

India Today: Economy, Politics and Society

By Stuart Corbridge, John Harriss & Craig Jeffrey

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Corbridge, Harriss and Jeffery have dealt with India as conscientiously as possible in a book that deals with this vast country through an inter-disciplinary approach. Corbridge and Harriss have been researching and writing on India for more than 15 years. The title of the book – ‘India Today’ however is a very common title as far as books, magazines, newspaper articles and the like are concerned, it is only apt insofar as the contemporary nature of the country can best be highlighted. This means that for any reader it is important to note the year of publication. A title like ‘India’s Economy, Politics and Society in the early 21st century’ could have guided the reader pointedly to the nature of the book and time period concerned. The book is divided into three parts: Economy, Politics and Society. Each part has been critically discussed and compared with its latest history (which can be read as Indian independence from the British Raj in 1947). The authors have painstakingly analysed the economic growth and politics at all levels, as well as the civil society. Each part of the book is a result of extensive research along with some great insight into the lives of people in the country, and yet at times it appears that certain statements do not seem to convey the results as they actually are.

India is a vast country and there is no single reason that can answer the question – ‘When and why did India take off?’, which is the title of their first chapter. The authors have tried to put together various views and have contributed to the reasoning of the same but have more often than not repeated themselves in many chapters; the reason for which they have already given in the ‘Preface and Acknowledgements’. They write that since each chapter could be read alone, their work might sound repetitive. This could have been avoided by merely a mention of the page where they have already described them and would have been a better option.

The chapters are supported by enough graphic representations of data for a quick and better understanding. Along with graphs and quotations to back up their claims, in the 'Economy' section of the book, the authors go on to say that the rich in India have fared very well and the poor seem to increase in number and get poorer. In spite of this statement being true, it is also a fact that the incidence of extreme Indian poverty has fallen significantly since 1970. This is illustrated by the graphs used in the book on page 56-57. A very strong statement that the authors make is that they claim that there is a missing middle (class) in India today. A single definition of middle class, to compare the middle class of the developing world is rather an inefficient way of expressing it. If India is studied from any angle – political, economic or social, there is definitely a very strong middle class that exists. These kinds of statements could mislead a student of Indian Studies.

The authors have caught the vein of Indian Politics in the second section of the book, with its various elements including extremist Hindutva, Maoism and other forces. They have answered in the affirmative to the question on the success of Indian democracy, which is true but again there are many shades of grey here. The authors have described Indian democracy at the national level as well as at the grass-root level in its proper sense, where it is yet to develop completely. This particular phenomenon is a result of years of oppression in the villages. They have pointed this out and highlighted the problems faced by the poorest of poor and the role of *pradhans* (leaders) in helping to solve these issues. They have persistently pointed out the issues faced by politicians as well as the general public as a result of Indian politics and policies.

In the third part of the book which is titled – 'Society', the authors begin by debating on what a civil society is. Indian society has been discussed here in different social strata as well as other demographics. They have clearly defined the upper-middle-class Indian society which was formed (in the past but does not exist now, as per them) by imitating the civil societies of the West with similar education, high flung ideals and icons of the British Raj. Apart from these echelons of the society the authors also dwell on the poor societies as well as the mobilisation of the poor which, as they mention, still needs an in-depth study and analysis. The authors think that the caste system does not exist as of today. This statement is partially true. The old system might not exist; it was nevertheless a result of anthropologists' studies, but the castes still do. There are reservations based on that in educational and

government institutes. This basic reservation policy is enough to prove that ‘caste still matters’ and that there is a long way to go for eradication of the ‘caste system.’

A discussion on Indian women forms a very small but important part of the book where again authors have enough data to prove their point. The authors have depicted the sea of differences when it comes to talking about women, and thus discussing gender or gender roles in such a large area of the subcontinent is not an easy task. Finally, in the afterword, the authors have summed up the economy, politics and society of India as it stands today as compared to what it was before 2003. Although the book has many contradictory views, for example, the existence or non-existence of middle-class, the afterword is an excellent summation. This book also has an admirable bibliography which is a treat for anyone researching on India.

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