

A Review of Subhashish Bhadra's Caged Tiger: How Too Much Government Is Holding Indians Back (Bloomsbury 2023, 272 pages)

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In his book *Caged Tiger: How Too Much Government Is Holding Indians Back*, the author Subhashish Bhadra attempts to present a case for minimum government interference in the lives of citizens. Bhadra proceeds with the assumption “[h]ow our democratic institutions respond in those moments of crisis really defines the kind of society we are” (Bhadra 2023, p. 2).

Does this assumption, on which the thesis of Bhadra's book is premised, hold water? To explore this, let us try and understand how the author has expounded on the two main pillars of this assumption, viz., democratic institutions and society.

The reader feels compelled to ask: Is the society, which Bhadra speaks of in his book, one and the same as the idea of ‘civil society’? Then again, does the author's notion of society as deployed in this book, as well as the notion of ‘civil society’, have cultural and historical relevance in the Indian context? How is the society placed in relation to the individual and the state? Without scrutinizing these issues, it would be premature to apply Bhadra's assumption to understand government, society and the individual in the Indian context.

After explaining the Hobbesian notion of government as the leviathan in the Introduction (Bhadra 2023, pp. 14 – 15), Bhadra raises the question: “[w]hat then determines the extent to which societies give up individual rights to the government leviathan?”, and immediately follows it up with an answer: “I argue that it is the circumstances of the country's birth.” (Bhadra 2023, p. 16)

Bhadra's argument – that the circumstances of a country's birth determine the degree to which societies agree to give up their individual rights – is then expounded by examples of democratic polities like those of the USA and India. However, Bhadra draws little distinction between the circumstances of origin in comparing these two nations. Despite declaring that “India and other countries have their own unique histories and contexts, and we must avoid the temptation to ignore this context while drawing lessons from other countries” (Bhadra 2023, p. 17), Bhadra pays little heed to his own warning. This becomes evident in his interpretation of the origins of the Indian nation and society as mainly a British colonial and postcolonial achievement. It is for this reason that he dubs the makers of the Indian constitution (a document that was ratified in November 1949 CE) as the “nation's founders” (Bhadra 2023, p. 18). In doing so, he ignores key formulations of the Indian nation by leaders of the national freedom movement. As early as May 1909, the revolutionary nationalist leader Aurobindo Ghose (later Sri Aurobindo), who was closely involved with the Swadeshi Movement, had articulated the idea of the Indian nation in the following terms:

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"I spoke once before with this force in me, and I said then that this movement is not a political movement, and that nationalism is not politics but a religion, a creed, a faith. I say it again today, but I put it in another way. I say no longer that nationalism is a creed, a religion, a faith; I say that it is the Sanatan Dharma which for us is nationalism. This Hindu nation was born with the Sanatan Dharma, with it moves and with it grows. When the Sanatan Dharma declines, then the nation declines, and if the Sanatan Dharma were capable of perishing, with the Sanatan Dharma it would perish...The Sanatan Dharma, that is nationalism." (Aurobindo 1909)

Ideas of the Indian nation outside colonial and postcolonial constructs is not wanting. Neither is political thought which imagines a state for the nation and outlines its contours. One does not have to look far back in time for it. Without looking even into Kautilya's masterpiece of classical Indian political thought, the *Arthashastra*, one could find it in early twentieth century political writing. In one such tract by the poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, namely *Swadeshi Samaj*, Tagore stresses the need of a mediator between the leviathan state and the individual. He calls this mediator '*samaj*' (the Indic word for society), and evokes its traditional (pre-British Indian colony) role in supporting and maintaining key services such as public works and education. By evoking this traditional society – the *samaj* – Tagore brings into question the very approach that divides the world into a binary, one part of which is the governance-and-individual-rights-dispensing 'state' and the other is the governance-and-right-enjoying 'individual'. In Tagore's words:

"What is called 'State' in English is called 'government' in our modern parlance. In ancient India this government took the form of monarchy. But there is a difference between the western state and our monarchy. England has entrusted the state with all welfare activities for the country. India had done it only partially. It is not that it was not the king's duty to reward or nurture those who had been like 'Guru's to the country, those who had dispensed education and religious instruction to the country gratis, but it was only partially so. Basically, it was the duty of the common householder. If the king stopped help, if the country became anarchic, still education and religious instruction would not be totally hampered. It is true that the monarch used to excavate lakes for the subjects, but he did it like any other prosperous person of the society. The water reservoir of the country would not be dried up even if the king were not caring enough.

