

Book Reviews

Sujata Patel, ed. 2020. *Exploring Sociabilities of Contemporary India: New Perspectives*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan. 328 pp. Notes, index. Rs 945 (hardback)

Exploring Sociabilities of Contemporary India comes at a time when sociology in India is indeed in what its editor Sujata Patel calls a ‘new moment’ amidst socio-economic shifts and political unrest. The edited volume is situated at the intersections of a growing need to take stock of the discipline’s past and concerns towards the future. It does all this and more by bringing together sociological perspectives from well-known scholars in the areas of family, marriage, gender, sexuality, religion, caste, tribes, and higher education.

The book opens by initiating a discussion on the vexed questions of ‘colonial modernity’ and ‘methodological nationalism’. In discussing sociology’s encounter with its colonial past, Patel traces the influence of 19th-century anthropology on the discipline. In the first chapter, Patel provides an elaborate conceptual ground for the volume, while also exploring the epistemological contours and fabric of sociology in India through a comprehensive analysis of institutional frameworks and practices that have organised knowledge of the discipline in India (p. 25). The chapter captures the transitions and tensions within sociology, particularly as attempts were made to interrogate contemporary pathways in the organisation of new sociabilities. The first chapter marks a significant moment for turning the gaze within; this is done consistently by all the contributors to the volume under three thematic sections covering debates pertaining to the study of structures that have been constantly located within the dichotomy of modern–traditional, sociology–anthropology and regional–national.

The contributions in the first section engage with the challenges of constituting the ‘field’ and situating India as an object of analysis. In locating the disciplinary practices in the field of family and kinship,

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Rajni Palriwala examines the need to move past the construction of family as a classificatory system with rules and structures. She highlights the need to integrate the more complex questions of emotional, non-biological, and same-sex formations of family and marriage.

The play of orientalist hegemonies emerges clearly in the understanding of tribes and caste. Virginius Xaxa and Surinder Jodhka, in two chapters on tribe and caste respectively, attempt to map the colonial historiography of two major areas in the sociology of India. As Xaxa notes, a lack of clarity in the conceptualisation of what constitutes a tribe persists, even as the term became synonymous with the 'primitive' and 'backward' (p. 78). Xaxa reminds us why, in the current discourse of development, colonial constructions and fault-ridden policies pose a larger problem as tribes of India are displaced, discriminated against, and excluded from land and forest resources. Jodhka points out that the study of caste also remains enmeshed in orientalist essentialism, leaving the view of caste limited to a religious value and 'ideal type' for Hindu social order. Jodhka's chapter is situated against the backdrop of electoral politics, processes of mobility and aspirations, caste-based violence and shifting meanings of the 'urban' in the Indian context.

The contributions in the volume chart out a back-and-forth critical engagement as Farhana Ibrahim's chapter—the last in the section—points out the challenges of limiting the sociology of religion in India to readings of Hindu texts, scriptures and social organisation. In the absence of a coherent academic engagement with the anthropology of Islam in India, Ibrahim calls for the need to reformulate the homogenous conceptualisations of India's Muslim communities within debates in South Asia more generally. Such methodological and theoretical rethinking in the chapter raises pertinent issues of self-identity and representation—paving the way for a much-needed interaction between sociology and policy-making. Ibrahim reminds us of the need to have meaningful conversations with categories such as syncretism, a question pursued further by Sudha Sitharaman in her chapter in the second section. In Sitharaman's chapter, textual and practical discourses become relevant to a holistic understanding of the anthropology of Islam in the subcontinent.

The second section steers the debates further by unpacking a range of perspectives on contemporary manifestations of the themes identified in the first section. Entwined with the issues raised by Palriwala earlier, the critical dialogue with hegemonic imaginaries of the family-marriage-kinship matrix continues in the chapters by Kamala Ganesh and Pushpesh

Kumar as they pay close attention to the everyday processes of identity-making. Located at the interstices of the caste-gender nexus, Ganesh's chapter is a feminist exploration of the 'domestic' in relation to women's agency amidst the conundrum of modernity and aspiration. Kumar's chapter, on the other hand, treads into the difficult terrain of challenging the feminist erasure of queer voices, while also drawing attention to the dominance of white, middle class, queer intimacies in reconfigurations of family arrangements. Deconstructing the Oedipus complex, therefore, becomes an interesting theoretical ground for exploring the potential of alternative queer formations, as affirmed in Kumar's analysis of hijras' everyday practices.

The city remains a pivotal site of analysis as religiosities become entrenched in the meaning-making processes. While Suryakant Waghmore places the significance of understanding Hindu cosmopolitanism through the workings of an upper caste community in Mumbai, Rowena Robinson and Nandini Paliyath trace the relations between faith, meanings of citizenship and Catholic associations in the city. Both the chapters, while tackling religiosities in their own distinct ways, capture the need for studying the manifestation of the 'religious' in non-textual and shifting processes of community-making in urban geographies.

The last section of the volume, deeply relevant in the current political context, discusses the oft-overlooked question of the role of universities in India. In revisiting the history of reforms for higher education in India, N. Jayaram brings to the forefront important issues of teacher training, infrastructure, curriculum development, and pedagogies. Satish Deshpande's chapter brings together perspectives on the role of universities beyond academic functions, keeping the future alive with possibilities for critical thinking, questioning and the creation of an enabling civic space. Perhaps an important area the volume could have considered in addition, is the sociology of schooling where methodological questions and meanings of education are intertwined with contemporary sociabilities in the Indian context.

For a discipline with a history of discursive traditions, this volume is a positive intervention in the direction of understanding hierarchies of knowledge, voice and experience. For students, researchers, teachers and practitioners of sociology, the book offers perspectives that have been shared and developed in Indian academic spheres, and that is an enriching aspect of the collection. The volume will help in accommodating

the nuanced questions pertaining to the future of ethnographic endeavour, fieldwork and writing for sociology in India.

*Indraprastha College for Women
University of Delhi
Delhi*

MADHULIKA SONKAR

Email: madhulika.sonkar@gmail.com