

A Nation in the making

India Invented: A Nation in the Making, by Arvind N. Das, Manohar Publications (1992). Rs. 180.

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How is a nation or a nationality defined? Is the basis purely geographical, ethnic or linguistic or even religious? Or is it some combination of these which along with their specific history lead to a set of people identifying themselves as a nation? Even at the end of the twentieth century, these questions are by no means trivial as is obvious from the events in the erstwhile Soviet Union, where a nation disintegrated and disappeared and has been replaced by a number of distinct entities. In India, the issues of nationalism and ethnicity are extremely important because of the tremendous diversity which is a hallmark of our land. Any attempt to understand our society must take into account the existence of many levels of identities which shape our lives and actions.

"India Invented" by Dr. A.N. Das is an admirable effort to come to terms with these burning issues. It is an attempt to "...Examine the concept of India with all its particularities, as well as in terms of the general features that create the idea of a nation." It is not as if these questions have not been addressed before. But most of the literature on this subject has been either very specialized and hence narrow in its scope or been too superficial to be of any lasting use. The volume under review avoids both these pitfalls. Written in a very readable style, it is yet scholarly and analytical. The canvass is wide and yet the interconnections between the various parts and the whole are made evident.

The concept of class in the Indian context has been always controversial. Arguments either for the paramouncy of caste over class or for the mechanistic and mindless application of Marxist analysis have been proposed. There is short chapter on methodology and a discussion of various categories, where the author strongly argues for a creative application of Marxist method for an understanding society. Demystification of concepts and categories like ethnicity, tribes and caste is important if these terms are not to become vacuous labels. There is much to be learnt about the specific nature of Indian society by using class analysis and this is the viewpoint which pervades the book.

Tribe, Religion, Caste, the Language issue and National Integration are the some of the topics with which Dr. Das tries to understand the making of an Indian identity. Beginning with a critical review of literature on the subject of ethnicity, he goes on to argue that no generalizations are adequate with regard to the tribes in India. The heterogeneity in the tribal society, where food gatherers coexist with peasants, does not allow us to bracket the society in any of the well-known categories. With a historical discussion of the various tribal struggles, the contours of an emergent class solidarity among the tribals becomes evident.

At the present moment, when the advocates of militant and aggressive Hinduism are concocting history to reap political dividends, the question "What is Hinduism?" becomes extremely important. That it is a complex, evolving, and flexible religious and social structure which has as much variation as commonality, makes mockery of the claim of the strait jacket variety of the religion being espoused by the VHP storm troopers. And it is here that the other important factor of the Indian identity, caste makes its presence. Challenging the usual picture of caste as a frozen arrangement in society, the author makes a strong case for a concept of caste which is not only a changing one but is also subservient to class. The transformation of 'harijans' into 'dalits', i.e. from 'untouchables' to 'oppressed', is discussed as an example where a large fraction of our population is increasingly becoming aware of itself as a class.

Whether it is the linguistic issue or that of religious minorities, Mandal or the New Liberalization package, the author manages to weave in facts with analysis in a witty, hard hitting and provocative style. Although there is an extensive bibliography, the absence of footnotes and detailed references is somewhat unfortunate. The book could also do with slightly better editing where repeated references are avoided and a better flow maintained. Given the importance that the author places on political economy, one would also have liked a somewhat more detailed discussion of economics and its interconnections with the various issues raised.

These minor quibbles notwithstanding, *India Invented* is an excellent overview of some of the major issues facing our society today. Eduardo Galeano, the noted Uruguayan writer, writes of "The Nobodies", who '...don't have culture, but folklore; who don't create art, but handicrafts; who don't have faces, but arms; who are not human beings, but human resources,.....'. It is only when these 'nobodies' invent an India where they have a future, would the saga of nation building end.