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# Book Review, Political Science. Volume 1, The Indian State. ICSSR Research Surveys and Explorations

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communitarianism, secularism, subaltern, passive revolution, and the particular conceptual distinction between civil society and political society developed by Partha Chatterjee. He conveys, as Andrew Wyatt says (below), a very good sense of how various post-positivist strands come together to constitute a distinctively Indian approach to studying politics.

It is perhaps a pity, however, that Vanaik did not push his discussion of the distinctively Indian approach further, as he might have done by comparing it with arguments of scholars who work in other parts of the world, outside the West, such as those of Erik Kuhonta, Dan Slater and Tuong Vu in their book *Southeast Asia in Political Science* (Stanford University Press, 2008), or of scholars who contributed to a recent special issue of this journal (“Context, Concepts and Comparisons in Southeast Asian Studies,” *Pacific Affairs* 87, no. 3).

There follow reviews of each of the four volumes in the set. Together they do constitute an impressive overview. But it is perhaps a moot point as to whether the work that they discuss provides the means of understanding the changes that are now taking place in Indian politics and society. As the editors of the *Economic and Political Weekly* noted recently (vol. XLIX, no. 45, November 8, 2014, 7) the victory of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party in the general election of 2014 came about because it addressed “the new class demands of the transforming and transformed social classes,” while the opposition failed and continues to falter “perhaps because they confine their political programmes to a world of social classes and class relations which does not exist anymore.”

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JOHN HARRISS

**POLITICAL SCIENCE. VOLUME 1, THE INDIAN STATE. ICSSR Research Surveys and Explorations. Edited by Samir Kumar Das; general editor, Achin Vanaik. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013. xxxv, 175 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-808494-5.**

This book maps the scholarly terrain on the Indian state. The book holds great promise, as the last survey was done in 1995. The volume seeks to understand the state through an analysis of the “social character” of the Indian state, the political economy of the Indian state, social policy, and law and rights. It is a well-edited collection from scholars based in India.

In my view, this volume as well as the other three volumes in this collection should be judged by the following three criteria: first, a comprehensive ability to map the *recent and current literature* on the Indian state and to uncover pieces of writing that change the way we think about the Indian state. This should answer the question: What have we learnt so far about the state? The second criteria is whether or not the authors *synthesize important questions*

worth asking about the Indian state. Third, the volume should be judged for its ability to raise new queries and questions which could be the focus for future scholars. These criteria would help scholars identify important gaps in our knowledge and lacunae at both empirical and theoretical levels. The book falls short on all three accounts although it is a useful collection that achieves the first two goals to some extent.

This book on the Indian state is a useful compendium that reflects the nature of writings on the Indian state. The introduction to the volume (by S.K. Das) maps the various paradigms on the Indian state in a comprehensive way. The literature review is divided into institutionalism, pluralism and state pluralism, marxism and neomarxism, new political economy, and cultural studies and discourse analysis. The literature on the Indian state focuses much more on the deeper social roots of the power of the state rather than what it does, or its institutional form. Gupta's chapter also suggests that the dominant understanding of the Indian state is "in terms of state-society interface" (54). The institutionalism turn seems to have bypassed the scholarship on the Indian state. The broader state-in-society approach essentially focuses on how the state responds to social divisions, economic cleavages and evolves its development strategy. All the chapters in this volume privilege an analysis of state-society or state-economy interactions in shaping the output of state policy. This picture assumes that the state was so weak that it was overtaken by societal groups of either caste, or class dimensions. The state is an arena, an empty shell occupied by societal actors. Analytically, the model of society in these perspectives is richer and more complex than the model of the Indian state. Analysis of the working of ideas such as accountability, representation and democratic quality of the Indian state seems to be missing from this literature from India.

Notably, the introduction to the volume introduces a new field of studies on the Indian state: cultural analysis and discourse studies. Books from this approach "shift the focus from how we perceive the state to how the state perceives itself" (29). In this genre, S.K. Das characterizes debates in constituent assembly, speeches and policy and statements, landmark judicial pronouncements and even memoirs. A notable shift is the need to look at how the state is experienced and its meaning in its daily and everyday activities. Gupta also reviews the ethnographic perspective on the Indian state, where the everyday forms of corruption are negotiated. Gupta also notes the analysis of the state's coercive and disciplinary character, and how it shapes identities itself (66–70).

The chapter on social policy recognizes a marked trend of enhancing welfare in India. Consistent with the analysis of the class character of the Indian state, Bhattacharyya argues that the government's social welfare policies are designed to gain the support of the poor, and of people left out of the economic processes that favour the corporate sector (115–117). Bhattacharyya recognizes a peculiar character of the Indian state, where

parallel domains of citizenship co-exist. One realm is a set of constitutional rights, which have been expanded since 2004. These relate to right to education, right to employment, as well as the right to information. The second realm refers to the actual practice of these rights. The formal political rights are not realized in practice, creating a gap between the two domains. The more recent social welfare schemes provide some discretionary rights to the citizens who are disenfranchised from their real practice of formal political rights, ensuring their support for the political system.

The book's survey of the important questions suffers from some gaps. It completely misses the regional turn in political economy and in studies of the Indian state. Studies of subnational variation across many policies present a challenge to homogenous theories of the Indian state (Aseema Sinha, *The Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India: A Divided Leviathan*, Indiana University Press, 2005; Atul Kohli, *Poverty Amid Plenty in the New India*, Cambridge University Press, 2012; Rob Jenkins, ed., *Regional Reflections: Case Studies of Democracy in Practice*, Oxford University Press, 2004; Sunila Kale, *Electrifying India*, Stanford University Press, 2014.) Is the Indian state a homogenous entity as analyzed by scholars surveyed in this volume or, rather, a segmented state riven by competing visions of development and agendas? (Aseema Sinha, *The Regional Roots of Developmental Politics in India: A Divided Leviathan*, Indiana University Press, 2005) The recent regional turn in Indian political science and political economy changes the way we visualize the linkages within the state. This is not a call to move our attention to the local level but to ask how the actions of local actors are shaped by the national structure of incentives as much as by the local variables. These questions, addressed in the writings on subnational variation, suggest the need to expand a subnational analysis to ask: how does subnational structure of power affect the nature of the national political economy? These questions are not addressed in this volume. Overall, this collection of essays gives a good idea of research and writing on the Indian state, from Indian scholars, with some significant gaps in the review of the recent writings on India. New questions worth pursuing in the future are not yet addressed in this otherwise solid and competent collection.

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