J. Daniel Elam, *Impossible and Necessary: Anticolonialism, Reading, and Critique* (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan), 2021.

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J. Daniel Elam's book *Impossible and Necessary: Anticolonialism, Reading, and Critique* offers us many important and necessary insights into anticolonial thinking. But the book does much more by also offering us a clarion call of what we might describe as an act of radical non-authoritarianism. The book' does so by a study of the thought of Mahatma Gandhi, Lala Har Dayal, Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh. As Prathama Banerjee's introduction suggests, this book's great achievement lies in its ability to dissociate anticolonial thinking from an essentially nationalist nature of many anticolonial movements. The figure of the reader, in Elam's reinterpretation of anticolonial thoughts, is a figure of recalcitrance, resistance, non-violence, and non-authoritarianism: 'To remain a reader- and to remain a reader with others-was precisely the goal of this anticolonial theory of reading'. In Elam's thinking, such, reading implies occupying a political, social and discursive space that refuses to behave like a figure of authority. As opposed to the author who knows and thus often makes suggestions and prescriptions from a position of authority and expertise, the reader remains an incomplete, even inconsequential figure. Elam elucidates such cultures of radical anticolonialism by revisiting the writings of these four thinkers of modern Indian political thought. In this project, Elam uses terms like 'bibliomigrancy' to connect his project with significant innovations in the studies of world literature. While the question of how ideas, like books, travel from one point of political context to another, does not constitute his central focus, the immensely rich imaginative rendering of these anticolonial thoughts showcase various methods of these thinkers to mediate convergent and divergent concepts and ideas.

The book begins with an analysis of Lala Har Dayal's writings and his politics apropos the Ghadar Party. As Elam reminds his readers, the Ghadar Party's anticolonial activities in North America and Europe are more often than not perceived in terms of its tangible political actions. The speculative, or intellectual contributions of Har Dayal or his Ghadar Party often get undermined by an emphasis on their 'properly political actions'. Elam also warns us not to simply criticise those perceptions by assuming a position where imaginative or philosophical cogitations are reductively rendered simply as a step towards political action. Elam explores some of Har Dayal's significant writings like *Barabari de Arth* (Meaning of Equality), *Hints for Self-culture* and *Ghadar de Gunj* (Echoes of Mutiny). If Elam's reader is an engaged, and attentive one, he/she should not be missing the spectral presence of Har Dayal's radical antiauthoritarianism in those telling signifiers in the titles of his books—*gunj* (echoes), *hints*, and so on. A *gunj* or an echo is never clearly or completely heard and comprehended. It is also a distant voice that travels through unanticipated and invisible trajectories in air. In Elam's rendering of Har Dayal's radical anticolonialism, such echoes carry forward the revolutionary specters of moments of *ghadar* or mutiny across space and time. On a similar note, Har Dayal's *Hints for Self-culture* is more concentrated on divesting any authorial claim of his in so far as such spaces of authorial authority is relegated to his predecessors. Elam draws our attention to the fact that Har Dayal's *Hints* can be reductively described as an example of what we term 'self-help books'. But, Har Dayal denounces such authorial prescriptive gestures for nurturing a more egalitarian culture of reading wherein even thinkers as different as William Morris and Herbert Spencer are juxtaposed. It is to these thinkers that Har Dayal assigns whatever unavoidable authorial authority we are habituated to look for in any such book. Elam's search for non-authoritarian politics of anticolonialism in Har Dayal's writings then urges him to engage with Har Dayal's concept of 'world-state'. Har Dayal attempted to imagine an anticolonial, antiauthoritarian world order which Elam terms 'a palimpsestic utopia' called 'world-state'. Although Elam suggests how this view of a world-state was informed by Har Dayal's radical universal humanism, Har Dayal's model of 'world-state' with one language, and one flag hardly looks adequately egalitarian.

In his chapter on Ambedkar, Elam draws our attention to not only the quintessential and tireless reader-scholar-thinker that Ambedkar was but also to some of his extremely significant intellectual inheritances. While there has been too much focus on Ambedkar's liberalism or his overall penchant towards Enlightenment modernity's key ideas and institutions, his anti-colonial thought has not been adequately explored. Barring some exceptional examples like that of Aishwary Kumar's *Radical Equality* or some short engagements with Ambedkar's post-liberal tendencies like Prathama Banerjee's observations in *Elementary Aspects of the Political* or Christopher Bayly's *Recovering Liberties*, we do not