In the West everyone is free to secure their own entertainment and realize their own goals in life – the more important duties are vested in the monarchy. In our country the monarchy is relatively independent, it is the common man who is committed to his duties. The king may go to fight or to hunt, he may carry out his kingly duties or spend his time in pleasure, his fate will be decided by the heavens, but the people do not depend entirely on him for their own welfare – the various social tasks are distributed among all members of society in a diverse, wonderful manner." (Tagore 2013)

Caged Tiger makes no reference to these alternative (and, one could argue, more culturally rooted) conceptions of the Indian nation and Indian society. For this reason, the book's perspectival apparatus appears too Euro-America-centric, and the author's analysis constrained by a strict binary vision that generalizes and oversimplifies the Indian political and cultural scenarios. This becomes even more apparent when Bhadra proceeds to comment on the educational scenario of post-1947 and contemporary India. Bhadra consistently uses the political binary of left and right to characterize governments and ideologies.

For this reason, while reading the book, the reader might get the impression that the tendencies and causes represented by the political left and right elsewhere applies literally to the Indian political and cultural situations. For example, Bhadra labels all those who complain of anti-Hindu bias in Indian history textbooks as “right-wing groups”. (Bhadra 2023, p. 155) This characterisation begs the question whether it is inconceivable to occupy a political space beyond this binary – for instance, can it not be the case where one may complain of anti-Hindu bias in Indian historiography while still envisaging healthcare and/or education entirely as public sectors? One wonders whether such a position would be adequately characterised by the left/right binary.

One also wonders whether the characterisation of such complainants as “right-wing groups” be unequivocal, in the first place. Was it at all necessary, for instance, for the author to characterise them as always belonging to some group, homogenous in terms of opinions in all matters, political and cultural? Interestingly, Bhadra refers to left-leaning players in the domain of education and historical studies as “academics”; and, in contrast, for those who do not demonstrate a bias towards the left, he uses characterisations such as “right-wing groups”, or “right-wing ideologues” at best. (Bhadra 2023, p. 155) Among those who have consistently pointed out anti-Hindu bias in Indian history textbooks are reputable academics and authors such as the linguist Prof. Kapil Kapoor, the political scientist and historian Dr. Meenakshi Jain, and the historian Dr. Vikram Sampath. Will Bhadra’s characterisation apply on these academics? Such issues cast shadows on the credibility of *Caged Tiger*, and the reader starts to harbour doubts whether she should see it as more of a polemical essay rather than a balanced, unbiased book on Indian polity.

Also, while analysing the school education scenario, Bhadra neither mentions nor hints at the lack of parity, in terms of constitutional rights as mentioned in Articles 29 and 30, between educational institutions run or managed by members or groups belonging to one of the several minority communities in India and those that are run or managed by members or groups belonging to the majority Hindu community, as has been frequently pointed out by several Hindu organizations. (The Hindu, December 28, 2019) A book such as *Caged Tiger*, one would expect, should have highlighted contentious issues such as this one, in order to not only restore balance in its inputs to the contemporary political and cultural discourses, but also to make original contribution in thought.

Now we turn to the other pillar of Bhadra’s assumption, viz., democratic institutions. The parliament is one of the most important such institutions in this country. However, comparing the political culture in the USA or the UK with that of India – as reflected in the values and activities of the democratically elected representatives at the national level – without providing any caveat relating to contemporary political situations in these regions, does not seem to be sound. Barring one or two instances (such as Rep. Ilhan Omar, who often betrays her extra-national allegiances through her speeches (Hoyt 2024)), the commitment of politicians in the UK parliament or the US congress to their respective country’s national interest is fairly unquestionable. The same cannot be said about politicians in the Indian parliament, especially in light of the repeated occurrences of cash-for-query offences and the resulting expulsion of Members of Parliament due to their breach of privilege (for instance, in 2005 and 2023). Bhadra’s book makes little effort to allude to such qualitative distinctions that exist between the political cultures of the USA/the UK and India, while comparing the two.

However, the book does help highlight important questions of government interference in the

lives of common citizens – in issues as basic as one's choice of food and entertainment consumption – and thereby indirectly points to a vacuum, viz., the need of a mediator between the government leviathan and the individual citizen. And therein lies the value of Bhadra's book. Will the traditional idea of *samaj* or some contemporary modification thereof be able to fill that vacuum – and if it does, what will be the nature of its functioning? Will it be able to acquire its character from a set of practices, ideas, and ideals rooted in the culture of the (still extant) Indic civilisation, while keeping itself relevant for the current (and quickly evolving) context, thereby becoming a '*Swadeshi Samaj*', as evoked by Tagore – or will it be more of a 'civil society' as understood in the Western context? Or, perhaps, an assimilation of one into the other? One hopes that these hitherto unaddressed but critically important questions will be taken up by some future author, sooner rather than later.

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