

Zabarskaitė, Jolita. 2023. “Greater India” and the Indian Expansionist Imagination, c. 1885–1965; The Rise and Decline of the Idea of a Lost Hindu Empire. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg. 441 pp. Pb.: € 79,95. ISBN: 3110997150.

Book review by

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Given that the notion of “Greater India” shaped so much of the academic, literary, artistic, and political discourse in the formative years of Indian nationalism and state-building – so much so that it was at one point impossible not to engage with the theme – this book is surprisingly late in coming. Closely related to the widely discussed “problematic and the thematic of nationalism” (P. Chatterjee) within which it arose and thrived until its temporary decline in the 1960s, the “Greater India” theme deserves, as this study proves, “a far more central place in the study of Indian history and of Indian nationalism” (p. 4) than it has been accorded thus far. It was “an Indian project” (p. 1) from the start, part and parcel of the Indian nationalist imagination infused with Hindu expansionist overtones, but one which arose from – and relied for legitimacy upon – British, Dutch, and French scholarship on ancient Indian history, culture and the arts. More specifically, it “grew out of a framework of Orientalist scholarship that dealt with the questions of Hindu and Buddhist influences in Southeast Asia” (p. 1). With time, the theme grew in scope and traction and was interpreted in terms of Hindu-Indian influences across much of Central, East, Southeast, and West Asia and everywhere Indians emigrated, whether the United States, Africa, or the Caribbean islands.

The “Greater India” theme emerged in the 1880s, fast gaining ground in the period of the svadeśī movement (1903–1911) and reaching its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s when anti-British nationalist sentiments were at their height. It emerged as a form of nationalist self-assertion, comprising “a language of legitimation” (p. 10). Once India became independent from British rule in 1947, the imaginative hold of the concept began to weaken correspondingly. This was not least because, as Zabarskaitė demonstrates, under a

different set of political circumstances, the Hindu-Indian cultural superiority argument “became irrelevant or damaging” (p. 389). All the while, the “Greater India” ideology was directed towards a Western and Indian audience and articulated primarily in English. As its name suggests, it was fuelled and popularised by an expansionist imagination within which “Indian civilization” was projected as a superior player in world history from ancient times onwards. This imagination may well have retracted with India’s independence, but the idea of “decline” appears to have been more a temporary eclipse than ever a complete waning. In fact, its resonance with the current political dispensation that glorifies the Hindu-Indian past (Hindu and Indian are understood as coterminous) makes it clear that this carefully researched monograph is not simply long overdue but also timely. As its author aptly points out, “‘Greater India’ is more than just an imaginary story or an anti-colonial tool of the Indian independence movement” (p. 383); it is no historical phenomenon of purely academic interest, but a recurring “political project” (p. 2); its “very particular construction of Indian-Hindu history and its civilizational claims” (p. 3) have always been articulated from within a Hindu nationalist sphere where the academic and the political joined hands, seeking justification and legitimation from each other for what was ultimately “a version of history that accorded a central place to Indian-Hindu cultural chauvinism” (p. 389). In that sense, the topic perfectly fits a book series explicitly intended to “bring into focus the politics inherent in historical thinking, professional, public or amateur, across the world” (editorial statement).

In exploring the links between politics, historiography, scholarship, and popular discourse to show how they were instrumental in identity formation in the context of British India and after, Zabarskaitė steers refreshingly clear of the impassioned or polemical tone often associated with such debates (though the intention and critique are implicit). Rather, her research energies are expended on delineating with forensic eloquence the genealogy and discursive structures of “the rise and decline of the idea of a lost Hindu empire” (the book’s subtitle) and the theme’s ongoing political implications. She does so by a) looking at “Greater India”’s major protagonists (educationalists, journalists, scholars, and politicians) and those appropriated thus; b) tracing the institutionalization of the concept through different discourses and the foundation of the Greater India Society as well as other institutional outlets, political and artistic movements (Svadeśī Art Movement, “Young India,” Visva-Bharati, Ārya Samāj, Hindu Mahāsabhā, etc.); and c) carefully analyzing the ways it was handled in scholarly papers, lectures, speeches, reports, letters and publications for the general public, including the Indian press. The regard she shows for detail or micro-history in her critical discourse analysis

is astonishing, especially in the close attention she pays to the construction of arguments and histories of ideas. Her analyses and readings are consistently based on archival research and primary sources (with critical commentary on editing, publishing, and appropriating processes often added). In fact, the ratio between primary and secondary sources is heavily skewed to the former. Her reliance on secondary interpretations is minimal as if to make the point that good scholarship must begin with groundwork – interpretation comes later. Her book is an implicit invitation for scholarship to critically revisit the whole question of Indian anti-colonial nationalism and its post-independence avatars.

This carefully researched monograph derives additional value from the precise and systematic way it shows how ostensibly sound scholarship can succumb to sectarian thinking, uncritical adoration, personal prejudices, or exclusivist agendas, variously interpreted to suit the political hour. Discounting the mounting awe at the sheer depth and breadth of research involved, the distinct feeling one is left with as one reads through the pages is that of discomfort, not to say dismay. Dismay at the powerful hold of an essentially parochial argument shared across the board by Indian and non-Indian intellectuals, an argument that had scant regard or need for factual evidence since, as the book shows, it was “always more a framing argument than a historical reality” (p. 6). What Zabarskaitė underlines from the start, however, is that hers is not “a study of the factuality of Indian or Hindu/Buddhist influences in Southeast Asia or the rest of the world” (p. 1). The author is not to be faulted, therefore, if after her critical – freshly deconstructive – readings of typically lauded figures, such as Annie Besant, C. F. Andrews (a close associate of both Gandhi and Tagore), Sister Nivedita, and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, to name a few, all of whom supported the Indian “national” cause, we are left wanting to gain a better-informed sense of what in fact was – and remains – “great” about India’s past and present. But then, this is precisely the wrong question and one that has been asked too many times already, to the exclusion of other, more substantial, and interesting questions. Even for those sympathetic to the need for a counter-discourse to totalizing claims of “Western” civilizational superiority, the study seems to suggest that the framing of Indian history in terms of “one country at the centre of a “global” project” (p. 5) merely reverses the argument and amounts to a corresponding lack of imagination. Moreover, when imaginative exceptions arose, they were either appropriated for the “Greater India” ideology or simply ignored. For example, Rabindranath Tagore envisaged a reciprocal give-and-take between cultures without succumbing to civilizational hierarchies in what can be interpreted as a “larger search for liberation” (to borrow Said’s term) for “the colonizer” and “colonized” alike. Given his

cultural capital as a Nobel Prize laureate, he was conveniently appropriated, as Zabarskaitè clearly demonstrates, as one of “Greater India’s” central protagonists, especially after establishing the international university Visva-Bharati in 1921. Perhaps one of the more pertinent questions this study raises and engages with is precisely at which point an idea becomes a conventional way of thinking – “a recurring paratext” (p. 8) repeated until it becomes normalized. Because once it is normalized, there seems to be no way of getting around it.