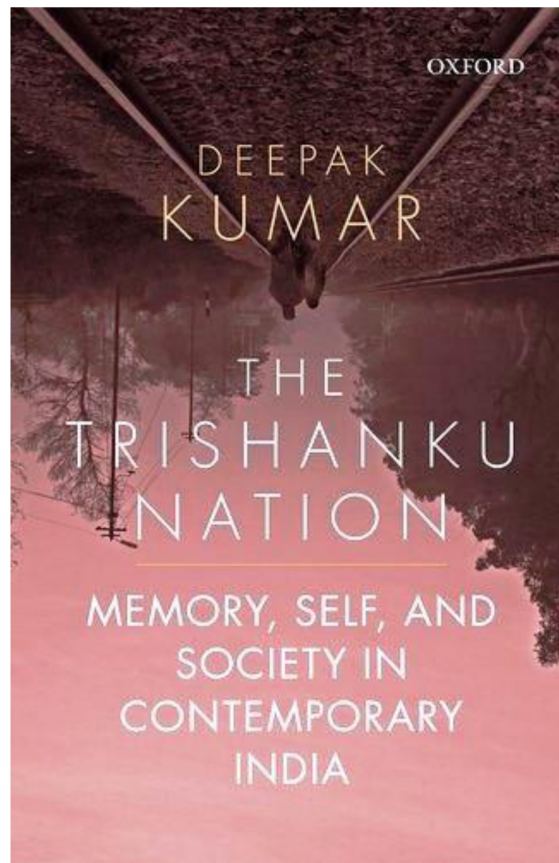


The Trishanku Nation: Memory, Self and Society in Contemporary India



The Trishanku Nation: Memory, Self and Society in Contemporary India,

By

Deepak Kumar; Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2016, paperback, 224 pages, ISBN 9780199461530.

The author presents a vivid canvas of the historical contingencies that outline the post-colonial Indian context in a human-centred manner, which gives history, a flesh, blood and life of its own. This creates a challenge to his account, in terms of ideology and perception. His primary inquiry as to from which factors, the three C's – Corruption, Casteism and Communalism create the limbus partum (limbus) or Purgatorio

(midway between hell and heaven). He begins by acknowledging the naysayers and argues the multidimensional nature and 'suppleness' of contemporary India. The role attributed to politics and religion, particularly the combination is more than apposite, but to link it with culture as a construct appears a bit apologetic than necessary.

His symbol of the mythical King, Trishanku is apt and as the footnote reveals the pursuit of the sacred and the profane in the unique experience of democracy, development and diversity. The fact that the divinity (Lord Ram) was pre-empted by such narcissism and that the obsessive pursuit of unnatural aggrandizement, even corrupted the educated and created a

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variety of intended and unintended consequences. The author comes across as a citizen waiting in absolution (moksha) from this vicious circle, as well as an erudite chronicler of history. This is less paternalist than the sacred and profane complex often cited for this situation. The metaphor of Ahilya as the infidel Brahmanical wife, who waits for “purist” absolution from petrification at the feet of Divinity is another befuddling explanation for this paradox that appears in currency today. His angst comes from the use of intended unnatural prescriptions and the prospect of redeeming the fundamentals of our polity from making these unfavourable impacts, that too in a manner respecting moral agency than fatalism.

