SHEPHERDING is suddenly chic. A flock of books about a shepherd’s life have recently been published in England. One was written by a shepherd who did an undergraduate degree at Oxford and then returned to his life with the sheep; his book was on the bestseller list for several months. Another was by a shepherd who later became a barrister. These books belong to a literary tradition that claims descent from Virgil’s *Georgics*, via W.H. Hudson and Thomas Firbank.¹ A distinguished but inaccessible member of this tradition is the book published in 1956 by a knowledgeable herder who was also President of Mongolia: it is elegantly produced, with watercolour illustrations of the main forage plants, but is written in the classical Mongolian script which was replaced by Cyrillic in the 1940s and is today largely forgotten in Mongolia.²

Despite the long line of evidence, the idea that shepherds have something to teach scientists and professional livestock managers continues to make news, often amongst difficulties and rejection. One of the most recent steps forward is an important study on the knowledge and practices of French sheep herders. The book, a collection of papers, is edited by Michel Meuret and Fred Provenza, respectively a French researcher who has worked extensively in the Alpine and Mediterranean regions from a base at Montpellier, and a US ex-ranch manager and scholar from Utah State University.

The book includes fifteen contributions organized in six sections. The opening section introduces us to shepherding in France, past and present. The last section discusses the occupation of shepherding by shepherds’ own pens. In between are sections on actual shepherding practices and their relationship with feeding behaviour in flocks, the link between shepherding and nature conservation, and the growing phenomenon of herding schools.

The idea for the book grew out of a network (BEHAVE) bringing together researchers, livestock farmers and private and public-land managers from several continents. The aim of the network is to study more seriously the relationship between the grazing behaviour of domestic livestock, especially sheep, and their environment, a relationship dominated by the herder’s choice of grazing circuits, sequences of vegetation grazed and the sheep’s appetite. Sheep can learn to create, by their competence in grazing, a diet richer than what scientists expect from the area. This ‘food culture’ of flocks involves sheep learning to mix grasses, forbs and shrubs in valuable combinations. Shepherds can optimise the benefits of this competence by closely managing intake, tracking high quality forage and strategically sequencing access to a diversity of fodder plants, including lower quality and ‘appetisers’.

The shepherds studied in this book have a precise geographical understanding of the patterns sheep follow when grazing. Concepts of ‘sector’ and ‘quarter’ are used to mentally partition grazing land; a ‘circuit’ is the route followed by the flock over the course of a day,
running through several sectors within a quarter. The flock may repeat the same circuit for days in a row and the sheep then gradually graze all the forage available in the various sectors visited, or the flock moves rapidly on to a new circuit. The routes differ little from year to year. There are a number of fixed points on each circuit, including night-time and midday rest areas.

‘Grazing circuits’ are an important component of herder strategies. A circuit might cover a whole day, during which the flock would graze on a variety of forages (albeit always including meadow grasses) in a single meal. Completing such a circuit might take six hours, including five hours of grazing, with the shepherd actively orienting the direction and speed of the flock’s movement, and the time the flock spends on each fodder species. Grazing circuits harnesses the diversity of vegetation by creating combinations and synergies between the available resources. A circuit allows herders to compose a meal for the sheep that is sufficient in quality and quantity and which maintains the nutritional status even on pastures of lower overall productivity.

The spatial behaviour of the flock at different points, its direction and pace of travel, can be predicted by the experienced herder. Like water points in the drylands, there are points of interest in the mountains—mainly near peaks and ridges—which attract the flock and which, in the absence of any other force, the sheep will move towards. Sheep flock patterns shift and transform according to land features, changes in vegetation, weather conditions, and the herder’s actions. Shepherds interpret and use these patterns more or less consciously.

