

J. Daniel Elam, *Impossible and Necessary: Anticolonialism, Reading, and Critique*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2021, ₹895, XVIII + 212 pp. ISBN: 9788194925835 (Hardback).

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J. Daniel Elam's book *Impossible and Necessary: Anticolonialism, Reading and Critique* is about 'an impossible task for an impossible politics that is impossibly urgent' (p. 129). The anti-colonial treatise takes up reading and critique as practices of anti-colonialism and anti-authoritarianism in the comparative philological tradition.

The book under review is structured meticulously to explain what is reading as anti-colonial anti-authoritarianism, how it was conducted as a practice during the national movements, and how it should be taken up in the present to continue the anticolonial practice into a probably impossible but urgently necessary activity to achieve the utopian future of egalitarianism. Elam proves himself to be a well-versed reader, which is evident in the coherent and precise use of the references studied by the thinkers of interest, the secondary resources on them, and the hefty bibliography. The author, therefore, reaffirms his expertise on anti-colonialism and anti-imperial critique in South Asia. A forward by Prathama Banerjee is indeed an embellishment to Elam's astute work.

To begin the discussion, the author juxtaposes two authors, S. R. Ranganathan and Lord Thomas Macaulay, through two of their respective works: one—*Five Laws of Library Science*—from a colonised writer, relatively unknown; and the other—*Minutes on Education*—from a renowned coloniser. While Ranganathan instigates an anti-colonial practice of reading rooted in disavowal of authority and self-mastery to abate colonial authorship viz-a-viz the colonial rule and to create a concrete stream of readers in India headed towards egalitarianism, Macaulay famously compares authorship between what he calls as barbarism and civilisation to conclude that 'the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England' (Macaulay, 1965). By paralleling two authors' works, the author also parallels their intentions as writers and readers. Macaulay, the British author, was

an extension of the colonial authorship and authority who advocated self-mastery and the rule of colonial authors over the colonised 'learned native' reader (Macaulay, 1965). Ranganathan attempted to transfuse the pain and infirmity of a nation into the general psyche of its people so that they could transform into an equalitarian community of readers.

As an anti-colonial practice, reading can label 'refusal, non-productivity, in consequence, inexpertise, and non-authority' (p. xiv). The political mission of philology and anti-colonialism is initiated in relative ambiguity, without the guarantee of accomplishing it. The anti-colonial aesthetics analysed in Elam's book is intended for post-colonial politics in the immediate present, without regard to its sustainability or its consequentiality. However, that does not dwindle its necessity and urgency. If the future utopia that many have imagined and continue to imagine is to be built from expertise in the knowledge of the present, then what is assured to continue is domination. Reading is a minor politics that is limited to modest contributions through books, unfinished gestures, and hardly perceptible movements but the dynamic effects it produces are compulsive enough to impel anyone into a commitment.

Further into the study, the author analyses the commitments and realisations of anti-colonial activists like Franz Fanon. Anti-colonial activity is a service to a world one will not live to see, but it is an emancipatory commitment that operates between the past and the future, between what has passed and what lies ahead. In lieu of falling into despair or ascending to baseless hopes, for the immediate present, build bridges and connect the indeterminate and the contingent. The author forwards comparative philology and anti-colonial thinkers as impossible subjects 'perpetually un-masterable and committed to perpetual disavowal and relinquishment' (p. 5). To become or to remain a reader is to fundamentally challenge the logic of the British Empire and European fascism and thus intentionally divest oneself of authorial claims.

Next in line with exposition are a few activists and the author's virtuoso perception of reading and philology as done by the anti-colonial thinkers. Elam gathers together some features of anti-colonial thought, which he then attempts to identify in individual thinkers. They act in 'relative opacity' (p. 2), attempt to articulate a world that is yet to exist or will never exist, embrace the conditions of unknowing and non-futurity. Moreover, they celebrate the impossibility of their task and practice forms of 'relinquishment, disavowal, and non-productivity necessary for anti-imperial survival' (p. 113) in the compromised present, all through reading and reading with others. As anti-colonial writers, these thinkers built on reading, and their texts are portals into their reading habits and choices for others as readers. Reading is, thus, a political activity.

The first writer to be read is Lala Har Dayal. In Dayal's imagination, Elam finds a politics that propelled a revolution that looked back at the horrors of history. Activists like Dayal stressed the lineages of political thought that 'appeared in textual juxtapositions, citations, imaginative translations, and creative misreadings' (p. 21). Dayal foregrounded a double-faced philosophical ancestry that simultaneously looks at the past and the future. Reading, in Dayal, develops into a proper anti-colonial practice and cultivates a properly anti-colonial self. Elam analyses the anti-colonial selfhood of Dayal in *Hints for Self-Culture* and *Ghadr di Gunj* dutifully. Progressing, the author then details how Dayal models his anti-colonial vision and utopian future termed as 'World State' by colligating his reading practice between Herbert Spencer and William Morris, two thinkers and their thoughts that, without Dayal's unifying attempt, stand separated.

