Shruti Kapila. *Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age*

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REFERENCES

Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age makes a commendable attempt at developing a fresh perspective on the history and evolution of political thinking on the subcontinent as the leading figures of our national awakening grappled with the yoke of British imperialism on the one hand, and tried to address the issues afflicting their society on the other. Kapila’s focus is on leaders such as B. G. Tilak, M. K. Gandhi, V. D. Savarkar, B. R. Ambedkar, Muhammad Iqbal, and Vallabhbhai Patel whose actions and thinking had a lasting influence on the course of the freedom struggle. The time frame for analysis is 1908–1947. For Kapila, these leaders were all primarily “political actors” who in the course of their struggles innovated and invented a political vocabulary and a language that signaled a radical departure from the traditions of Western political thinking. Transfiguring “these figures’ role into that of thinkers” (p. 11) and with a focus on the “power of ideas” (p. 3), Kapila investigates the role of violence in the political transformation that resulted in the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of the independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Besides seminal books and texts that Tilak, Gandhi, Savarkar, Ambedkar, and Iqbal wrote, which have been the subject of interpretation and analysis in conventional approaches, Kapila’s sources include private papers, pamphlets, letters, and speeches from historical archives. Thus, Kapila examines the pamphlets of the Ghadar movement and Abhinav Bharat (Young India), letters written by Lala Har Dayal, Gandhi, Iqbal, and Patel, and speeches that Tilak, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Iqbal, and Patel delivered on important occasions. This is accompanied by ruminations over the universal questions of violence, fraternity, and sovereignty as the author historically contextualizes the acts, practices, and ideas that the Indian nationalist leaders employed in their struggle against foreign rule. In a radical departure from established traditions of studying the development of political ideas in modern India, Kapila seeks to understand the moving force behind political transformation leading to the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of two sovereign states in terms of these leaders’ alleged concerns with intimacy and enmity in their thinking, acts, and writings. This moving force Kapila terms “fraternal violence,” which yields the analogous concept of “violent fraternity.” The twin concepts of “violent fraternity” and “fraternal violence” are central to understanding the author’s expositions throughout the book.

According to political scientist, Mahendra Prasad Singh, the history of political thought deals with three kinds of element: “ideas and concepts in general, thought of individual thinkers, and political ideologies and movements” (Singh and Roy 2011: xii). While making several departures from conventional understanding, the book deals with all
three elements; it also gives thought to contemporary and futuristic concerns and questions such as the nature of fraternity and democracy in Indian society, and the continuing legacy of the founding fathers of the Indian republic.

The author makes the following four key arguments:

1) The fundamental question of violence preoccupied the leaders who laid the political foundations of modern India “not excluding the apostle of non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi” (p. 4). Tilak’s commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, Savarkar’s exposition of Hindutva, Gandhian cult of non-violence and Satyagraha, Ambedkar’s Annihilation of Caste, and Iqbal’s advocacy of republicanism, thus Kapila argues, all essentially dealt with the fundamental political question of violence. To quote her further: “The book foregrounds the question of killing and dying as articulated and understood by modern Indian canonical—even ‘father’—figures” (p. 4).

2) Enmity and violence need to be seen as an aspect of intimacy. Thus, according to Kapila, all the major political thinkers in India were “animated by the forging of life with others in a context that was shot through with an intimacy that incited hatred and violence” (p. 2). Elsewhere she writes: “One of the central arguments of this book is that hostility and enmity in India gained significance and salience from intimacy” (p. 93).

3) Innovations and interventions by the nationalist leaders had the cumulative effect of shifting the place and locus of sovereignty and violence from the entity of the state to the agency of the individual. An “anti-statist political subject” was thus conceptualized with his potential for violence, and visions of sovereignty that conformed to the history, culture, and specific conditions prevailing in his society. Both Tilak and Gandhi created “a subject-oriented horizon of the political,” thereby subtracting “violence from the state” and positing it “as an individual capacity” (p. 6). Kapila further writes: “Sovereignty was thus detached from its mooring in the state and deposited in the political subject, including in the latter’s profound potential for violence” (p. 7).