Two of the chapters record discussions between herders about these issues. The first is a conversation about how to stimulate the sheep’s appetites and promote selective grazing. The second concerns shepherd- ing more generally, including the impact of tourism, the way migrating flocks block roads, disposal of sheep manure, the growth of second homes in mountain passes by a ‘king goat’ (shahboz). Indeed, research in the 1980s on Fulani herders in Mali on their annual migration found that the combination of mobility and selective grazing by the cattle enabled the animals to enjoy a diet richer in nutrients than the average value of the rangelands they used. This observation was behind the seminal paper by Breman and De Wit on rangeland productivity in the Sahel, which showed that the highest concentrations of nutrients were to be found in the dryer northern

Group behaviour is maintained by the presence of ‘experienced guide’ animals who understand quickly what is expected of them, and are able to induce others to follow. Experienced guide sheep are kept in the herd even if their economic performance is no better than average. They are awarded a bell, the sound of which reinforces herd cohesion. A prerequisite for this sort of behaviour is that the young animals are trained in a number of skills: recognize food plants (the young learn by imitating their mothers, but must be led to places where they can see the entire range of plants eaten by adults); recognize the herder’s authority; and follow gazing circuits (albeit not necessarily the same ones as for adult animals). In some circumstances adult sheep must also be trained. This is done by mixing them with experienced guide sheep, from whom they learn.

The Art and Science of Shepherd ing provides good examples of the way shepherds and sheep work together. It is an important contribution to understanding the relationship between herders, animals and natural environment in pastoralism, its necessary conditions and economic importance. Shepherding in the French mountains is not the same as pastoral systems in the Sahel or in other dryland and mountain areas of the world. Yet scholars of pastoralism, whatever their area of specialization, are likely to find themselves surprisingly at home in this book. Livestock herded with competence, says the evidence presented in The Art and Science of Shepherd ing, have a more nutritious diet than livestock grazing on their own. Besides, managing landscapes by competent herding is both more sustainable and cheaper than using fences or other technologies. French shepherds discussing the rationale for their itineraries, their concerns for stimulating, even teasing, their animals’ appetite and avoiding distractions and disturbances to grazing, will sound familiar to the readers of Nomadic Peoples and we bet—would be immediately understood by pastoralists in the Sahel, in the Mongolian steppes, or in the mountains of Iran.

Indeed, research in the 1980s on Fulani herders in Mali on their annual migration found that the combination of mobility and selective grazing by the cattle enabled the animals to enjoy a diet richer in nutrients than the average value of the rangelands they used. This observation was behind the seminal paper by Breman and De Wit on rangeland productivity in the Sahel, which showed that the highest concentrations of nutrients were to be found in the dryer northern

3. Luri pastoralists of north western Iran evidently think that goats are needed to teach sheep these things; each sheep flock contains one or two goats to mentor the sheep, and on the great spring and autumn migrations each sheep flock is led through the mountain passes by a ‘king goat’ (shahboz).


belt (contrary to the conventional belief that pasture quality increased as animals went south). That the nutritional value of heterogeneous rangelands can be increased by selective grazing by the livestock and by herd mobility became a pivotal tenet in the theoretical rethinking of pastoralism in the 1990s and is now recognized even in some advanced policies.

Knowledge and ability of this sort are largely the result of learning. Sheep learn to graze, shepherds learn to herd. There is no room for a romantic view of grazing skills as innate or ‘natural’. Just as people are not born shepherds, but learn the trade by putting in the hours (and, as in any activity, some do better than others), livestock’s performance too depends significantly on experience, both the experience of the herders and that of the sheep.

Modern investment in French pastoralism started in 1972, when a pastoral code was drafted by herders’ associations and public authorities, the former trying to improve living and working standards, the latter seeking to stop the depopulation of the mountains. Today, French pastoralism benefits from important institutional, financial and technical support and represents a distinctive element of identity in the regions where it is performed; a shepherd on French rangelands earns twice as much as colleagues in neighbouring EU countries, operates in a more comfortable setting and enjoys higher social and political prestige.

