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Book Review

The wide-ranging impact of identity politics

Reviewed by Lynn Ockersz

Title: 'Identity Politics in India and Europe'

Author: Michael Dusche

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The search for 'external enemies' by governments seeking to expand and consolidate their support bases at home on the basis of narrowly-conceived nationalisms, is a time-tested tactic of opportunistic governance. While there are short-term gains for governments from such exercises, they do grave harm to communal relations within states. Thus, ethnic chauvinism, or the empowerment of one community above others by governments, within pluralistic societies, becomes an 'internal enemy' which relentlessly eats into and destroys domestic social stability and cohesion.

This is just one insight this timely book by a German political scientist researching identity politics in India and Europe throws-up. Currently a Fellow at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Studies at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Dr. Michael Dusche has not only dealt comprehensively with a range of theoretical issues in the field of identity politics, but has buttressed his standpoints on them through the publication in this book of a thought-provoking series of interviews given to him by some of the most erudite among Indian and European minds, the social sciences have been yielding over the years. Just a few of such Eastern spirits are: Rajeev Bhargava, Ashis Nandy, Asghar Ali Engineer and Gurpreet Mahajan.

One of the attractions of 'Identity Politics in India and Europe' is the researcher's analysis of the manner in which Arab and Christian civilizations have interacted over the centuries and the impact this process has had on inter-racial ties and identity-formation on both sides of the one-time 'civilizational divide' in the West. It is little realized that these civilizations had constantly fertilized each other in times past and that their cultures are a really a composite 'coming together' of elements from their different intellectual and artistic heritages. Thus, the West has constantly absorbed into its accomplishments in Mathematics and Astronomy, for instance, elements from these branches of knowledge originating in the Arabic East.

Nevertheless, for the purpose of power projection and consolidation, the earliest colonial powers of the West, such as the Romans, needed to engage zealously in identity politics and one of the strengths of this book is the in-depth exploration it conducts into the way identities were forged and manipulated by these powers in the Middle Ages. The same is true of those who were considered enemies by them, the Ottoman Turks. The latter too engaged in what in social science terminology is referred to as 'Othering' their enemies, the white expansionist powers in this instance, and this process kept hostilities going among these enemy powers. This process of 'demonizing' or 'Othering' each other helped in galvanizing domestic support for the powers concerned and facilitated their expansionist wars abroad, for, when the cultural lines of differentiation are drawn with increasing starkness between oneself and one's enemy or the 'Other', mobilization of popular support for colonial exploits becomes easier. To be sure, this process of exploiting 'Otherness' has continued into contemporary times and is proving an effective means of governance among neo-colonial expansionist powers as well as Third World authoritarian administrations which have found it expedient to say 'no' to pluralism.

The following are some 'quotable quotes' from 'Identity Politics in India and Europe':

'Explaining the other's behaviour by recourse to her/his religion is a stratagem of 'othering' more than a way to mutual understanding. It has a long history. In the West, the perception of threat emanating from the Muslim world is as old as Islam itself (or the West for that matter).'

'While the "other" is portrayed as foreign and hostile, one assures oneself of one's own uniqueness and identity. This can be conducive for the sense of inner cohesion that each society needs in order to form a functional political body. At the same time, it harbours conflict both within and without.'

'From the 8th century on, emerging western Europe – or Latin-Christian civilization as it expanded from Charlemagne's Empire into the eastern, northern and western corners of

Europe – saw itself faces with a twin "other": the Saracen as the outer enemy and the Jew as the inner foe.'

These insights into inter-cultural relations are buttressed further through the interviews located in the second half of the book, as mentioned. The value of this section resides in the fact that the contemporary identity politics of South Asia and Europe are taken-up for discussion. The section gives to the theoretical insights that are posited, a much needed topical flavour and relevance. For instance, religious nationalism in India is focused on along with the Arab-Israeli dispute. The discussions enable the reader to delve deeper into the tensions and dynamics of the religion-centred politics of India's Gujarat state, to take just one example, and give him a finer understanding of the processes that engender 'ethnic' polarities in subcontinental politics.

Besides, the reader's curiosity is satisfied about numerous other contentious issues at the heart of modern world politics, such as, the role of religion and ethnicity in the current confrontation between the West and forces of religious fundamentalism. Needless to say, the book's arrival is most timely.



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