

## Book Reviews

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### **Debnarayan Modak, *Contemporary India: State Formation and Political Process*, Netaji Subhas Open University, 2015, pp. 1-271**

The present work of Debnarayan Modak titled *Contemporary India: State Formation and Political Process* is a significant contribution in such a theme which has been attracting the attention of the historians, political scientists and sociologists for a long time not only in India but also in the academic world of both sides of Atlantic. Indeed 'state formation' and 'political process' are twin complementary aspects of the recent researches of social sciences. The present book is an attempt to understand the complex development of contemporary India through the mirror of state formation and political process.

Professor Modak has divided his book in three sections. The Section I is consisted of four papers primarily concerned with the remapping of post-colonial India. In these papers, the author primarily tries to identify one of the fundamental elements of the state formation in India after independence. In his explanation, movements for linguistic states were the key aspect of contemporary India. In fact, the growing movements for states on the basis of linguistic identity in post-colonial era posed new challenges before the ruling authority. The author rightly points out that colonial state was completely indifferent towards the question of any kind of popular aspiration of the subjugated population of India as its only interest was to protect the imperial interest of the British Raj. However, it was difficult for the post-colonial state to ignore the peoples' movement completely; the basic reason is that democracy was the key constitutive element of the political system in India after independence. It opened up in the Indian context numerous possibilities of the growth of agitation, movements, negotiations, dialogues, debates, conversation, and even violent unrest at the popular level. It must be mentioned that most of the researches in these subjects generally highlighted either the legitimizing aspects of the Indian democracy or put emphasis on the 'fragments' of the *nation's life*. The present work ventures to go beyond these two predominant

models and relocates the political aspects of protest and unrest in the wider perspectives of juxtaposition and tension between centre and margin, privileged and masses, old dominance and new aspiration, national interest and regional identity. Another very important point in Professor Modak's analysis is that he underlines the viewpoints of the communist party regarding state formation.

In Section II, the author analyses the various aspects of the demand for autonomy and statehood in North-East India. In conventional researches, the north eastern India is generally placed in the trajectory of rebellion. The general analysis on the relationships between Indian state and the north east is dominated by the Delhi centric outlook. Here the present author also ably breaks the stereotyped approaches of *unquestionable legitimacy of the Indian State*. He also in the Section II pays adequate attention towards the left and the communist perspectives in the understanding of the 'North East Questions' in the Indian political syndrome. Professor Modak also points out the role of emerging middle class in the north eastern states in sharpening the question of statehood and autonomy. It could be considered as a significant contribution as most of the researches would pay attention only to the tribal and ethnic identity behind any movement in this region.

In comparing with the Section I and Section II, the Section III lacks comprehensive nature. It includes four papers on four different themes, namely, coalition politics, Sacher Committee, women empowerment and gender budgeting, and capacity building of panchayati raj institutions in West Bengal. However, as the author contextualizes these heterogeneous themes in the perspectives of the left politics, it gets an altered flavor. In this section, Professor Modak makes an elaborate analysis of the development of coalition of politics in India and the role of the left forces (especially the communist parties) in it. The merit of his analysis is that he historicizes the development of coalition politics

in the country mentioning the functioning of Muslim League Ministry with members of Hindu Scheduled Caste Communities and two members from Indian National Congress on April 24, 1943. It proves that the development of coalition politics in post-colonial India particularly since the last half of 1960s was not new. One may also note that the growing crisis in the political economy of the country contributed to the erosion of the so-called 'one party system' and its dominance steadily both at centre and the regions during 1960s. One can also argue that the decades of 1960s started witnessing the true essence of the working of a multi-party democratic system in India. In analyzing this remarkable change in the Indian politics, the present work under review not only highlights the role of the communist parties (both CPI and CPI-M), but also analyzes the critical difference between CPI and CPI-M in this regard. In this context, the readers may ask the question about the positive influence of the left politics both at national level and regional level. The striking difference is noteworthy. While the coalition politics in West Bengal provided stability in the state to a large extent, the political stability was not so concrete at the national level politics during the first UPA regime. One of the basic reason is that Left Front Government in West Bengal (1977 – 2011) was dominated by the CPI-M; the other left parties including CPI played comparatively marginal role though they were part of the coalition government. It is difficult to deny that the CPI-M's unprecedented hegemony stabilized the left politics and coalition government significantly in the state. At the national level coalition politics, the situation was little bit different. Though the Congress-led First UPA Government was dependent on the lefts for their support, it was not a left coalition; rather it was a bourgeois democratic government functioned through *uneasy understanding* of the Congress and the left. Another interesting point is that the Left Front Government in West Bengal was more cohesive in terms of both ideological orientation and economic policies; the Congress-led UPA Government did not have this cohesiveness for obvious reasons. These intricate complexities have been analyzed in Professor Modak's work in an elaborate manner.

In this book, Professor Modak has made a significant understanding regarding the so-called 'Muslim Question', Sachar Committee and the Indian lefts.

He rightly points out the uncomfortable position of the Indian communist and the left parties, especially the CPI -M. The CPI-M was held responsible for the miserable condition of the Muslim community in the left -ruled states because of the simple fact that CPI-M was the largest party in the left government. The author also points out that the CPI or the CPI-M failed to organize the Indian Muslims politically though the majority of the Muslims lived under poverty line.

Two other essays need to be mentioned in this context. These two essays of Professor Modak are related to gender budgeting and capacity building through panchayati raj institution. Apparently these two essays are related to two different subjects, but one could make effort to understand these themes as institutional mechanism for empowerment and capacity enhancement. These questions, as argued by the author, are related to specific politics in a given condition of social formation. Most of the essays regarding gender budgeting, empowerment and capacity building suffer from narrow technical approaches. The present essays are exceptions.

In conclusion of this review, we may make some points. First, the readers would have been more enriched if the dalit question and right wing politics in the post-colonial Indian democracy were analyzed. It would also not be unfair if we expect a review of the Maoist uprising in the vast plain of central India in recent days from Professor Modak. The author makes a self-imposed limitation in this regard: he has brought the so-called 'constitutional lefts' in his analysis in great detail. However, he makes no reference to the interpretations offered by those leftist groups who stood beyond the parliamentary democracy regarding state formation. Secondly Professor Modak tries to identify the process of state formation and its constitutive elements in his analysis. His analysis would have benefited the readers in general and the younger scholars in particular more if he had contributed an introductory essay reviewing the existing literature on the post-colonial democracy and state formation in India in the volume. Thirdly the present work would have been neater if the author had followed a uniform pattern of referencing and style sheet. However, it is undoubtedly a major contribution in the subject. The friends and colleagues of Professor Modak now start expecting a monograph from his pen on the similar subject after reading the present one.