The development of professional shepherding is supported by four herding schools offering long-term training programmes. Each school addresses the specificities of the hosting region and focuses on the sector of local specialization: dairy/meat; cattle/sheep. The schools are run by the Ministry of Agriculture, and funded by the local authorities, and receive roughly 300 entrance applications each year. Surprisingly, of these, eighty per cent are from people in cities.

This is an original book, with new and far-reaching ideas. It is about France, but the lessons it draws are important, perhaps critical, for those who want to understand the dynamics and future of pastoralism everywhere.

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In his immense book, Don Watson provides a thoughtful and fascinating account of 200 years of Australian ‘bush’ history. Extremely well researched, The Bush explores the complexities and controversies of White settlement across Australia’s vast interior. The importance of livestock in ‘unlocking the land’, and the nation ‘riding on the sheep’s back’ is a core theme. What we now regard as environmental degradation – ancient forests cleared to provide pasturage – was then the ‘progress and prosperity’ of settlers changing the landscape forever to generate small towns and a European rural life based on sheep and cattle.

The pioneering spirit of the bushmen and women is the source of many of Australia’s ideas about itself; with ‘Waltzing Matilda’ – the most famous of the bush ballads – describing the suicide of a swagman caught for stealing a sheep. In reviewing the history of the colonization of the bush, and the emergence of its role in Australia’s national identity, Watson describes the appalling treatment of indigenous Australians who had managed the landscape for millennia. Using stories of the lives of settler individuals he brings home the successes and failures of pastoral life: the boom years followed by bust from droughts, floods, fires, rabbits, disease, soil erosion, the impact of high interest rates or wool prices set in London. Pastoral life in the Australian bush could be an enduring misery, as one description of the life shepherds – often former convicts – illustrates:

‘They watched their flocks by day from un-shady trees, by night from a purpose-built utilitarian watch box, two metres long by a metre wide, with handles at each end so it could be moved about like a litter. Strychnine baits hung from the trees with nearby tins of water for the dingoes to drink with their meals to hasten the effects of the poison… Shepherds were given anything from 200 to 1 500 sheep to guard in the daylight; at night
they yarded them between moveable hurdles. To eat they had flour, salted mutton or beef, and tea. They were never compensated for loneliness or fear… or for the acrid, flyblown filth in which they lived.’

Watson’s book is wide ranging in scope and appeal. He has extensive knowledge of the fauna and flora, and through his widespread travels across Australia provides the human details that make the narrative resonate. Watson’s reading of the memoirs of Australia’s settler women helps fill the gaps in frequently male versions of history. But what holds the reader’s attention most through the nearly 400 pages is the beauty of the writing and the fluid tone: Watson uses openness and humour in his contemplations; explaining the history of the bush without judgement, and leaving us to ponder how we would have fared in the circumstances.

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LIVING WITH DISASTERS: Communities and Development in the Indian Sundarbans


The book Living with Disasters: Communities and Development in the Indian Sundarbans provides an engaging account of the ways in which the lives of the people of Sundarban are juxtaposed against the policies of a governance system which is essentially inept. Through an ethnography of ‘state-making’ in the village of Kusumpur in Gosaba block where he did his primary fieldwork, author Amites Mukhopadhyay endeavours to explain how the inhabitants of the village sustain their vulnerable existence in the endangered landscape by negotiating with the political processes and the local factions of the state.

The village is essentially one among the many in the lower islands of the Sundarbans, where the constantly changing course of the river and its tidal action erodes large chunks of inhabited land along with prospects of living and land based occupations. People are, therefore, integrally dependent on the resources of the adjacent rivers and the forest, as well as on labour works to protract their living from the eroding landscape, where they are gradually ‘losing ground beneath their feet’ (p. 2). In this background, the book, through a combination of reviewing a pioneering anthropological scholarship, along with an intense ethnographic fieldwork, provides a nuanced interpretation of the transitions from a harmonious and equitable natural reality to that of an ecological disorder and disaggregated social interests.