4) Drawing on their history, culture, and theological sources, Indian nationalist leaders developed a political vocabulary that fundamentally differed from the language of politics rooted in the canons of Western political thought. This created an anti-colonial Indian political landscape. This Kapila calls “the Indian Age” that distinguished itself from the rest of the world in terms of the distinctiveness of its language of politics and visions of social and political transformation. Kapila argues that the Indian Age not only holds significance for understanding the global developments of the last century, but also has relevance for the contemporary and emerging global society and politics.

The core thesis of the author may thus be summarized as follows: innovations in the realms of practices and ideas by the leaders of the national awakening in India shifted the location of sovereignty and violence from the apparatus of the state to the agency of an anti-statist political subject for whom fraternal violence provided the way to usher in historical transformation, thereby creating a distinctive political landscape—the Indian Age—that helps in understanding the developments of the past, and also has relevance for contemporary times.

A hidden thread binding all four arguments together and also constituting the heart of the author’s core thesis is a basic premise that has its roots in the Freudian understanding of history and in Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud believed that the interplay of hatred and love played a decisive role in forging human life and was the moving force behind human history. The opening sentence of the book says: “Buried in
a footnote in Sigmund Freud’s masterful study of mass psychology is a fable that captures the central concern of this book” (p. 1). Elaborating this further, Kapila continues: “As the fable instructs, however, proximity and intimacy also carried the potential for peace and fellowship” (p. 2). The book purportedly eschews “the psychological to focus upon the political” (p. 2). Kapila borrows the elements of enmity and intimacy from Freudian psychoanalysis and reframes the Indian political psychologist Ashis Nandy’s interpretation of India’s relationship with the West “as one of intimate enmity” (p. 8). Redirecting Nandy’s focus on “relationship” with the external to her “in relation to the proximate”, the author explores the contours of the relationship among the two main communities of Hindus and Muslims on the subcontinent that though united in their opposition to foreign rule might have different understandings and visions of self-rule. Kapila’s innovations and interventions yield the concepts of “violent fraternity” and “fraternal violence” that become tools for her analysis of Indian political thought. Herein lies the originality of Kapila’s approach.

The book may be divided into two parts. The first half of the book discusses the birth of a “violent fraternity” in Indian society at the turn of the 20th century in the course of its encounter with the West. This violent fraternity was characterized by the intimate enmity and anti-statism of the new political subject. For Kapila, this marks a transition in the way politics and the questions of authority had been understood in Indian society. Kapila contends that the birthing of a violent fraternity resulted in the decline of the currency of “liberal ideas of contract”—the hallmark of Western political thought; instead, “the ambivalence of intimacy and hostility” within the Indian fraternity, and an “anti-statist political subject” in confrontation with the colonial state now provided a new vocabulary to the language of politics. This theme is elaborated “in relation to Tilak, Gandhi, the global insurrection of the Ghadar and the making of Hindutva” (p. 9).

After having discussed the birth of a violent fraternity, the eclipse of liberalism, and the ascendance of a new language of politics in chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4, the author addresses “the enduring legacy of anti-statist political subjectivity” in chapters 5, 6 and 7 that may be said to constitute the second half of the book. Here, this legacy is explained in the making of republicanism and popular sovereignty or the rule of the people. Kapila argues that the anti-statist political subjectivity of a violent fraternity midwifed republicanism and popular sovereignty. The intimate nature of violence and the anti-statism of the new political subject of fraternity accounted for the distinct nature of republican sovereignty that emerged from the womb of anti-colonial struggle and experienced the violence of partition preceding the creation of two sovereign states. This theme is discussed with reference to the figures of Ambedkar, Iqbal, and Patel who are all transfigured as important thinkers of republicanism and modern sovereignty. Besides its seven chapters, the book has an introduction and an epilogue.

Chapter 1 is devoted to a discussion of Tilak’s confrontation with imperial law, and his actions and ideas that inaugurated “the political in India” (p. 16). Here Kapila argues that Tilak’s commentary on the Gita with its focus on the elements of sacrifice and desirelessness in action created the “anti-statist subject.” For Kapila, this anti-statist subject became “fundamental and consequential for the Indian remaking of political enmity and fraternity” (p. 19). Referring to Tilak’s attempts at remaking the political in terms of sacrifice and detached action, Kapila interestingly notes that this also
underlines the key distinction between Western political theory and Indian thought, namely it is sacrifice rather than self-interest that offers possibilities for sustaining collective life (p. 47). Kapila ends the chapter by opining that Tilak’s writings inspired “the new and potent idea of Hindutva” (p. 52).

