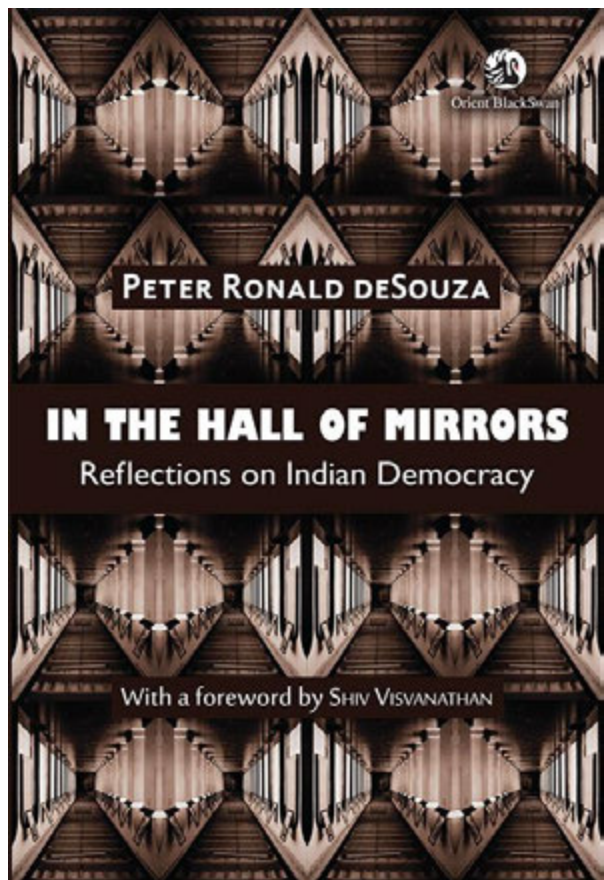




**Smita Gupta**

**In the Hall of Mirrors: Reflections on Indian Democracy review: Same country, different worlds**

**Understanding why India is messy, complex and many-layered**



When the basic tenets of democracy are being challenged in many parts of the world, including in India, the publication of Peter Ronald deSouza’s eminently readable collection of essays is very timely. The 53 thought-provoking essays is intended as much for the serious student of political science as the lay reader.

The essays, published over the last two decades in a variety of publications and books, puts the spotlight on the democracy-driven social transformation taking place in India. But even as Prof. deSouza dwells on what democracy has done to India, he also seeks to answer the question, “What is India doing to democracy?” in this volume.

He also uses an evocative image to explain the complexities of Indian democracy at work, an image that gives the book its title. “The Indian hall of mirrors,” he explains, “is... like a bedroom in a Mughal palace where the ceiling is dotted with mirrors which, when a single candle is lit, gives a sense of the night sky. The picture they collectively produce, since they are many and of different curvatures, will not be a single image which a set of mirrors of the same focal point would produce, but a

sense of the universe that is India.”

The book is divided into five clusters, with the first four, ‘Analytical Frames’, ‘Aspirations of a Young Nation’, ‘Anxieties of a Plural Democracy’, ‘Accommodations of a Layered Society’, leading up to the concluding sections that focuses on the complications of democracy in the pluralist society that is India, ‘Ambivalences of a Constitutional Polity’.

The essays in the first cluster illustrate the many viewpoints from which the working of Indian democracy can be explored. For instance, the first is on the “public life” of the intellectual, who continually moves “between thought and action, between analysis and intervention”. Another essay deals with the need to bring Indian epics — that

continue to have enormous popular appeal — “into our contemporary discourse of Indian politics” as they would provide “a rich lode of moral conundrums”. A third essay introduces the issue of utopias in social theory through a brief discussion of the Gandhian frame developed in the *Hind Swaraj*.

“Aspirations of a Young Nation” looks at the way various people — ranging from a freedom fighter to a Dalit poet to an examination of statistical data sets of public opinion — “imagined this young nation would be.” The first essay in this section on Maulana Abul Kalam Azad focuses on his willingness to forego *swaraj* — or self rule — for Hindu Muslim unity “if asked to make such a cruel choice by the angel from the high heavens,” a choice, Professor deSouza points out, that is “pertinent” to remember in “these troublesome times.” A second essay is about the Constituent Assembly debate when the Gandhian model of democracy was being discussed and the question being asked was whether the basic unit of the constitutional order should be the individual or the village. A third essay is an elaboration “of three rebellious positions in this young nation, the most acerbic of which is the Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal.”

### **The Nehruvian model**

The opening essay in the third section “concerns the undermining of the Nehruvian state by the NDA government”: undermining it, the writer says, “is fraught with too many dangers. The social costs of even trying out other models are just too high.” The other chapters deal with the anxieties that our democracy confronts, such as violence against women, civic neglect, authoritarian leaders damaging institutions, hate, politics and religion and the demographic overload that stretches the rule of law. “By pointing these anxieties out in a social context,” the writer says, “one is alerting the global democratic community to their significance to the distinct Indian experience of working a democracy.”

‘Accommodations of a Layered Society’ deals with the adjustment of competing claims as a key aspect of democratic life in India. The concluding essay in the last section, ‘Ambivalences of a Constitutional Polity’ puts the spotlight on the core dilemma of politics. “Let us call it the Yudhistira conundrum,” writes Professor deSouza, “When uncertain he faces Drona who wants to know whether his son is dead, should he be principled or...pragmatic, should he tell the truth or should he tell a half-truth? I ask the question as if the contrast between the two choices is clear. It never can be. This is Indian democracy.”

In describing the liberal predicament in post-Independence India, *In The Hall of Mirrors* focusses on a society grappling with the competing demands of various interest groups — defined by religion, caste, region — who live in different worlds, even though in the same country. This book is a must read for all those who wish to understand the workings of this messy, complex, many layered, constantly changing democracy.

*In the Hall of Mirrors: Reflections on Indian Democracy*; **Peter Ronald deSouza, Orient BlackSwan, ₹850.**