The book argues that a shared history of settlement in a reasonably endangered physical locality and a shared experience of marginalization from the economy and its material entitlements, does not uniformly translate into homogenous bonds of kinship, reciprocities and sustainable ecological practices acquired through traditional knowledge. Rather, such landscapes are often marked by structural asymmetries, strained power relations and feuds within a seemingly congruous community which is historically perceived to be antithetical to the influences of the market and the state. The book transcends the overarching meta-narratives of the concepts of ‘indigeneity’ and ‘community’ and reflects on the fact that in an endangered habitation, where the chances of survival are made and remade through the fad of nature, ascription to indigenous virtues and collective identity is often concessional.

The ethnography of practices like prawn farming and embankment construction which the book focuses on, reveal the realities of corruption within the governance system as well as within the locale. Contrary to the image of a conventional sociality where the everyday life of the reasonably constrained community is lived in opposition to the epochal conservationist policies of the state, we find a necessarily endangered habitation in existence which, although constrained, does not represent ideals of reciprocity and harmonious living.

Following the introduction the author reviews the journey of Sundarbans from a ‘wasteland’ to a ‘wonderland’. The process describes the colonial efforts in reclamation of the forests for wetland agriculture and revenue as well as the post-colonial image of the Sundarbans as a World Heritage Site and a natural abode of biodiversity and wilderness that merits conservation. The next four chapters are eloquent in their ethnography of the lived experiences in the village where the study has been conducted. Construction of the embankments and the disjointed nature of governance policies practiced therein, provide a significant mainstay account of the third chapter. Despite having some of the key departments and subsequent provisions concerned with the maintenance of the embankments among other infrastructural developments in the Sundarbans, most of such provisions are disconnected from each other and thus fail to ensure the specific development schemes warranted for the region. The processes of building and maintaining the embankments are enmeshed into local level politics since the...
 contractors and the engineers of the Department of Irrigation are rarely driven by the pursuit of development as much as they are by the pursuit of land acquisition and profit, in the pretext of embankment repair.

As the author states, ‘What actually happens in the name of urgent development work is either indiscriminate land acquisition on the pretext of building ring embankments or hastily done patch work repair of breaches that is likely to lead to problems in future’ (p. 56). Even in the aftermath of cyclone Aila, the relief and aid directed towards the massive destruction of life and livelihood was mainly centred on reinforcing the political-party rivalries between the Left Front government and Trinamool Congress and establishing subsequent vote banks.

Chapter four foregrounds the realities of livelihoods centred on embankment construction. The chapter discusses the ways in which ‘communities’ are produced in active negotiations with the governmental machinery. Corruption is implicit within the image of villagers as embankment workers and labour supervisors. Through instances of ‘stealing the earth’ by the workers, inherent within the process of embankment construction, the marginalized islanders in an already endangered landscape endeavour to make money, even if this practice further threatens their own protective bunds as well as their habitation.

Chapter five is juxtaposed between the identity construction of the tribals within the discourses of aboriginality on the one hand and their image as ‘beldars’ or the hired embankment workers of the Irrigation Department, on the other. The dominant image of the tribals of the Sundarbans as tiger chasers and jungle clearers during the colonial period, contrasts with their contemporary role as beldars. Transcending the emotive appeal of community as ‘homogenous, harmonious and territorially bound’, and of indigeneity as ‘primordial’, the transforming role of the tribals challenge the popular generics of these terms in their efforts to survive a necessarily hostile ecology. The next chapter focuses on ‘prawn politics’ captured through the ways in which prawn fisheries are set up and operate in the Sundarbans with active negotiations with the political parties. Both the prawn trade and the network of individuals who sustain it, are hierarchical in their possession of assets and are varied in their ability to manipulate the local political interfaces of the government.