Chapter 2 discusses the principal events of the Ghadar movement, individual life narratives of prominent ghadris, and their motivations. The Ghadar is interpreted “as being foundational to a rethinking of violence” (p. 58) that ruptured the dominant narrative of the Indian freedom movement as a nonviolent movement. Kapila argues that the Ghadar had global reach and its style of functioning defied the logic of national territoriality. Readiness for death and violence by the sacrificial subject characterized the politics of the Ghadar. The principle of “anti-statism,” as with Tilak before and Gandhi later, marked “this new politics of the subject” (p. 67). The author concludes that after all the Ghadar remained an “unassimilable” and “irregular” phenomenon, lacking in fidelity to any one particular ideology (p. 85). This chapter gives us fascinating accounts of the adventures of ghadris such as Khankhoje, Har Dayal, Amba Prasad, and Barkatullah Bhopali, and the experiment of the Provisional Government of India in Kabul under the leadership of Mahendra Pratap; such accounts are mostly missing in the mainstream literature on the national movement.

Chapter 3 contrasts the personas of Gandhi, Savarkar, and Ambedkar, and focuses on Savarkar’s exposition of Hindutva. “Hindutva,” as expounded by Savarkar, “is, above all, a confrontation with the history of India, for its political mastery” (p. 97). Kapila argues that Savarkar’s attempts at re-ordering the history of India through his Essentials of Hindutva and Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History “aimed to found a violent fraternity” (p. 105). Dispelling a common misconception, this chapter also brings up Savarkar’s atheism and the categorical distinction he made in his writings between Hinduism and Hindutva. Hindutva represented a “future-oriented theory of violence and a political proposition” to “establish a new brotherhood and found itself as a political monotheism” (p. 129).

Chapter 4 deals with Gandhian politics of truth and the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate on the question of caste and self-transformation. The chapter’s focus is on Gandhian intervention grounded in the insistence on truth (Satyagraha) to address the issue of violence as experienced by the subject within the framework of his body, as an individual, and as part of a larger collectivity in society. Evil and truth were both hidden in the subject of an individual. Insistence on truth in quotidian life had the power to give visibility to violence hidden in the individual and the patterns of human relations in society. A nonviolent confrontation with the violence of modern existence, at the level both of an individual and collectivity in society, now brought to the surface through the insistent pursuit of truth, would result in transformation. This politics of truth lay behind Gandhian experiments in Transvaal, Champaran, and the Dandi march. Thus, action based on recognition of the need to be different from what one already was resulted in transformation. That is to say, self-transformation held the key to ushering in social and political transformation. Kapila’s claim here is that Gandhi understood truth “not as a function of speech or aspect of conduct and cultivation, but rather—in its most ordinary manifestation—as revelation” (p. 145). Kapila argues that it was Gandhi’s defining debate with Ambedkar on the question of caste that shifted the focus of the era from the anti-statist subject to “a republicanism that was based on a political reappraisal of caste” (p. 155). Kapila ends this chapter by bringing out the
rupture that the Gandhian approach to politics signified: “It was a politics that required attachment to truth as action, as opposed to the detachment as a disposition for action (nishkaam-karma) that had been dominant in nationalist and other contemporary Indian political thinking” (p. 162).

