

BOOK REVIEW

ROUTRAY, SAILEN , *Everyday State and Politics in India: Government in the Backyard in Kalahandi*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019, 138pp., £36.99 (paperback). ISBN: 9780367887254

The state in relation to society in India has largely been studied from the lens of political science and political theory. Sailem Routray's *Everyday State and Politics in India: Government in the Backyard in Kalahandi* offers alternative understanding of state-society relations without taking the usual recourse to dominant politicist perspectives as implied in the works of scholars of the post-colonial Indian state. This book is the product of an ethnographic study of a micro-watershed development project in Kalahandi in southwest Odisha, a district disreputably branded as Somalia or Ethiopia of India for its persistent droughts and acute level of poverty and backwardness. Viewing the emergence of such participatory mission-mode based development projects since the 1980s as a critical stage in the evolution of Indian state, the book tries to analyse the subtle utterances of the new forms of developmental statecraft.

The Gramscian passive revolution framing of the making of the Indian state by Sudipta Kaviraj and the extension of passive revolution thesis into the political society framework by Partha Chatterjee are the grounds that the book tries to problematise anthropologically. Routray argues that these pioneering accounts in Indian political theory, although claimed to be addressing the third-world political realities, often emulate the grand abstraction and the high-scale explanation of the theories of western provenance. They do not explain the myriad articulations of the workings of the state in marginal spaces like Kalahandi. Besides, people's culturally rooted rationalities of perceiving and deliberating the state cannot be made legible with such normative theoretical prescriptions. Hence, to make his book's purpose obvious, he emphatically asks that-"If the dominant way of perceiving and experiencing the state in the non-west does not follow the templates set in the west, is there a generic non-western way of articulation of politics and the political?" (p.31).

The book is divided into six chapters with ample anecdotes of everydayness, as any good ethnographic writing must contain. Throughout the book, the use of metaphorical phrases to make uncomplicated analysis out of intricate observations is what gives the impression of a captivating prose. Chapter 1 introduces Kalahandi's grim socio-historical moorings and reviews its discursive framings found in different registers. The author takes an archival detour to the 1980s when the representation of Kalahandi as a geography of hunger emerged in the narratives of academics, poets, journalists, and datasheets of government and non-government organisations; and it is the time when "state started seeping through" (p.103) the capillaries of Kalahandi. This throwback would surely help the readers visualise a detailed sketch of the realities that necessitated the state intervention in Kalahandi.

Chapter 2 proceeds with a set of tales from field to illuminate the idiosyncrasies with regard to the functioning of the developmental state and the shifting perceptions about the state's disciplinary action, and its deterministic effect on people's shared morality. The tales also make visible the vernacular pathways through which the developmental

programmes are twisted and refashioned locally in agreement with the local cultural concepts and categories. Another interesting theme is how the various actors of the local state can subvert the imperatives of transparent conduct- a statist virtue. According to the author, although the kind of events described by scholars from the passive revolution school and the events from Kalahandi are more or less similar, they do not subscribe to and describe any singular social reality. The developmental state in Kalahandi is not founded on the politics of class coalitions and hegemony, as the passive revolution thesis assumes. In contrast, the author suggests the 1980s as a distinct temporal window for interpreting the state, i.e. to shift the focus from “state formation” to “state fabrication”. Routray employs Judith Butler’s idea of “gender fabrication” as a parallel analytical lens to look at Indian state as continuously “being fabricated” through its performativity and not as “being formed” at decolonisation as a fixed ontological entity. The mission-mode project in Kalahandi is one such archetype of fabrication wherein the state had morphed its character from a regime of “symbolic” mode of operation at a distance to a regime of direct engagement within the quotidian sphere of social life.

Chapter 3 discusses the practical modalities through which the state has morphed its character on ground and infused into uncharted spaces. It elaborates on the five interrelated “tactics” of state fabrication in Kalahandi, such as “multiplication” of the points of contact via new types of institutions like SHGs; “expansion” through NGOisation of welfare delivery; “pluralisation” of logic of legitimate intervention through technologies like participatory governance and categorical targeting of beneficiaries; “provisionalisation” of operation in the form of rented office buildings, contractual recruitment; and “textualisation” of governance through extensive documentation and auditing.

In chapter 4, the everyday function of the developmental state in Kalahandi is discussed with case narratives of project meetings between government and NGO functionaries. The meeting events reveal that the bureaucratic hierarchy as regularly seen in the organisational culture of the state is replaced by an “overall culture of informality” (p.68) at workplace- a contingent feature arising out of the tactic of converging the government apparatus with that of NGOs. The chapter offers a stimulating discussion on the mushrooming of institutions like watershed committees and user groups representing the “quotidian logistics of state-fabrication” (77) and facilitating further entrenchment of state power. However, regarding the effects of state fabrication the author does not agree with James Ferguson’s post-development critique of development as a machine of depoliticisation of society. Instead, he contends, “one needs to reframe politics and how it is cognised in the local ethical world such as that of Kalahandi” (p.105). In other words, the counter-tactics used by the subaltern actors to make their claims, for example the vernacular concept of “*bhag*” (an ethical register against elite-capture of public welfare services), or the trick of “*lukiba*” (a deceptive practice among project staffs to hide from the burden of accountability) testify against the dominant narrative of developmental governmentality. These anecdotes of transactional dealings with the state in Kalahandi, the author opines, concur with the famous “weapons of the weak” argument of James Scott.