The capture and culturing of prawns in an already fragile landscape like the Sundarbans is highly unsustainable; yet it is promoted by a large network of people, backed by the state, multifaceted corporate interests and political parties against their usually intense narratives of ‘sustainability and unsustainability’. The conclusion summarizes the contribution of the book and reflects on the policy inaction and underdevelopment in the region through the structures of power and politics reinforced by the state.

The book provides a rich account of the incipient political process and its corollaries in the everyday life of the people in the Sundarbans. It discerns how the ‘state’ is implicated within the everyday life of the villagers, evident from several local practices through which a livelihood is attempted to be eked out. Within the few anthropological accounts on the Sundarbans and its people, the present treatise proves to be a pioneering contribution, magnificent in its portrayal of transformations in the context of identity, politics and the dominant narratives on conservation and development.

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REINVENTING SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT: Insights from Indian and Scandinavian Comparisons edited by Olle Törnquist and John Harriss. Manohar, Delhi, 2017.

THIS is a unique book for at least three reasons. First, it is a rare attempt in comparative politics and development studies which draws insights from two disparate settings of India and Scandinavia. Using the method of contrasted contexts, this book tries to compare the different efforts at realizing social democratic development in these two regions with a clear emphasis on identifying common elements of the development and social democratic orientation in the two countries.

Second, this book is a unique amalgamation of work by a range of scholars from both North and South, including an Indian bureaucrat, with their expertise in economics, political science, political economy, sociology, international studies and history. While these diverse disciplinary backgrounds help introduce different methods and approaches to the book, it is interesting to note how these different approaches are deployed in an attempt to construct a coherent narrative. Partly funded by the Norwegian Research Council and partly by the scholars themselves, this book project is a labour of love of concerned scholars and advocates of social democracy.

Third, with an aim to reinvent social democratic development by drawing on insights from Indian and Scandinavian experiences, this book makes a unique
contribution to existing literature on social democracy *per se*, defined here as ‘democratic politics towards the combination of social equity and economic growth’. In the context of uneven development, flawed democracies and weak states, the book argues for the need to reinvent the extent understanding of social democratic development and advances recommendations for India as well as Scandinavia.

However, it is also in part because of these reasons that the book comes across as somewhat forced attempt to put together seemingly rather different contexts, concepts and methods. So, for instance, experiences in social democracy in Kerala and West Bengal, which are states in India, are compared/contrasted with those of Norway and Sweden, which are full-fledged countries. Given the federal character of the Indian state and the dynamics of regional politics in India, it is difficult enough to carry out any inter-state comparisons within India, let alone with the Scandinavian countries. In the name of comparative analysis, stand alone essays on social democratic development experiments in India and Scandinavia are placed next to each other. And though a theoretical framework of four fundamental processes of social democratic politics is presented as the unifying element across the book, the different chapters do not convincingly engage with the given theoretical framework. Instead, readers are reminded of the framework in the introductory and concluding paragraphs of the chapters which quite evidently, is a *post hoc* contribution of the editors.

The first chapter presents a theoretical framework including four fundamental processes central to social democratic politics – first, formation and organization of democratic political collectivities; second, construction of democratic linkages between state and the society; third, the inculcation of the struggle based on common popular interests and ideas of universal civil, political and social rights; and fourth, development of coalitions between capital and labour. What follows is a set of ten essays on the very different experiences of India and Scandinavia related to fundamental processes of social democratic politics.

The second chapter by the editors undertakes a historico-sociopolitical analysis of India and Scandinavia examining the early efforts in establishing social democracy in the two regions. Even though an attempt was made to introduce elements of socialism in the Constitution of India, the political compact reached in the 1940s did not allow for an explicit mention of the term ‘socialism’ in the Constitution. In early post-colonial India, the economic development paradigm chosen, although celebrating the role of the state equally laid emphasis on private capital owned by a few family controlled business groups. In Scandinavia, given higher levels of literacy and political participation of the masses in local decision making processes, the mobilization of the people happened from below. In India, by contrast, the masses were mobilized ‘politically through networks of clientelism and patronage around local “big men” and – increasingly – through the populist appeals of political leaders’ (p. 51). The next chapter, also authored by the editors, critically appraises the Indian experiences in social democracy in Kerala and West Bengal and discusses the successes and weaknesses of the left inclined political parties in India.

