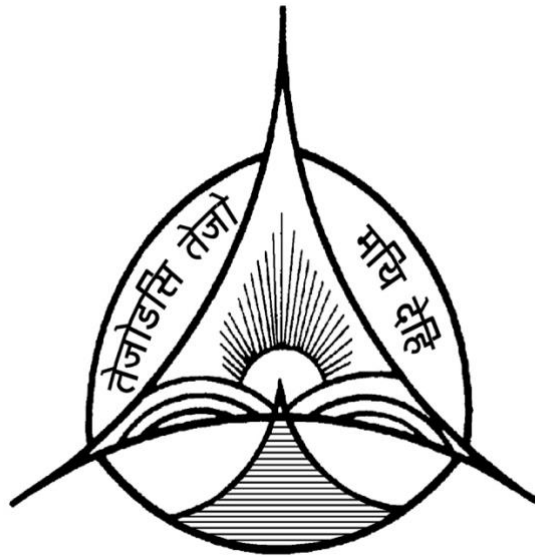


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Political Violence in Ancient India by Upinder Singh, Cambridge Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. xvii + 598, ₹999.00. ISBN 978-0-674-97527-9

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On 12 March 2018, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, had organised a one-day symposium entitled ‘Contemporary Classics: Reframing History’. It was an interesting event where three recent publications on Indian history—one each from the ancient, medieval and modern periods—were discussed by their authors and a couple of discussants for each book. Upinder Singh’s *Political Violence in Ancient India* had been chosen for the ancient period, and it became a great opportunity for me—as one of the discussants—to talk about the book with the author herself. I am referring to this symposium as my starting point to this review not only because the discussion largely contributed to my reception of the book, but also because the title of the symposium points to a remarkable aspect about the importance of this work. Singh’s *Political Violence* is a contemporary classic. What makes the book a classic is the wide range of sources it brings together to form a comprehensive whole.

Though the title of the book is *Political Violence in Ancient India*, it is not a book centred on the theme of political violence. Rather, it is a comprehensive history of political ideas of ancient India, particularly with reference to the three issues of kingship, war and the wilderness. Therefore, a pertinent question could be why the title emphasises political violence. A clue can be found in the introduction, as the author begins the book with an overview of how leading political thinkers of modern India perceived the intellectual legacy of ancient India. It is, after all, the Gandhian and Nehruvian emphasis on non-violence as a defining contribution of ancient India that has been extremely influential in shaping the public perception of ‘Indian tradition’. Even though B.R. Ambedkar recognised the existence of both violent and non-violent traditions in ancient India, he clearly espoused the non-violent (Buddhist) over the violent (Brahmanical). On the other hand, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar represented a very different standpoint that valorised ‘righteous’ violence and war against ‘foreign aggressors’ as the hallmark of ‘Hindu glory’. Singh’s book shows how erroneous it is to think of a monolithic non-violent or violent ancient India. Rather, Singh rightly says: ‘... the history of ancient India, as that of the other parts of the world, was marked by considerable violence of various kinds. The extent of this violence has usually been either underestimated or ignored. And yet, violence and nonviolence were subjects of lively debate in ancient Indian thought over the centuries, and this debate was marked by an intensity and diversity that was unparalleled elsewhere in the ancient world’ (p. 6).

It is true, indeed, that different civilisations approached the issue of violence differently. Certain civilisations, such as the Greco-Roman, glorified martial and heroic values, and celebrated the violent capacities of the great warriors. In other civilisations, such as the

ancient Chinese, war has never been considered the best option, even if the impossibility of complete non-violence was acknowledged. However, there cannot be an overarching generalisation about ancient Indian concept of violence. There have been varied positions and perspectives, represented by different kinds of sources. It is only by placing these various sources side by side that one can appreciate the magnitude of this debate and understand the diversity of intellectual positions. The sources the book deals with have all been discussed separately by different scholars. However, it is in juxtaposing them to construct a totality that the unique contribution of the book lies.