Chapter 5 dwells on the idea of “*toutary*”- a vernacular conceptual lens to make sense of the state in Kalahandi. *Toutary* reflects the political ramifications of developmental statecraft while there is increasing presence of political touts and brokers within the state’s service delivery system. Author’s diagnosis of the phenomenon of *toutary* is made beyond corruption, rather it is seen as a vernacular domain of politics that emerged out of social perception of state action. Also, the chapter offers an interesting account of the folk narratives

on the overpowering influence of touts on the magico-religious domains of society and this, the author argues, “provides a space for an ethical critique of emergent forms of state fabrication and governmental action as well” (p.79). The final chapter collates the theoretical takeaways of each chapter.

Methodologically, the book demonstrates the strength of multi-sited ethnography on puzzling entities like the state and bureaucracy, which has always been a challenging terrain in social science research. The book proves that understanding the complex interfaces between state and society lies in ethnographic possibilities across societies and cultures, not in the static models of political theory. It also argues against the overreliance on historical method, which has failed to grapple with the state’s contingent transmutations vis-à-vis emerging milieus of decentralised statecraft like rural livelihood, natural resource management, micro-credit, health and sanitation. The author presents numerous case studies and life histories of villagers, local politicians, NGO workers, and government functionaries to make his arguments well illustrative. The use of participant observation for witnessing people’s quotidian interactions with the state is compelling and encouraging. However, author’s positional qualifications behind such participatory observations of governmental affairs and easy access to bureaucratic circles is not talked about.

Routray’s book has tried to bring the state back again as a new subject of study in conjunction with the contingent processes of development. However, the book does not shed any light on social cleavages like caste or gender, which could have been done through a discussion on the village social structure. This would perhaps bring to light more layering to the counter-cases. Nevertheless, the book is an evocation to give serious attention to situated experiences of state-society relations from diverse third-world geographies and “not to reduce the narratives of these experiences to being mere variations of a global master narrative” (p.107). The book is a valuable addition to the existing literature on “everyday state” while instilling hope for open-ended theoretical engagement with ethnographic reality from Kalahandi or elsewhere. It is a relevant text for students and researchers of social anthropology, development studies and political science wanting to explore the state beyond formal politics.

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Indian Institute of Technology Bombay.

PRADYUMNA BEHERA

MORE, S. *Memoirs of a Dalit Communist: The Many Worlds of RB More*, edited by Anupama Rao, translated by Wandana Sonalkar. 2020. New Delhi, LeftWord Books, 293 pp., Rs. 450 (paperback), ISBN 978-81-940778-0-0.

Ramchandra Babaji More’s incomplete project, *Memoirs of a Dalit Communist*, is a combination style of autobiography edited by Anupama Rao and translated from Marathi to English by Wandana Sonalkar. RBM died before completing his memoir. He could only write about his then-life till 1927. As a result, even after reading the compiled-autobiography, readers are unaware of many aspects of his life. Satyendra More, his son, has augmented the text even more by incorporating substantial-aids from his father’s repository or collection, such as letters, photographs, and book covers. While R.B More’s grandson Subodh More painstakingly compiled all of these into a cohesive manuscript featuring three generations of endeavor in introducing to its readers a guidebook of Dalit political movements and Labor Union framework in the lives of activists and urban assembly line workers alike; further

elucidating Maharashtra's politics at the time.

The book is organized around three major themes: the first section RBM's quest for school admission, in which he highlighted how school administration discriminates against Dalit children and how he was prevented from participating in learning. He was resolved to pursue his ambitions, and he submitted letters to the colonial authorities, which were widely publicized. As a result, the early phases of communal consciousness and assertiveness are apparent in his life-history. The second section explored the supposed and empirical situation of Dalits in the military, including his active participation in the Mahad Satyagraha. RBM claimed to have urged Ambedkar to attend the Mahad convention. While the third segment described RBM's decision to join the communist revolution, he contends that the greatest hindrance to class consciousness is caste consciousness, and he pushes the Party to prioritize the fight against caste.

This book failed to expound on RBM's admission into the Communist movement and ignored the issues that developed during the Bombay strikes of 1928 and 1929. There is also no mention of RBM's internal party conflict in the memoir. RBM's caste differences with the Communist leadership, as well as his endorsement for Ambedkar's anti-caste movement, inhibited his advancement inside the party. Many of the book's arguments are debatable; those familiar with Dalit politics and Ambedkar's works would be able to reflect more clearly. Further, the prefatory comments of Prabhakar Sanzgiri, a CPI-M committee member, has also been omitted from the English version. Sanzgiri notes that, until the 1980s, Communist Party study sessions did not contain caste or religion issues, both of which have gained significance in Indian politics lately.

Overall, this book concentrated on the subcontinent's convoluted past, which included marginal identities and battles that were continually concealed in order to minimize the potential of alternatives to society's authoritarian status quo. It is a significant autobiographical novel that interweaves three generations of family history, political debate, and social interaction among Bombay's urban industrial workers. The lucid wording and composition make it an excellent read in the Dalit-autobiography category for all readers.

Research Scholar,
Centre for the Study of Social Systems,
School of Social Sciences,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

KANCHAN BISWAS



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