



Balmiki Prasad Singh. *India's Culture: The State, the Arts, and Beyond.* Second Edition. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009. Illustrations. li + 263 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-806063-5.

Reviewed by Mary E. Hancock

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Culture and Development in Twenty-First-Century India

The Indian subcontinent has long been the home of diverse and dynamic streams of cultural creation and expression, fed by encounters born of migration, trade, war, commerce, pilgrimage, labor, and learning. Over some five millennia, varying designs for living have been engendered by ethnic, regional, linguistic, religious, occupational, and status communities using diverse media—Harappa's clay figures, Ashokan pillars, palm leaf manuscripts, wooden toys, rice-flour drawings, and the human body itself. How these diverse and diverging cultural forms have responded to and have had an impact on the political order has been examined by historians, literary scholars, and artists in works spanning several centuries. Answering the question of how political institutions *should* nurture cultural expression is Balmiki Prasad Singh's ambitious goal in his book, *India's Culture*. Singh, currently the governor of Sikkim, draws on his academic training in political science and, perhaps more important, on his distinguished career in government and international organizations to outline culture's role in twenty-first-century India's development.

Although it offers a synoptic account of regional cultural history, the book is not principally historiography and is marred by occasional errors and inconsistencies in its presentation of historical materials (e.g., the Indus Valley civilization is sometimes dated between 3000 and 1500 BCE and at other times between 2400 and 188 BCE). Historical narratives are used, instead, to frame and contextualize the author's prescriptive statements. Singh begins the book with a chapter, apparently written for the second revised edition of the book, that introduces India's geography, history, and culture to the general reader, and provides broad, working definitions for key analytic terms, such as "culture," "civilization," and "development." (Here, it should be noted that the author

treats "India" as a discrete, albeit pluralistic, collectivity that has persisted as such for the past five millennia, and that is marked by cultural continuities that transcend the region's changing geopolitical boundaries. Thus, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh are at points gathered under this umbrella.)

The following chapter (chapter 1), "India's Culture: Some Facts, Some Perspectives," aims to provide a general overview of the history of Indian civilization—its languages, religions, performing arts, philosophies, and scientific achievements. It is a narrative replicated in many general, introductory texts and is not meant to break new historiographic ground but to set the stage for the prescriptive analyses of later chapters. To this end, he emphasizes the encounters (between Indus Valley agriculturalists and Aryan herding communities; between Vedic, Buddhist, and Jain traditions; between Hindus and Muslims; and between Indian subjects and European colonizers) that have shaped India's history.

Subsequent chapters offer reflections about how the present-day Indian nation-state's economic growth will affect citizens' ways of living, their world views, and their pluralist society, and about how India's forms of cultural expression and creativity can nurture its political and economic development. Chapter 2, "State and Market in India's Culture," begins with the contrast between India's "developed culture" and its "not yet developed economy" (p. 47). Singh suggests that nurturing culture will support economic growth by creating environments in which self-expression and pluralism are encouraged. His argument that development should extend to cultural domains and, in fact, be guided by cultural norms echoes positions advanced by Amartya Sen in many of his works on development policy. Like Sen in *The*

Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture, and Identity (2005), Singh hopes to draw lessons for the liberalization of the present from ancient precursors, such as the Pallava era's commerce-fueled cultural florescence, though Singh's historiography, as noted above, is not meant as close comparison but as inspirational illustration. Chapter 3 discusses the postcolonial blueprint for cultural policy established under Nehru, using extended excerpts from letters and policy documents pertaining to the genealogy of the Republic Day parade and to the state's arts administration policies. Chapter 4 offers India's history of cultural encounters and democratic traditions as a counterargument to Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" model. The book closes with a postscript in which Singh revisits Mahatma Gandhi's well-known critique of industrialization, finding in it a more nuanced position than sometimes presented; specifically, he proposes a Gandhian rationale for embracing the democratizing potential of the informa-

tion and communications technology revolution. Indeed, Singh's understanding of India's deep history of pluralist cultural forms and his ecumenical outlook are consistent with Gandhian philosophy, and it is not surprising that Gandhi's writings are invoked throughout the book.

The book does not offer new historical material, nor does it deal in any sustained or detailed way with the challenges and contradictions with which cultural policy must wrestle in contemporary India. It does provide the general reader with a sense of the temporal depth and complexity of the region's cultural history and, more significantly, asserts that that cultural history is relevant to the political economy. Overall, Singh's prognosis for India's economic development is optimistic, and his book conveys a deep respect for a civilization of which he is, admittedly, both proud and sometimes angry, and about whose achievements and failings he is "still learning" (p. xxxix).

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