17 The next chapter focuses on the political thought and writings of Ambedkar. Here the author discusses Ambedkar’s seminal works on the Hindu social order and his rather less cited, though foundational, work *Pakistan or the Partition of India* on Muslim aspirations for a separate nation. With his focus on caste in Hindu society and the question of nationality among Muslims, Ambedkar critiqued and revised prevailing notions of fraternity in Indian society. Citing Ambedkar’s extensive writings on the violence of caste and her interpretation thereof, Kapila argues that for Ambedkar the relationship between the Brahmin and the untouchable was intrinsically hostile and antagonistic; thus, the “Hindu social” was the most formidable obstacle to the creation of a new fraternity and the republic. The search for a new fraternity mooted in the idea of the general will as the basis of the republic called for the transformation of this relationship into one of adversaries or competitors. The antagonism between Brahmains and untouchables had to be converted into adversarial agonism. This involved the annihilation of caste. In contrast, hostility between Hindus and Muslims had reached a point where their relationship could not be converted into one of adversarially. Recognition of Muslim nationality and concession the demand for a separate nation was the price that had to be paid for ushering in an era of peace and for the establishment of republican sovereignty. Thereby, the hitherto two antagonistic communities would be converted into two agonistic nations and neighbors. Ambedkar’s search for a new fraternity and his project of conversion of antagonism into agonism, whether within Hindu society or between Hindus and Muslims, Kapila thus argues, above all, concerned itself “with the making of ‘the people’ as the subject of politics.” This Kapila terms “a radical republican project” (p. 190).

18 Chapter 6 focuses on Iqbal’s political thought. As against the dominant interpretations of Iqbal as a thinker who addressed both the national and the global in his extensive writings, this chapter considers him to be a thinker of republicanism and modern sovereignty. For Kapila, the “fostering of a fraternity” that was moored in sovereignty, and republicanism was central to Iqbal’s political thought. Kapila further contends that Iqbal’s writings did not attempt to synthesize oppositional ideas; rather he pushed antagonistic ideas to a limit that forced a gap or separation between the national and the universal, thereby creating new concepts. In line with her overall approach, Kapila argues, that, like his contemporaries, Iqbal’s political thought addressed “the intimate and the fraternal” in Indian society; citing Iqbal’s stand on the question of the Ahmadis, Kapila contends that, for Iqbal, significantly, the “internal hostilities” were directed towards his co-religionists.

19 While developing his ideas of fraternity and sovereignty from the precepts of the history and theology of Islam, Iqbal realized that the prevailing notions of brotherhood and authority among the Muslims of India were not suited to the modern times of nation-state. He sought to reinvent and redefine these notions in the light of political developments in Turkey that had resulted in the establishment of a republic there. With the global in the background “as a lens upon the world,” thus Kapila argues, Iqbal’s visions of futurity and his conception of republican sovereignty for the Muslims of the subcontinent emerged in the course of his grappling with “the intimate and the
fraternal.” His interventions had the effect of rendering “the category of the Muslim not merely religious or cultural, but—and primarily—political, in its relation to co-religionists and others” (p. 198). Thereby, Kapila contends, “Iqbal innovated and amplified key concepts of modern politics” (p. 196).

The last chapter is devoted to understanding the violence of the partition of 1947 and its “profound political significance as ushering in the republican age of the people” (p. 230). The author interprets the violence resulting from the decision to partition the subcontinent in terms of “civil war”; it is argued that this occasioned transformation of “concern with fraternity, fellowship, and life with others” into “the language and pursuit of sovereignty” (p. 230). This chapter further argues that “violence was not incidental, but integral—foundational—to” Indian republicanism (p. 230). Focusing primarily on Patel, this chapter charts the historical transformation of the political landscape of India into a republic with “the people” as the sole fountain of sovereignty (p. 232). The chapter concludes with a discussion of Patel’s speeches, public utterances, and posturings that shed light on “whether Patel is indeed representative of Hindu nationalism” (p. 236).

The author’s exposition of “the Indian Age” deserves further attention from the disciplinary angle of political thought.

While, in line with the thrust of her overall approach, Kapila frames the Indian Age “as shorthand to an orientation of thinking and a horizon of thought on the foundational question of violence” (p. 12), she highlights the universality, but also the distinctiveness, of Indian political thought, and reflects on its continuing relevance not only for the present and future of Indian society but also for the global society at large. It can be safely said that Kapila is arguing that ruminations by Indian leaders on the meaning, import, and location of political contain elements of universality that have something to offer to political thought as it originated and developed in the West. This is very interesting and significant since sensitive and reflective scholars of political thought, both Indian and Western, have always felt the need to recognize the contributions made by Indian leaders. Thus, Western scholars such as Alasdair MacIntyre, W. H. Morris-Jones, and Norman D. Palmer have lamented the neglect of Indian political thought in the West and have highlighted the need for its due recognition and appreciation (Pantham and Deutsch 1986:9–16). V. R. Mehta has noted that “while Western thought works in terms of antagonisms, dichotomies and antinomies between spirit and matter, the individual and society, bread and culture, necessity and freedom, Indian thought has always considered such dichotomies as artificial and unreal” (Pantham and Deutsch 1986:12).

