

Prathama Banerjee, *Elementary Aspects of the Political: Histories from the Global South*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2021. 284 pp., ₹625, ISBN: 9789354420023.

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Elementary Aspects of the Political: Histories from the Global South by Prathama Banerjee sets its performative stage by emerging from an *a priori*—‘the political’. It is this *a priori* that marks the basic premise of the book, that is, a diligent inquiry into what constitutes the political.

Banerjee pursues this seemingly regular objective without letting this pursuit morph the book into yet another book of political history. In asking the basic question ‘what is it that in the modern times comes to be commonly recognized as the political?’, she brings to light the various ways of looking at politics and the political (p. 1). Tracing out the various narratives through which we commonly come to learn, conceptualise or practice politics, Banerjee makes a sharp turn within the disciplinary space to push for a de-coupling of history and politics, and of politics and philosophy. This move, we are informed, serves two purposes. First, it dislodges philosophy ‘from being the natural ground of the political’, and second, it interrupts the hierarchy not only between philosophy and history but also between histories—histories from the Global South and European history (p. 6).

The crucial yet rather innocent operative vantage point of the book is a biographical and retrospective one—a time in the life of the author which saw ‘politics as a default condition of being’ (p. 1). Banerjee’s inquiry into becoming political is thus a resistance to the modern social science common sense of ‘everything is political’, born out of a dissatisfaction with such a ubiquitous imagination of the political (p. 8). She charts the movement of becoming political through an analysis of the political modernity in India, recording its divergences from and overlaps with the European ‘modern’. In doing so, she is also receptive towards the difficulty as well as the convenience associated with defining the political. Banerjee treats the world around as a populated semantic field, pregnant with historicity and meaning, and employs this sense to understand not only how the political is defined in particular ways, but also, why.

In addition to a comprehensive introduction and a lucid epilogue, the book is divided into four parts. Each part carries two chapters, presenting a dyad that highlights the internal tension, ‘the split’ within the element. Through these arduously conceptualised dyads, Banerjee forcefully

argues that the political shows itself through a contest or comparison with that which is not identical to it—the non-political.

Part 1, titled ‘The Self’ (Chapters 1 and 2), is an inquiry into the modern image of the political man. Banerjee takes two iconic figures—Vivekananda and Chanakya—marking them as icons of the opposing forces of renunciation and *realpolitik*. She studies the relationship of politics to religion and politics to philosophy, identifying spirituality and philosophy as extra-political supplements to the purely political mode of being.

Part 2, titled ‘Action’ (Chapters 3 and 4), is a study of how political action is understood. Banerjee looks at the notion of politics as political action vis-a-vis that of karma. This exposes a paradox in the very constitution of politics. On one hand, politics as action holds that any subject could be political insofar as they acted in politically recognisable ways. On the other hand, looking at politics as subjectivity means that the subject is always already political, irrespective of action. As a response to the paradox, Banerjee studies how politics came to be reimagined as an analogy to labour. Banerjee inquires into this abstraction of labour as an unmarked universal concept, irrespective of its imbrication in labouring bodies, to capture how ‘anybody who laboured was, presently or potentially, a political actor’ (p. 17).

Part 3, titled ‘Idea’ (Chapters 5 and 6), deals with the politicisation of an idea along a movement through spiritual, economic, literal and social registers. The objective at hand is to challenge the normative status of a universal political idea and flesh out the interplay of the political, non-political and extra-political in its constitution. The chapters in this part focus on the emergence of the political idea through a study of equality by investigating how equality becomes thinkable in Bengal and India as the central idea of our times. Banerjee begins by tracing equality as a spiritual idea drawing from various philosophical and theological traditions such as non-dualist Vedanta, popular Islam and Buddhism, and posits it against the struggle to imagine equality-in-difference. She makes apparent the idea of equality, beyond itself, and more so in the face of difference, in the context of multiple differences and competing notions of inequality.

Banerjee studies the early socialist and communist thinking in Bengal to capture how economic reason came to be mobilised as a way of circumventing the question of difference. She holds that it is precisely the economic that made possible a thinking about the idea of inequality, rather than equality. In that sense, Banerjee studies the journey of equality as a double negative, as that which is not inequality.

Part 4, titled ‘People’ (Chapters 7 and 8) studies people as a party and as fiction. Keeping an eye on the contention between a nationalist party (Indian National Congress) and a vanguardist party (Communist Party of India), the author studies the rise of the modern party seeking to give people a coherent body. She argues that although the classical notion of a ‘party’ denotes a part of the people, both these modern parties simulate a totality, that of the party as people in its most political form. Posing this against the fictionality of people—the literary which materialises the people as a credible fiction—she further argues that it is not the simulation but how the people are staged that finally gives form to how ‘people’ come to be seen and conceptualised.

This work emerges as an attempt to not only ‘go beyond disciplinary boundaries’ but to expose the disciplinary insecurities that arise when dealing with the political. Banerjee uses these insecurities and anxieties to not simply chart the becoming of the political but also a becoming of the disciplines. By inviting the reader to go beyond postcolonial and decolonial criticisms in producing new political theory, she, quite promisingly, also sketches out a route map of engaging with the political, and of doing politics, if at all.

The cognitive depth and imaginative thickness that the book demands, makes it an essential read for anyone reflexive enough to identify as students and learners. Its strength lies in its forceful advocacy vis-a-vis ordinary politics as a useful frame of thinking and analysis and multiple genres to engage with and understand the political. However, owing to this exact ability and potential to disrupt and reshuffle conceptual trends that have become commonplace in both politics and academia, as a reader, one cannot help but be apprehensive of the degree and nature, if not tenure, of this book’s reception and appreciation in contemporary times.

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