By examining the first element within the proposed social democratic development paradigm, i.e. the establishment of a political collective, Hilde Sandvik discusses the evolution from ‘local citizenship’ to ‘universalization politics’ in Scandinavia. Post industrialization and the subsequent experience of the Great Depression, Scandinavia saw the rise of a new protective liberal legislation which helped prevent a full-scale commodification of society. Moreover, the political strata that controlled the different political parties in Scandinavia was drawn not only from the working class but also from the world of art and literature, thus signalling the importance of aesthetics in Scandinavian imagination. This is followed by a chapter on the prospects for a social democratic alliance in India today. What stands out are discussions by John Harriss on the politics of the middle class. In this context, the recent rise (and quite prophetically, the fall) of the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi, is discussed theoretically. Harriss argues that ‘the AAP episode shows… demand in Indian society for an alternative politics and the possibility to bring together an important fraction of the “mass middle class”…’ However, the durability of the AAP will depend on its ability to maintain internal stability, avoid infighting and transform a protest movement into a functional party.

In a long and descriptive essay, N.C. Saxena, bureaucrat and planner, discusses needed administrative reforms to establish linkages between state and the society in India. The problem he identifies is that of ‘weak governance, manifesting itself in poor service delivery, uncaring administration, corruption, and uncoordinated and wasteful public expenditure are key factors impinging on real development’ (p. 131).

Contrasting Indian experiences with those of Scandinavia, Torsten Svensson argues that corruption needs to be understood as collective action where acts
like bribery and nepotism are an integral part of shared expectations of how the system works. Consequently, governance reforms require both a strengthening of controls as well as fostering of trust in the government – the civil servants and other state representatives. In this context, it is instructive to decode the transformation of Sweden from a poor and corrupt country through much of the 19th century to now as one of the least corrupt countries in the world to draw out lessons for India. Svensson argues that the Swedish strategy vis-à-vis the civil services and other policy reforms, such as the move towards universalism and supporting legal discourse, among others, significantly contributed to the development of trust and cooperation in the country. Unsurprisingly, Svensson advocates universalism and universal welfare policies in the Indian context. However, given the currently dominant political and policy discourse in India, which favours a moving away from universalism towards selective and targeted programmes, it seems that India has set off on its own unique development trajectory very different from that of Scandinavia.

Even as Neera Chandhoke fulminates over the ‘chequered history of social rights in India’, Fredrik Engelstad discusses how by following a policy of privileging social rights, decommodification and democracy, a welfare state was established in Scandinavia. The essay on ‘Social Equality as Development Strategy’ by Kalle Moene presents an egalitarian path to affluence by invoking the Scandinavian experience where market efficiency is combined with social equality. Chapter eleven, a prescriptive essay by Pranab Bardhan, provides general reflections on the broad patterns and trends in democratic and economic development in India.

The last word rests with the main editors of the book. Given the complex nature of the topic in hand and a series of distinctive essays preceding the conclusion, the editors faced a daunting challenge of summing up all that had been said while also trying to advance policy prescriptions on how to reinvent social democratic development both in India as well as Scandinavia. Invoking Karl Polanyi’s warning about the emergence of countermovements in response to an aggressive pursuit of economic liberalism, the editors argue that India requires countermovements of resistance from ‘broad alliances for social and work related rights in addition to impartial governance’ (p. 326). Moreover, that this process requires international cooperation between like-minded states including Scandinavia, not just because of altruistic but also economic reasons. The editors are of the belief that following the greater integration of the global markets, it is in the interest of Scandinavia to support labour unions and other progressive partners in countries with uneven development so as to temper the challenges emerging from poor pay, inhumane work conditions and global climate change. Clearly, however, developed countries are now increasingly wary of migrants and increased refugee inflow, evident in the recent policy decisions of the Trump administration in the US and the Brexit support in the United Kingdom. Thus unlike the arguments in the book, recent policy decisions by the developed countries do not indicate any move towards increasing international cooperation to promote equitable wage contracts in the countries with uneven development but rather favour inward looking policies to protect their own industries. It is, therefore, unrealistic to expect that Scandinavia would make any serious effort towards helping reinvent social democratic development in India.