have too many dedicated explorations along this line. Elam is aware of the way Ambedkar, during the Mahad Satyagraha, burnt the *Manusmriti*. But he rightly underscores the fact that between the burning of the *Manusmriti* and the authorial status ascribed to Manu in Brahmanical socio-legal as well as colonial legal discourse, there lies a radical moment of anti-caste, anti-authorial thinking in closely reading the text of *Manavadharmashastra*. Readers of Ambedkar's *Philosophy of Hinduism* would know that Ambedkar was not only a close reader of Nietzsche but also a committed reader of *Manusmriti*. But for him, *Manusmriti* brings to the fore of Manu's 'madness' which is simultaneously an enthusiasm for caste and for cementing the authority of a class of people. As opposed to this he insists on building the democratic ethos on the Deweyean idea of 'social endosmosis', in his book *Democracy and Education*, which offers a non-aggregative, non-mathematical view of democracy. Such a view of democracy in Dewey, Elam underlines, is not very clearly (or authoritatively) delineated. Such a view of democracy, both in Dewey and in Ambedkar's Indian rendition of it, is not merely a 'set of institutions'. It is a notion of 'social endosmosis' that is linked by Elam with Henry Bergson and Gabriel Tarde. Bergson and Tarde both implied, in their own ways, how sociology has been discursively connected with biology. The reader of *Impossible and Necessary* are then persuaded to recognise how the divergence of sociology from biology has damaged our patterns of sociological thinking. Ambedkar can come as an interesting exception and warning in that context of disciplinary divergence and required convergence. If Manu's varna/caste society is based on divisions, his authority remains contested by Ambedkar: we do not simply stop at a search for parochial anti-colonial thinking, but go on to a radical anti-authoritarianism, that Ambedkar holds on to.

Elam's next chapter is based on the life-teachings and statements of Gandhi. Gandhi and Ambedkar, as goes common knowledge, never completely agreed on their views on caste. Yet, Elam juxtaposes these two thinkers in an already unlikely discursive context. While Ambedkar is often projected as the poster-boy of modernity, Gandhi is presented to us primarily as an established figure in the global anti-colonial thinking. Elam begins his explorations of Gandhi by deploying the phrase used by Faisal Devji, namely, 'an impossible Indian'. Gandhi is widely known not only for his anti-colonial crusade but also for his controversial views on caste, gender or vegetarianism. Elam focuses on how those very moments can also offer us something invaluable in our effort at grasping the varied patterns of anticolonial thinking. By the seemingly impossible demand of his satyagraha, Gandhi makes us realise the ultimate finitude of the self as well as a simultaneous, infinite sacrifice of that finite self for others. When Gandhi is questioned on the issue of vegetarianism, Gandhi accepts his defeat. Elam focuses on similar debates Gandhi had on more pressing issues like women's rights birth control, and caste. Unlike Tagore, Gandhi's views on abortion and other methods of birth-control might seem anti-women. Yet, during his debates with the American activist of birth

control methods, Margaret Sanger, Gandhi ultimately did not hesitate to accept defeat and declared his incapacity to conclusively speak on a matter like this. Gandhi begins his debates with Sanger by claiming he 'knows women' because he has adequately mixed with them as their equal and he himself is often identified by many as 'half a woman'. Elam takes us through another corresponding record of Gandhi's conversations with Sanger in Mahadeb Desai's account. By doing so he argues that Gandhi was not being boastful but was trying to base his observations on what Elam calls 'egalitarian mixing'—a mixing with women in which Gandhi is already seen as 'half a woman' by those women. Moreover, Elam sees here a radical gesture of self-effacement or retreat. Gandhi, during this debate with Sanger, was not only being open about his controversial views on birth control but was also primarily arguing how he had "his own limitations" and suggests that women "go to others for advice"'. Such gestures on Gandhi's part reflect a practice of inescapable limitations to knowledge that many keep denying in their fetishisation of a liberal selfhood. Elam also discusses the Gandhi–Tagore correspondence on issues like the Bihar earthquake and birth control and more tellingly Gandhi's politics of fasting to eradicate untouchability in 1933. While the description of the Poona Pact is more ethically tilted towards Ambedkar, Gandhi's fasting to eradicate untouchability in the later years and his eventual failure to achieve that target, renders him seem 'defeated'. 'But what would it mean to claim that Gandhi preferred to be wrong, that he preferred to lose debates rather than win them?'

The last figure studied in Elam's book is Bhagat Singh. Focusing on his jail notebook and its seeming affinities with Upton Sinclair's *Cry for Justice*, Elam highlights Singh's passionate reading habits. Before his martyrdom, Singh had made a list of requests to the jail authorities to ensure better living conditions for the inmates. Among his demands, Singh includes reading and writing materials to be made available to prisoners. Given that Bhagat Singh was about to die, Elam wonders why he was so bent on reading books. Elam takes Singh's Jail notebook as a sign of Singh's radical inconsequentialism and his attempts to non-instrumentalise reading as an antiauthoritarian gesture. Such wide and committed reading habits as we have seen in Lala Har Dayal's case and as with popular perceptions on Babasaheb's inexhaustible reading list, are often described as steps or tools to cement their commitment to the cause of justice and freedom. But to be a reader when one knows one is dying provides us with a strangely powerful devotion to one's cause.

Elam reminds us in his 'Epilogue', that Ambedkar, Fanon and other such anticolonial thinkers have always had some utopian vision amidst their sociopolitical and ontological challenges. But at the same time, Elam rightly reminds his readers, that these utopias are mostly 'failed utopias'. Har Dayal and Bhagat Singh did not see any level of approximation or realisation of their anticolonial politics in terms of a realpolitik. Gandhi was alive to see Indian independence but it was hardly the Swaraj he had hoped for and Ambedkar's constitutionalism and anti-caste politics have been arguably contained and accommodated within the constitutional definition

of electoral democracy. But this is no occasion for losing hope. Elam invites us to think, celebrate inconsistency, inconsequentialism, a relinquishment of mastery and control and the teleological certitude of the 'end of history'.

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