For all its originality in developing a fresh perspective on the study of modern Indian political thought, Kapila’s key concepts of violent fraternity and fraternal violence are firmly rooted in Freudian history and psychoanalysis. Her repeated invocation of “father figure,” consideration of Savarkar “as Gandhi’s shadow” (p. 92, p. 126), and construction of Gandhi’s assassination, contra Ashis Nandy’s interpretation of it “as a function of the assassin’s homosexual identification with Savarkar” (p. 126), in terms of “Oedipal complex” and “parricide” with profound implications for the future of Indian polity and democracy, reinforce Freud’s hold on her approach. Thus, we may legitimately say that Freudian understanding of history and Freudian psychoanalysis provide the bedrock for the book, and the author’s approach to the study and analysis of modern Indian political thought is Eurocentric. And this is problematic for both the
subject matter and the claims of the book. Ironical as it may seem, the Freudian ambivalence of enmity and intimacy becomes the distinguishing and defining feature of political subjectivity in India, and the author applies European understanding of history and culture to establish the novelty and originality of political ideas of “the Indian Age.”

Here it is instructive to consider what Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar has to say about the suitability of Freudian psychoanalysis for studying non-Western societies, particularly Indian society. Drawing on Girindrasekhar Bose's correspondence with Freud and his contributions to the field of psychoanalysis in the Indian context, and in his own work much later, Kakar has tried to bring out the limitations of the discipline of psychoanalysis as founded in the West. Kakar observes: “Preeminently operating from within the heart of the Western myth, enclosed in the mahamaya of Europe—from myths of ancient Greece to the ‘illusions’ of Enlightenment—psychoanalysis has had little opportunity to observe from within, and with empathy, the deeper import of other cultures’ myths in the workings of the self” (Kakar 1989:139). On the issue of the Oedipal complex and parricide, Kakar says: “My main argument is that the ‘hegemonic narrative’ of Hindu culture as far as male development is concerned, is neither that of Freud’s Oedipus nor of Christianity’s Adam. One of the more dominant narratives of this culture is that of Devi, the great goddess, especially in her manifold expressions as mother in the inner world of the Hindu son” (Kakar 1989:131). Though Kapila does recognize the pre-eminence of the figure of the mother in Indian culture, her overall approach is firmly located within the framework of Freudian psychoanalysis. It is at scholars like Kapila that Kakar seems to be directing his critique: “I would only like to point out that apart from some notable exceptions, ... most theorists generally underestimated the impact of culture on the development of a sense of identity—the construction of the self, in modern parlance. Freud’s ‘timetable’ of culture, entering the psychic structure relatively late in life as the ‘ideology of the superego,’ has continued to be followed by other almanac makers of the psyche” (Kakar 1989:140).

A little about the departures the book makes. First and foremost, the book attempts to understand the political ideas of the India of the twentieth century in terms of the ambivalence of intimacy and enmity and makes fraternal violence the distinguishing and defining feature of political subjectivity in India. Gandhi’s assassination is interpreted in terms of the Oedipal complex of the assassin and parricide. Thirdly, Ambedkar is considered “the arch-thinker of modern sovereignty” (p. 9). Fourthly, Muhammad Iqbal is identified “as a thinker of republican sovereignty” (p. 9) whose ideas “remade the Muslim subject as political, rather than communitarian” (p. 197). And, finally, the book understands the partition violence of 1947 as a “civil war” (p. 230).

Its flaws and shortcomings notwithstanding, Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age may be considered an important theoretical and methodological intervention in the study of modern Indian political thought. The main contributions of the book lie in developing a new perspective on modern Indian political thought, highlighting the significance of the Indian Age, conceptualizing the partition violence of 1947, and making several departures from conventional understanding. The language is jargonistic, the arguments intricate. It will attract the interest of scholars and students of political thought.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The author could have benefitted from Sudhir Kakar’s seminal work on violence, *The Colours of Violence*.
2. The founder and first president of the Indian Psychoanalytical Society.

AUTHORS

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