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UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY INDIA, 2ND EDITION

NEIL DeVOTTA, EDITOR

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Reviewed by Christopher Shaw

Professors in the evolving field of global and area studies continuously confront the challenge of “coverage.” What might a course on the Indian subcontinent, for example, responsibly omit? If the focus is on political and economic challenges, to what extent does the teacher examine modern versus ancient history? Refer to trade patterns versus regional diplomacy? Refer to the arts or local culture? Every world region merits examination in its full complexity, but the reality of a ten- to fifteen-week course demands a pitiless commitment to omission.

A recent addition to the *Understanding: Introductions to the States and Regions of the Contemporary World* series edited by Donald Gordon for Rienner Publishers, like the series’ other volumes on China, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Africa, Russia, Latin America, and the Asia Pacific, seeks to omit nothing. In this second India edition, Neil DeVotta, a political scientist at Wake Forest University, has edited and expanded the first edition, published with co-editor Sumit Ganguly in 2003. The new version (2010) debuts five chapters by DeVotta and others, which take their place alongside seven updated essays and strive, slavishly, to cover all bases necessary and sufficient to understanding contemporary India. This “topical survey” examines India’s geography, history, democracy, international relations, economy, environment, women, religions, caste system, and arts. None of the chapters effectively refers to any other; they exist as stand-alone nods to all academic departments that might lay a claim to India.

Some of the essays in this collection flow gracefully between description and analysis. Christophe Jaffrelot’s engaging chapter on caste, for example, does not attempt to summarize the history and function of caste, but instead highlights its changing nature and function in Indian politics. Joffrelot documents the competition among Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Minority Communities, the emergence of quotas, and the leadership of Dalits like Kanshi Ram, whose father had “benefitted from the military jobs that the British reserved for Untouchables” and who rose himself from an assistant chemist to

become a national labor organizer and social activist. (258) Ram, a coalition builder, created BAMCEF (the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation) in the 1970s, the DS-4 (Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Somiti) Committee in the 1980s, and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) which by 2009 commanded 27 percent of votes in Uttar Pradesh. Jaffrelot's analytical expertise, developed over years as a Senior Research Fellow and Director of CERI, the Centre d'Etudes Relations Internationales in Paris, sheds needed light on an old question.

In contrast, other chapters read as packed summaries of a given topic. Holly Sims' heroic attempt to describe India's environmental challenge through three conceptual lenses—population, poverty, and technology—reads like an eloquent entry in an encyclopedia. Sims, a professor at SUNY Albany, admits herself that her analysis “oversimplifies reality;” in so doing, it remains too ambitious and broad to be of use to students of social, economic, or natural resource policy. Far more turgid and impenetrable is Shalendra Sharma's essay on Indian politics. A professor at the University of San Francisco, Sharma documents in detail the structure and history of India's political machine, the sheer size and complexity of which overwhelm his stated aim to reconcile the “paradox of democratic resilience and relatively ineffective governance in India.” (68) Rather than documenting sixty-four years of political history, an article on Indian politics might more usefully have explored the tensions between the nationalistic, xenophobic factions of the BJP with the neo-liberalist globalism of the corporate elite.

Clearly, however, this was not Sharma's task. Indeed, each author was asked to cover a topic, omit little (to quell the critics of exclusion), and therein create a primer on modern India. The result is a solid, stolid desk reference of variable utility and quality on everything Indian. The astounding paucity and poor rendering of photographs throughout—in grainy grays and whites—underscores the mediocrity of this collection, which is an adequate enough addition to the library shelf, but hardly an appropriate centerpiece for a study of modern India. DeVotta has accomplished his goal; the fault ultimately lies less in the execution than in the conception of such a project.

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