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INTERPRETING THE WORLD TO CHANGE

IT is no easy task to review a book written in honour of one of the more celebrated and popular teachers of one’s own time and discipline. Although I have never been a student of Prabhat Patnaik, as a student of Economics in the same university, though not in the same centre – Centre for Economic Studies and Planning (CESP) where he taught for years – I have long been an admirer of his work as both researcher and teacher. The book, edited by two of his colleagues in JNU – C.P. Chandrasekhar and Jayati Ghosh – brings together contributions from a number of disciplines, including history, philosophy, political science and language, as well as film studies. The book further transgresses disciplinary boundaries in the sense that it includes contributions from ‘non-academics’ as well, for instance full-time politicians such as Prakash Karat and Sitaram Yechury, both of whom were students in JNU.

While appreciating the range of contributions from a multitude of disciplines and vocations, a marked strength of the book, the specific choice of contributors is a little disappointing. The editors claim that the selection reflects ‘an attempt to bring together a group
of people who, other than being personally close to him in various ways, have been influenced by Prabhat Patnaik to different degrees in their own work – both through his writings or their direct interaction with his work.’ So far so good. What appears somewhat problematic is the allied claim that the specific selection of contributors is truly reflective of Prabhat’s concerns, especially because Prabhat is known to engage with a variety of disciplines and strands of thought. Intriguingly, however, this quality does not seem to be as well represented as one might have expected in a book published in his honour. For instance, one would have liked a few more contributions from Prabhat’s contemporaries, especially from someone who, though connecting with him professionally, does not necessarily subscribe to the Marxist school of thought. This might have made the book more complete. An extremely polite and humble person, Prabhat has always commanded tremendous respect among fellow economists, including those who do not share his political affiliations or policy positions, largely because of his perceived willingness to ‘listen’. While one ‘understands’ the constraint of space when deciding on contributions, the absence of diverse and differing schools of thought is disappointing. I clearly remember Prabhat once making the point in a seminar about the need for different arguments to make the debate sharper – this variety is missing in the book.

This is not because the contributors are not eminent and highly regarded experts, but more because the ‘mix’ disregards one of Prabhat’s most desirable and engaging traits as an ‘intellectual’ – the ability to respect views and analysis radically different from his own.

The title of the book Interpreting the World to Change It is obviously a reference to the famous quote from Karl Marx: ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.’ The title may well represent Prabhat’s own life and work but I am not sure if it is equally reflective of all the contributions to this book. Interestingly, several contributions to this book revolve around analyzing Jawaharlal Nehru’s thoughts, politics and policies and, in more than one way, is he who emerges as a more powerful claimant of the title!

At least three essays by noted scholars from different disciplines – Irfan Habib from history, Akeel Bilgrami from philosophy and C.P. Chandrasekhar from economics – directly discuss Nehru, his ideas and policies. Bilgrami’s essay, ‘Is there an Indian Secularism’, brilliantly builds on the Hegelian perspective to argue for Nehru’s position, especially in the context of allowing Muslims to have their own personal law as not being in violation of his secularist identity or position. Bilgrami argues that given the context of heavy losses suffered by the Muslim community at the time of Partition in different spheres, such as loss of numbers due to massive migration of their brethren to the other side, abolition of zamindari, loss of their language Urdu and so on, it would have been coercive to impose a uniform civil law. Thus, the choice of permitting the continuation of a Muslim personal law based upon the Sharia needs to be viewed more as affirmative action in the cultural sphere in order to enable the community to prepare itself to accept liberal laws at a later stage. What eventually happened is a separate issue and, therefore, Bilgrami argues that the decision to adjust with and accommodate Muslim fears and concerns should not be used to question Nehru’s secularist positions.