While Elam perceives Dayal's agglutinating imaginative genius, he discerns the science in Ambedkar, who uses an 'assemblage of sociology, philology, and philosophy of American academy' (p. 45) to introduce a radical anti-authoritarian political philosophy that is simultaneously anti-colonialist and anti-casteist. Elam tracks how Ambedkar uses his unique concoction to make an anti-colonial critique that is 'immune to the seduction of liberalism and its alleged benefits such as autonomy, self-mastery, and

identitarian expertise' (p. 46). In the first level of analysis, the author does a philological critique to highlight 'the anxiety, madness, arbitrariness, and utter irrelevance of authority' (pp. 46, 52). He then proceeds to do a sociological critique to theorise new forms of Aniket Jaaware's 'sociability'. Ambedkar's critique defines a 'political subject on the basis of the chaos of cell biology: perpetually contagious, heterogenous, and incapable of self-authorization or individual autonomy' (p. 46). This 'sociophilic subject' will render caste unimaginable and will be the basis for an illiberal anti-authoritarianism, and this anti-authoritarian practice is accurately named 'sociophilia' (p. 63) by Elam. For Elam, between obeying and burning the *Manu-smriti* in December 1927 at the protest in Mahad, Ambedkar's most egalitarian practice was reading Manu. Here, his anti-casteism becomes reconstructive and emancipatory rather than destructive. What the future must stress on Ambedkar is this creative annihilation. Ambedkar's social vocabulary, especially 'fraternity' in 'Annihilation of Caste' and 'social endosmosis', are adapted and revamped ideologies borrowed through his practice of reading from many western thinkers like John Dewey, Henry Bergson, and Robertson Smith. Ambedkar's anti-authoritarian practice of sociophilia is formed of individuals who do not know their individual identifications. They are open to contamination so that upon 'regrouping after ungrouping' (p. 65), they find themselves infinitely shared and mutually constitutive, thus erasing the idea of 'strangers' (p. 65). In this particular stance, divisions and discriminations cease to exist. This is again an impossible theory of egalitarian politics but absolutely necessary to annihilate oppression.

Elam suggests approaching Gandhi as an anti-colonial thinker through his losses, failures, inconsistencies and apologies, which he finds clearly in the debates Gandhi participated in and lost. He examines Gandhi's three apologies for lost debates in his newspaper, *Harijan*. He then considers Gandhi's two debates with Rabindranath Tagore (1934) and Margaret Sanger (1935) before analysing *Hind Swaraj*, which he claims as Gandhi's most famous but imagined debate. The analysis of Gandhi is done in a chronologically backward trajectory to facilitate a better approach towards his anti-authoritarianism. Gandhian philology has its vocabulary, which perpetually guarantees its impossibility. Elam supplements Faisal Devji's statement that Gandhi was an 'impossible Indian' (p. 74) in three senses. The author also asks whether the reading was the very method Gandhi suggested to his sympathisers to reduce themselves to zero, whether it was the very social act Gandhi's nation-to-come in *Hind Swaraj* shares among themselves. He identifies the curious appendix of *Hind Swaraj* 'Some Authorities' as a renunciation of authority and upholding reading as a political project and an acknowledgment of a reader: Gandhi himself. The reader, in terms of Gandhian perspective, becomes a *satyagrahi*.

The penultimate matter under Elam's study is how Bhagat Singh's revolutionary politics is not 'exhausted by the telos of his death' (p. 93). In Bhagat Singh, Elam finds out 'a global network of thinkers and agitators in communication with one another' (p. 93) and the centrality of reading to revolutionaries. The revolutionary read, especially in the face of death, and this inconsequentiality of the reading before the demise, makes it revolutionary. Focusing on the 'reading' of an active political agitator like Bhagat Singh demands a reconfiguration of 'revolution' itself. There appears an attachment to minor forms of politics which insist on the present that celebrates its commonness and inconsequentiality. Bhagat Singh's *The Jail Notebook and Other Writings* reveals his commonplace anti-colonialism and revolutionary present. In the process of a 'proper' revolution, reading is overlooked as inactive or passive. But through Bhagat Singh, Elam narrates the method, process and beginnings of a revolution than the ends, authority, and results of a revolution. He quotes Chaman Lal to state that Bhagat Singh had three agendas in jail, one of which was to develop himself ideologically and politically by undertaking a serious and rigorous program of reading. 'Reading becomes an ethical practice, care of self, and a political vision without the goal of becoming an author' (p. 103). Marked by a willingness to die and using the terms 'master' and 'expert' to describe others, reading turns doubly inconsequential to Singh.

Elam also parallels Auerbach and Gandhi to Bhagat Singh, stating that both Bhagat Singh's and Auerbach's anti-colonial approaches attempt to rescue European philosophy from Europe. At the same time, both Gandhi and Bhagat Singh insist on anti-colonial, anti-authoritative inconsequentiality.

In the epilogue of his book, Elam rightfully leaves notes to the present generation to take up anti-colonial anti-authoritarian thinking and understand them through reading and critiquing the comparative philological tradition. Investing in the 'unknowability, unknowingness and unknowness' (p. 113) of this particular politics will help each of us 'envision a world that could be otherwise' (p. 103). Though uncharted and inaccessible, the shared vision will dictate the importance of a critical project that is necessary and urgent today. The final act of anti-colonialism is to stop and then to leave, according to Elam. To colonise today means to continue the coloniality. To stop and leave means to stop this very continuity and leave the fold. If we leave, and if we leave together, it means that we endeavour to create a togetherness that is moved away from the colonial world. It is we who must discontinue and leave. When Gandhi asked to stop, Ambedkar asked the masses to stop and leave, which he did with his Dalit followers from Hinduism to Buddhism. There is a history of existing, starting from Moses from Egypt to Ambedkar from Hinduism. Elam's final message is to his friends and others in anti-colonialism, reminding them that departures are also beginnings. He finally asks them to stop, leave, and 'endeavor to create a new world and a new human to inhabit it' (p. 129). The end of the book and the beginning of its functioning at the moment is in the act of finding the reader in each of us.

Reference

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