The book has five chapters. The first three cover the evolution of political ideas about ancient Indian kingship. The fourth and fifth are overviews of the ideas about war and the wilderness. The arrangement of the first three chapters is chronological, whereas the last two are arranged thematically. Curiously, Singh entitles the first three chapters 'Foundation' (c. 600 BCE–200 BCE), 'Transition' (c. 200 BCE–300 CE) and 'Maturity' (c. 300–600 CE). It remains unclear what is being founded, transformed and matured in these three stages. Is it ancient Indian kingship? How is it being founded, transformed and matured? The book does not provide a clear answer. However, each of the chapters is rich in a thorough overview of different kinds of sources. Thus, the first chapter brings together the early Buddhist and Jaina sources, the inscriptions of Aśoka, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The second chapter includes two texts which have been most extensively used in conventional studies of ancient Indian political ideas— Kautīlya's *Arthaśāstra* and the *Manusmṛti*. Although both these texts have been used by numerous scholars, many studies have taken them at face value. However, both texts being normative treatises, the ideas they reflect are prescriptive rather than a faithful representation of their contemporary realities. Moreover, the normative treatises also speak in different voices, depending on their genres. Singh notes the essential difference between the *dharma* view of kingship that sees the king as the protector of a normative social order, and the *artha* view of kingship that prioritises the expansion and maintenance of royal power and wealth. Singh's study is invaluable in placing these texts alongside other contemporary documents more reflective of actual royal operations, such as the inscriptions of Khāravala, Rudradāman, the Sātavāhanas and the Ikṣvākus, and the texts representing alternative conventions, such as Bhāsa's plays as well as different kinds of Buddhist texts including Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita*, the *Aśokāvadāna* and the *Jātakas*. Singh also pays attention to the numismatic, artistic and sculptural representations as alternative registers of the idea of kingship. The third chapter surveys the sources of the Gupta period, including royal documents such as the Gupta and Vākāṭaka inscriptions, prescriptive texts like Kāmandaka's *Nītisāra*, creative literature with a political content like Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* and Viśākhadatta's *Mudrārākṣasa*, and the popular fables with didactic political lessons in the *Pañcatantra*. In the last two chapters, all these sources are revisited to show the diverse perceptions on warfare and the wilderness.

The book craftily shows the multiple ways in which ancient Indians perceived kingship, war and the relationship between the settled society and the wilderness, and often shakes

prevalent perceptions. Thus, one learns that the ideal king in the Buddhist *Āśokāvadāna* is not a non-violent one but a proselytising one. Even though Jainism is definitely the most staunchly non-violent of all ideologies, it is interesting to note how the ardent Jaina king Khāravēla took pride in war and military conquest. With remarkable authority, Singh extends the horizon of ancient Indian ideas about war beyond the texts to incorporate the world of hero stones (memorial stones for those dying heroically, more popular in south India). She must also be given credit for bringing the *Pañcatantra*, often ignored as fables meant for children, into serious consideration and showing how it surprisingly portrays one of the most violent political landscapes.

The book provides a handy overview of ancient Indian political ideas, which may trigger further questions. For instance, as we appreciate Singh's distinction between the *dharma* view and the *artha* view of kingship, one wonders at the omission of a discussion on the *kāma* view of kingship (*dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* being the three life goals in ancient Indian thought). The fact that *kāma*, the domain of pleasure and refinement, was integral to kingship can be discerned from Singh's book itself. An ideal early Indian king was expected to be not only righteous, wealthy and powerful, but also handsome and culturally accomplished. That is probably why even an ardent conqueror like Samudra Gupta had to be represented both as a competent poet and musician in his inscriptions and coins, and the legendary king Vikramāditya or the king Udayana of Bhāsa's plays had to be great romantic heroes apart from being righteous and mighty. *Kāma* plays a crucial role, especially in the concept of kingship from the Gupta Age onwards, when the relationship between the king and the Earth has often been seen as sexual. Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*, in the process of what Singh calls 'aestheticizing kingship', propounds this model, and it is not impossible to identify the distinct ideal *dharma* (Dilīpa, Raghu, Rāma), *artha* (Atithi) and *kāma* (Aja) kings in this great piece of political poetry. One may also ponder if a more nuanced discussion on *ānṛśamśya* (non-cruelty), a *Mahābhārata* ideology creating a middle ground between the undesirability of violence and impracticality of complete non-violence, would have enriched the book even more. Also, while dealing with the political ideas in texts like the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, considered by many to have been composed over centuries, a distinction between the political ideas in the sections considered earlier with the ideas in the sections added later to these texts would have helped contextualise the ideas better. There are a few mistakes of detail, which may be rectified in the next edition, such as the reference that the Kuru kingdom was partitioned between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas after Yudhiṣṭhira lost the first dice game (pp. 400-1).

The book is a masterpiece that shows how impossible it is to straitjacket the political ideas of ancient India into one fixed model. However, one interesting aspect in the entire discussion is that, even though the impossibility of completely non-violent kingship was accepted across traditions (and even by the Buddha himself), there was a constant unease about violence. Thus, even Manu would warn the king against excessive violence, while Kautīlya's indifference towards violence would be tempered in Kāmandaka. The *Mahābhārata* and the

Rāmāyaṇa, despite the martial exploits of their heroes, unequivocally represent peace as preferable to war, and the former vigorously criticises the violent *kṣātradharmā*. Acknowledging the need for violence in kingship, Buddhists and Jainas would relegate it to an inferior status than peaceful renunciation, Aśoka would try to extend the scope of non-violence as much as he could, and even someone like Samudra Gupta would need to aestheticise his kingship by representing refinement as a counterpoint to his violence. It is of course necessary to remember that the Gandhian–Nehruvian paradigm of non-violence provides a partial and incomplete picture of ancient Indian political thought. However, it is worth remembering this unease about violence across ancient Indian traditions in a time when ancient India is being repeatedly invoked to justify the much more dangerous and violent Savarkarian paradigm.