Irfan Habib’s essay, though critical of Nehru in parts, is clearly written more as an appreciation of the man, his ideas and actions. While helping the reader understand the complex relationship between Nehru and the national movement, the essay helps humanize the person and his dilemmas because of the recounting of certain personal anecdotes. C.P. Chandrasekhar too, in his analysis of the post-independent development model based on central planning and socialist principles, argues that while Nehru remained committed to socialist ideals, he made compromises, perhaps due to diverse political pressures that did not allow the full benefits of the central planning model to fructify.

Mithir Bhattacharya’s essay titled ‘Culture in the War of Position’ is another article that deserves special mention. The essay discusses important and complex concepts of ‘transactival’ texts coming from people’s culture (not popular culture), which is continuously evolving in contexts of both time and space, and ‘transordinal’ texts where markets play a dominant role. It goes on to discuss the role of such oral and non-oral texts in the evolution of art and performance, and in politics and society. This is the only essay that discusses the dilemma of the relationship between artists and the world of power, especially when power resides in the hands of those whose politics they also share, or think they share.

Two of the essays, by Ashok Mitra and Rajendra Prasad, are personal in nature and bring out different facets of Prabhat Patnaik’s personality and scholarship. However, here again, one would have welcomed greater variety! The fact that despite being a card carrying member of the CPI(M), Prabhat signed a letter condemning the then Chinese government for firing on protesting students at Tiananmen Square finds mention in Rajendra Prasad’s piece, possibly to indicate
Prabhat’s independence of thought. But I suspect there have been several other occasions when Prabhat may not have signed such letters, despite personally supportive of the positions reflected. A personal piece from someone who could also have talked of these dilemmas would have added immense value to the book. Similarly, the absence of any reference to and analysis of the experience of Left Front governments in Kerala and West Bengal is conspicuous in a book where several essays analyse the post-independent economy and critique the neo-liberal phase from a Marxian perspective. That at least would have highlighted the limitations and compulsions of a sub-national ‘socialist’ government in a federal economy and electoral polity based democracy as also brought out the fact that it was not Nehru alone who had to make compromises.

What unites most contributions to the book is a critique of the neo-liberal development model adopted since the early 1990s, alongside a palpable fear of and possibly some kind of frustration over the recent emergence of Narendra Modi and the political right. However, while fully sharing the criticism, fear and even frustration, I feel some essays lack the desired intellectual rigour. Long ago, a friend had commented that ‘listening to Prabhat Patnaik on imperialism and Romila Thapar on ancient Indian history is like listening to Kishori Amonkar’s Hindustani singing’. He was an admirer and thus could be exaggerating, but was obviously referring to the clarity of thought, rigour of analysis, depth and detailing of the arguments, and perhaps also the diction and style reflected in Prabhat’s speech and writing. If we were to take that as a yardstick, some essays fall short.

Let me end by referring to a personal incident which I am reasonably sure Professor Prabhat Patnaik is likely to have forgotten. Once, I think it was in 2008, I was attending a conference on education organized by the Left Front government of Kerala, and Prabhat was part of a panel discussion. He was arguing for education processes to be directed towards preparing students for questioning all forms of hegemony – something I was in total agreement with. But when asked a question – ‘What about questioning the hegemony of the organized Left’, his response was that given the situation one is in, one has to live with that hegemony. I can’t but help thinking that I sense some kind of the same ‘living with that hegemony’ in this book as well!

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