India and the Breaking Down of Borders: a Comprehensive Review of Texts, Religions, and Social Institutions

Revolving Around India(s): Alternative Images, Emerging Perspectives edited by Juan Ignacio Oliva-Cruz, Antonia Navarro-Tejero and Jorge Diego Sánchez, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2020, 298 pp., $64,99 (hardcover), ISBN (10): 1-5275-4524-5, ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4524-3.

No other country in the world embraces the extraordinary mixture of ethnic groups, the profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, the varieties of topography and climate, the diversity of religious cultural practices, and the range of levels of economic development that India does. Shashi Tharoor, 2007.1

In spite of the dictums of the nativist discourse, plurality is a concept endemic to Indian society. The country could be said to be a nation of nations. With a long history of empires and regional kingdoms, contemporary India comprises peoples of Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, and Zoroastrian religion among others within its almost a billion and a half inhabitants. Although there are 22 official languages, 122 are actually listed in the census2. With a system of ‘caste-based exclusion’ and tribes also being in a vulnerable position3, Rochana Bajpai contends that in India ‘hardly any group […] lacks a claim to minority status’4. Taking this state of affairs into consideration, the editors of *Revolving Around India(s): Alternative Images, Emerging Perspectives* have focused on the dissonance between tradition and newness, and their present coexistence for putting this volume together. They have organised their articles around three different concepts or, as the editors express it in the Foreword, ‘Indian idiosyncrasies’ (p. 1): tradition(s), distance(s), and difference(s). This choice reflects the great influence these concepts have had in the shaping of national identities. Hence, the attempted deconstruction of these concepts by the volume’s contributors can be said to engage in a broader sense with the demystification of nativist attitudes towards culture.

The first section – Revolving Around Tradition(s) – is composed of seven chapters, all of them challenging the single narrative of Indian religions, institutions, and canonical texts. The authors explore how literary texts and institutions have been subject to changes over time without seeing their value or authenticity diminished, as Chapter 4 – ‘Subjugated Knowledges, Emergent Voices: Rereading Indian Epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in Contemporary India’ by Meenakshi Malhotra shows by exploring different versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* . As such, the section denotes a poststructuralist approach as it reaffirms the continuous and inevitable transformation of meaning which any text or concept is prone to, not only when it is subject to deterritorialisation but because of its own condition as cultural product. In this sense, the last chapter (Chapter 7) of the section, ‘Bollywoodizing Brontë: Tamasha’s *Wuthering Heights*’written by Laura Viñas Valle and Blanca M. Lara González, states that “[t]here are, have been, and will be other Indias far away from India (let alone within)” (71) shaped, in this case, by the hybridising force of migration which does not only transform the migrant but the receiving culture as well. This sentence summarises the aim of the contributors to this section: to show a more heterogenous vision of what already seems a quite homogenous institution, thus debunking the binary categories which served the colonising enterprise: black or white, civilised or native.

Connecting with the centrality of migration in Viñas Valle’s and Lara González’s article, the second section of this volume, Revolving around Distance(s), focuses on the Indian diaspora, one of the largest and most plural in the world. Chapter 14 by Felicity Hand – “Mapping Indianness in Mauritius” – locates the beginnings of this phenomenon to colonial domination by the English, when Indian manpower was used as cheap indentured labour. Furthermore, some Indian societies also find their origin in historical diasporic migrations, as is the case of the Parsees. Chapter 9, written by María Jesús Llarena Ascanio, analyses the literary representation of double diaspora in the works of Indo-Canadian Parsee author Rohinton Mistry (‘Other Indias as a Third Space in Canada’s Aging Anxiety and Bodily Corruption in Rohinton Mistry’s Work’). In contemporary times, tens of thousands of Indian migrants live in the diaspora due to events and phenomena such as Indian partition, decolonisation, the failures of modern democracy, and, in broad terms, globalisation. The concept of an Indian diaspora in turn transcends the nativist belief that the nation is linked to territory5. Thus, narratives of diaspora which tackle the issue of belonging carry more weight than it seems at first sight, as explained in Chapter 12 written by Bandana Chakrabarty, who explores the trauma derived from the 1947 Partition and the diasporic mobility it triggered in the analysis of a selection of short stories. In short, while most definitely being affected by them and their cruel practices, diasporic authors and individuals destabilise the very notions of the nation, nationality, and the state.

Finally, the third section of the book tackles the question of difference, aiming at artists who are usually excluded by the canon. The various Others who protagonise the literary texts explored in this section include post-colonial, gendered and racialised subjects as well as religious minorities. While it has been stated that ‘Differences have been the hallmark of Indian society’6, outside the subcontinent these differences seem more compelling as they are used for identifying the Indian migrant as not belonging in the receiving nation (most often the United Kingdom, Canada or the United States). While Otherness in terms of gender and social class has been a class-shaping force in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial India, migrants directly have to face the hostility of being a perpetual Other in a strange land, an experience marked by a neo-colonial regime of hospitality. As a pertinent way of opening this section, Mª Luz González’s and Juan Ignacio Oliva’s chapter – ‘‘Cultural Schizophrenia’ in Some Diasporic Indian Women Writers, and Their Quest for Unity’– explores the postcolonial consciousness. This is often expressed in the form of cultural schizophrenia: “the necessity of negotiating between self and culture” (p. 198). This transition from being an alien in one’s own land to being a stranger in an alien land informs this section’s seven contributions. As such, the racial, sexual, and gendered difference that its protagonists embody not only becomes the shaping force in their artistic representations of alienation and suffering, but more importantly also a valuable border-transgressing tool that carries the power to transform society. In this way Jorge Diego Sánchez’s contribution concludes the volume with his analysis of the work of Meena Kandasamy, who he considers an authorial “radical voice” who “can change the world and make India imagine different versions of its current politically corrupt state of affairs” (p. 285).

In conclusion, the title of this volume reflects the heterogeneous and diverse topics that it tackles. The connotations of the phrasal verb “to revolve around” imply that it is impossible to define Indian culture through a single focus of analysis. The mobility that is associated with the semantics of the verb itself instantly dispels notions of nativism or nationalism. The book states that Indianness has never been and will never be a fixed entity: it travels and transforms in enriching and subversive ways so that plurality, which has always been characteristic of the region, becomes an influential force for those who come into contact with the Indian way. Such is the philosophy that this volume and its contributions, complementing one another, seem to denote: an openness to transformation and fluidity which makes the world a less hostile place.

Notes:

1. Shashi Tharoor, *India From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2007, p. 7.
2. Rochana Bajpai, ‘Why did India Choose Pluralism?: Lessons from a Postcolonial State’ [web], 2017. Available at: https://www.pluralism.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/India\_EN.pdf; Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, *Religions of India: an Introduction*,London and New York: Routledge, 2018.
3. Dar-Erik Berg, *Dynamics of Caste and Law: Dalits, Oppression, and Constitutional Democracy in India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020; Virginius Xaxa, ‘Politics of Language, Religion, Tribe and Identity: Tribes in India’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40, 2005, pp. 1363-1370.
4. Bajpai, ‘Why did India Choose Pluralism?: Lessons from a Postcolonial State’, 2017.
5. Parvati Raghuram, Ajaya Kumar Sahoo, Brij Maharaj, and Dave Sangha, ‘Foreword’, in Parvati Raghuram, Ajaya Kumar Sahoo, Brij Maharaj, and Dave Sangha (eds), *Tracing and Indian Diaspora: Contexts, Memories, Representations*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore: Sage Publications, 2008, pp. xii-xiii.
6. Xaxa, ‘Politics of Language, Religion, Tribe and Identity: Tribes in India’, p. 1363.