His characterization would strike many of today’s generation as the flashback visions of an eminent historian living through these organic experiences and is therefore peculiar and yet extremely interesting. To mistake this for angst and anecdotage alone does injustice to the individual experience in historical accounts – a key feature of contemporary history. This personal journey has been positioned as a matter of popular culture, seen through the endless spectacle of social institutions of kinship, family, sense of belongingness and society, expressed variously in the opening Chapter. This presents a keenly drafted human value-based account of the primary structures and motivations that are often attributed to the lack of progress, as defined by narrowly drafted Western ideology. This is distinct from the various accounts of mofussil towns offered in contemporaneous India, which primarily holds the role of family and social structures as a key barrier to innovation.^[1] This point applies to the broader context of his theme. His use justifies this in relation to the constructs of memory, self and society, he employs to underscore the explanation of institutional and cultural memory and sense of a nation that emerges from that of the individual. This is done through a metaphorical shift from the rural town of Monghyr to the Metropolis, which is a striking theme underlying India’s historical encounter as well (Chapters 1-3). This is what binds history and experience and distinguishes memory and self from angst and denial. The denial of the self has been the classical bane of articulation in our context. This is also particularly the case for his discourse on the rivalry and contradictions between Reason and Religion, Knowledge and Education, Science and Technology. He demonstrates an ambitious prospect unlike members of his generation, generally in confronting these entanglements in Chapters 5-8. He starts by characterizing the polity, as opposed to political economy, which is somewhat more of a favoured construct, to outline our unique context and origins (Chapter 4). He touches on the role of media and how markets and institutions have shaped this trajectory in Chapter 5. The Tectonic shifts outlined reflect well upon our fundamental social trajectories and the impact of external forces in this context. The poignant account of his angst over communalism

and identity as undermining progress and socio-cultural stability, reflects how often getting rid of the idiosyncratic in favour of the rationale is a challenging prospect. Essentially how the constructs of caste and religion impacted the origins of a productive society through the division of labour is well brought out.

The author offers a narrative that is at once engaging and soothing, in times of great violence to interpretations surrounding history and culture, reflects his deep understanding of the Indian milieu. A Key focus is what role these diverse cultural and historical factors imply for institutional analysis in a country’s life. The author briefly touches on how the major historical events that most such accounts offer, affected the interior of India to outline how despite a lot of movement, little has changed and in terms of the role culture and history continues to play in the life of a Nation in various spheres like technology. Admittedly, the veteran is entitled to his momentary lapse into frustration and pessimism, arising from the personal experience to the impersonal analysis of history on the surface. That way all historians must be guilty as charged then as characterizing history in the language of paradoxes.^[2] He at least manages to redeem the prospect of the knowledge economy by making well-meaning observations on the difference between science and technology to outline a more organic trajectory for progress that enmeshes our society, culture and other factors well.

The angst and anecdotage are acknowledged and justified, as regards the social narrative underlying post-colonial contemporary history, which is susceptible to a different criticism that colonial history is not.^[3] However, what is notable is the redemption from “Eurocentrism” evident in the author’s understanding of India, a position which has for long generated despair among alternative histories from the standpoint of the colonized.^[4] He chronicles this colonial hangover as a structural reality of Indian history and how moral agency has been discounted as a result. Additionally, he avoids sounding unduly triumphalist about the past glory. His account on Economic Strategy Making in the form of centralized planning and economic liberalisation and pitfalls of bureaucracy supplies an important research gap.^[5] Though it somewhat grapples with identifying what the context has been- strategic or political. A few areas like development-displacement discourse, social movements were not discussed beyond anecdotes although they shaped the terms of the discussion largely.

The author’s discussion of the impact of colonial history in certain areas, though very broad ranging from education to religion etc. have focused more on how they remain a deliberate paradox (Chapter 4-6). His discussion of idiosyncratic elements forms the highs and lows of this entire Book and the discourse underlying it. In his final Chapter “Whither

India?" he relapses from reflexivity into pessimism and frustration worn down by the years of Excellence and his seeming exasperation at not being able to see things happen, a sentiment shared by many across age groups. He, however, channelizes this angst to a direction that is both well-meaning and constructive. It is for this reason that this Book is eminently readable for scholars intending to see History from a different lens often offered by textbooks and insider accounts and biographies in Contemporary Indian History.

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Reviewed by

Ashish Gosain

Centre for Studies in Science Policy, School of
Social Sciences-1, Jawaharlal Nehru
University, New Delhi – 110067, INDIA.

Email: ashishgosain@gmail.com

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