

Review

Diana Dimitrova and Thomas de Bruijn (eds.), *Imagining Indianness: cultural identity and literature*. Gewerbestrasse, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. xvi + 166. Price: \$84.99. ISBN 978-3-319-41015-9

NARASINGHA P. SIL
Western Oregon University

This is undoubtedly an excellent Sammlung but with serious shortcomings and thus calls for celebration as well as circumspection. The rigorously researched and deftly written nine chapters have successfully highlighted the fluid, flexible, even evanescent, concept of Indianness that is far from a fixed and unified identity of the inhabitants of the ‘Republic of India’ or ‘Bhārat’ (‘Bhāratavarṣa’). As the Introduction has it: “‘Indianness’ denotes a particular cultural identity that is inherent to India and can only be understood against the background of the plurality of India’s languages, myths, religions and literatures...the ways Indians ‘imagine “Indianness”’ (2).

However, the editor’s contention that ‘hindutva is a secular notion that understands Hinduism as a cultural and political unifying reality in modern India rather than a religious concept of “Hindu Dharma”’ (2) is somewhat problematic. Secularism stands for ‘freedom of religious practice to every individual and

community equally in a multireligious polity’ (Needham and Rajan 2007). Hindutva incorporates the idea of ‘Hindu Dharma’ though its definition as provided in the Introduction has been perverted as fanaticism or politicised as fundamentalism since the rise of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) and the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in Indian politics.

All the chapters deal with the contemporary concept of Indianness through literary critiques of their select writers in their preferred language. These literati are the inhabitants of India, their literary mediums are Indian, yet these do not, by themselves, represent the entire subcontinent. Arguably, Hindi has been the official (never national) language of postcolonial India but none of the contributors seem to be cognizant of the violent history of the language riot that followed in the wake of the more violent communal riots erupting in the fledgling nation. Satchidanandan’s essay (15-34), while emphasizing cultural pluralism,

hardly deserves a claim to represent India as a whole. On the other hand, Harder's contribution (35-53) is self-consciously an exercise though a critical analysis of the literary scholar Jaidev's concept of *pastische* to describe "Indianness" in the Hindi work of the prize-winning author Nirmal Varma (1929-2005). Most important, Herder's explanation of 'Indian' and 'Indianness' is unquestionably clear, simple (sans jargons), and illuminating.

Schokker's essay (111-30) examines the work of the Vrindavan scholar Kishorilal Goswami (1862-1932) that brings out he uncluttered and unabashedly traditional Hindu template of Indianness in the persona of princess Indumati. This occurs against the background of Islamic India's transition from the rule of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526) to that of the Mughal dynasty begun by Zahir-uddin Muhammad Babur (r. 1526-30) following the latter's victory over the reigning Sultan Ibrahim Lodi (r. 1517-26). De Bruijn's interesting discussion of postcolonial India's New Narrative [*Nayi Kahānī*] movement in Hindi literature and its distinguished exponent Kamalashvar shows how it formulated ideas of Indianness in literature highlighting the idealized traditional moral values as well as the living reality of the present without stereotyping different communities or cultures (55-75).

There are some problems with the entire research project. The book's very title is misleading at best. Its subtitle ought to have been 'A Case Study of Hindi Literature in Postcolonial India.' The book is intended to be a discourse on 'Indianness' or *Bhāratīyatā* (the authors use the colloquial Hindi orthography 'Bhāratīyā'). Actually, 'Indian' and 'Bhāratīya' are two different words. Did the folks of precolonial times identify themselves as

Bhāratīya? If they did, they probably considered themselves as belonging to Hindustan, though a vast majority of them identified themselves, as did their European counterparts during the Middle Ages or earlier, with their regional identity. Dimitrova's anthology concentrates on the so-called cow belt of Hindi speaking Hindu India, overlooking the region that first felt the impact of an alien culture deeply and directly.

The Introduction should have provided a succinct historical account of the region of the Mughal Empire where the British commerce and culture—merchants, military, and missionaries—made their maiden contact, that is, Bengal (see Sil 2017, 29-53). The consciousness of being an Indian historically is imbricated with the coming in of modernity in early colonial Calcutta. The genteel folks of the city—*bhadralok bābus*—expressed their identity as "Indian" in respect of the colonizers' language and culture. As a concerned *bhadralok* of the city wrote:

With the Englishman's genius we cannot combine to produce a literature of our own, revive indigenous arts, extend native commerce, and develop [sic] a national politics that could be understood by the humblest man...and so we end in being trousered patriots, tittle-tattling in English, fancying we can carry everything before us by talk (cited in McCulley 1966/1940, 225).

A most succinct consciousness of acute Indian identity was expressed, ironically, by one of the most anglicized Indians, Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-1873). Datta reportedly, 'likened Hinduism to a rotten tree trunk, which has to be cut' but admitted unabashedly in his response to the charge of

extreme Anglicism that any possibility of his becoming a sāheb had been precluded by providence as he was not even a pure Bengali but a rustic bāñāl [a mildly pejorative term designating a Bengalee from eastern Bengal] from Jessore [Yaśohar] (cited in Chakrabarti 1997, 40).

Nevertheless, ironically but arguably, the colonizers' tongue still continues to resonate with the sense of a pan-Indian identity—Indianness. As Srinivasa Iyengar observes,

even after decolonization, its identification with politics and culture at the pan-Indian level prompted nationalist scholars to look upon Indian Writing in English as the instrument 'to promote an all-India consciousness' and a 'national identity' (Iyengar 1962, 699).

Even a distinguished professor of Hindi at the Banaras Hindu University admitted: 'If truth be told, it is [the] Indian writers in English alone who are representative writer of Indian literature; the literature of any other Indian language such as Hindi, Bengali or Tamil must remain regional literature' (Singh 1992, 150).

References

- Chakrabarti, Manotosh (1997), *Hindu kolej o uniś śataker bāñālā Samāj*. Kalikātā: Subarṇarekhā.
- Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa (1962), *Indian writing in english*. New Delhi: Asia Publishing House.
- McCully, Bruce T. (1966/1940), *English education and the origins of Indian nationalism*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith
- Mitra, Rajendralal (1892), *Speeches by Raja Rajendralal Mitra*. Calcutta: S.K. Lahiri & Co.
- Mund, Shubhendu (2002), 'Indianness: problematizing the Indian english novelist's identity' in Mittapalli Rajeshwar and

Christopher Rollason (eds.) (2002), *Modern criticism*. Chennai: Atlantic, 173-86.

Needham, Anuradha and Rajeswari Sundar Rajan (2007), *The crisis of secularism in India*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Sil, Narasingha P. (2017), *Problem child of renaissance bengal: The bābu of colonial Calcutta*. Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi & Company.

Singh, Namvar 1992, 'Decolonising the Indian Mind.' *Trans. Harish Trivedi, Indian literature*, XXXV, 5 (September-October): 145-56.

About the reviewer

Dr Narasingha P. Sil was educated at the University of Calcutta, India and the University of Oregon, USA. He published extensively in the history and culture of Early Modern Europe and ancient and colonial South Asia (including some in postcolonial Africa) in scholarly presses and journals around the globe. He retired from Western Oregon University in 2011 as Professor Emeritus in History.