammcharini Samnak she now sometimes thinks of going "on a two-year meditation retreat to deepen her understanding of Buddhism (...)" (p. 136).

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SUBRATA K. MITRA AND V.B. SINGH, *Democracy and Social Change in India. A Cross-Sectional Analysis of the National Electorate*. New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London: Sage Publications, 1999. 341 pages, £ 29.99. ISBN 0-7619-9344-4 (US, hb.) /81-7036-809-X (India, hb.)

In the year 2002 India celebrated the golden jubilee of her parliamentary democracy, witnessed some of the worst instances of rioting and bloodletting, and also successfully held free and fair elections in one of her main trouble spots, Jammu and Kashmir. Time and again in India, just when democracy seems to be at its lowest ebb, it bounces back, thus fascinating and baffling both admirers and critics alike. In this rigorously and yet elegantly argued book Mitra and Singh attempt to answer the perplexing question that seems to perennially plague both observers and students in and of India; why has democracy worked, survived and brought about change in a country with not only inadequate but also 'inappropriate' basic hardware, numerous contradictions, hurdles and problems?

The introduction reviews major theories of social change and maps the contours of what is called an 'Indian' model of social change and politics. This 'evolving' model has mass political participation at its core, recognises that there is an interaction between different levels of the system which creates new or reinforces traditional institutions, and political actors engage in dual strategies that combine normal political action with rational protest. The study is grounded in what they call 'critical traditionalism', which assumes that political actors are rational and that they draw upon a repertoire of available resources, creating a dialectical synthesis of tradition and modernity in pursuit of their goals.

To answer the question, they posit what they call an "Indian puzzle", which is a series of binary opposites that coexist together. Thus we see the persistence of paradoxical pairs or unusual combinations, a constitutional commitment to democracy and the presence of social and economic conditions that characterise poor, post-colonial, non-Western societies; a democratic record with all the institutional paraphernalia and mechanisms and frequent illiberal aberrations that threaten democracy itself; *jati*, *varna* and *dharma*, the core of Indian tradition and a constitution that envisages a modern, liberal, secular state; a society characterised by hierarchy, tradition, and rituals not conducive to democracy nonetheless not only, democracy but also warding off authoritarian and non-party attempts to destroy democracy; legitimacy and efficacy of institutions and low trust for the political class that runs them; and the increasing assertiveness of the regions vis-à-vis the centre.

The puzzle is tackled in the four core chapters which show that the two dualities or contraries can not only coexist but have also enabled social change through an interplay of both factors and led to the resilience of democracy in India. The authors used the survey method to unravel the puzzle and understand what Indians themselves make of government, state, society and their interaction, and of their everyday reality, also seeking to explain why individually rational acts could at times lead to collectively irrational action. The three appendices to the study provide details on the research design, methodology, measurement indicators, sample, and questionnaire.

An intergenerational and sociological mapping of the profile of the electorate provides the backdrop to the rest of the study. Contrary to the predictions of the prophets of doom, the survey of more than 10,000 respondents representing the diversity that is India revealed that there has been progress in terms of empowerment, enfranchisement and emancipation. In the chapter on the changing party system, it was politics first; political parties and elections were the vehicles for social and political change rather than authoritarian and non-democratic methods. Despite the clamour characteristic of Indian politics there was an underlying positive consensus on major issues of contemporary relevance like Kashmir, the Ayodhya dispute, Pakistan, and a common civil code. The next chapter, which juxtaposes region and nation, reveals that fears of Balkanisation are baseless and that there is instead a seamless movement between the two identities depending on the context and circumstances. When read with the relevant statistical indicators the chapter on economic policy and social oppor-



tunity reveals that democracy and economic reforms are not necessarily antithetical to each other, though the pace may be slow.

In the penultimate chapter a comparative analysis of some of the component units of the federation shows that, despite huge variations across the country, local government institutions have infused new political resources into the system, enhanced the legitimacy of the state and thus contributed to enriching and deepening democracy. On the basis of a detailed case study of West Bengal the authors opine that its success could be instructive to other constituent units. A comparative analysis of the different units of the federation with respect to all parameters instead of just local government would have enriched the study.

Some of the more important findings revealed by the study include the instrumental use of primordial identities for political mobilisation. The concepts of caste, religion, language, tribe, and region as used in politics are thus far removed from their meaning in the social context. The study thus refrains from attempts to read political actions from things such as caste, religion, class etc. Furthermore, it also shows that the central tendency is towards moderation, accommodation and inclusiveness. This explains why the imminent implosion never takes place. Finally, the dynamic synergy achieved by a constant movement between the old and the new, traditional and modern, the local and the national, indigenous and foreign, has contributed to the strengthening of democracy. In other words, the 'inappropriate' hardware has chipped in to vitalise democracy.

The study also throws light on three aspects of contemporary politics which manifest in multiple forms. First, a process of social churning is afoot, and previously disadvantaged sections of society have been able to exercise power, second, almost all levels of society are aware of and have accepted this ongoing societal change, and, finally, sections of society which have become dislodged from traditional positions of power have turned to parties of the right or have attempted to make use of the new avenues that have emerged with the integration in the global market.

A "feel good" breeze blows through the book and helps balance some of the recent gloomy prophecies about the impending collapse of India's experiment with democracy and secularism. A grey area and particular vulnerability of Indian democracy revealed by the survey, is the negative evaluation of and lack of trust in those in charge of the institutions, though the institutions themselves receive high marks. This finding contradicts the deinstitutionalisation thesis that had become the staple for political scientists on India in the 90's.

Survey analysis is an expensive method and may be beyond the reach of an individual researcher. However, grand studies like the book under review can provide valuable clues to new hypotheses and conjectures, besides clearing the air about some assumptions and removing niggling doubts. The study will be of immense help to students and observers of Indian politics, policy makers and sociologists. It should be an essential handbook for anyone doing research on India in the years to come.

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