

***Voices of Dissent: An Essay*. By Romila Thapar (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2020).**

Voices of Dissent: An Essay by Dr. Romila Thapar explores the concept of political dissent in India. Thapar traces the history of dissent from a historical perspective, from ancient India to modern democratic India. In addition, Thapar, a Marxist historian, has established political consciousness by linking the issues of the past with those of the present, thus establishing a crucial link between dissent and dissenters throughout the history of India in a culture that tries to erase them.

The book "*Voices of Dissent: An Essay*" is a product of two Memorial lectures presented by Dr. Romila Thapar, the *Nemi Chand Memorial Lecture* and the *V. M. Trakunde Memorial Lecture*.¹ The essay provides a broad perspective of historical analysis from India's ancient, medieval, and modern history. The book is divided into nine distinct parts set out in a chronological pattern tracing two distinct groups: the dominant group (i.e. a social higher class in society) and the others (i.e. lower social classes). The history of dissent, as stressed by Thapar, starts from the Vedic Period (c. 1750-500 BCE), with the *Dasyah-Putra Brahmana*, or the son of a *Brahman*, born to a *Dasi* (servant) mother, as provided in chapter one. In ancient Indian history, the *Aryans* are described as the Indo-European people who were said to speak an archaic Indo-European language and who were thought to have settled in prehistoric times in ancient Iran and the northern Indian subcontinent. The *Vedic* lore of *Aryans* mentions defensive armour, weapons, chariots and warfare against dark-skinned foes named *Dasas*. The *Dasas* have been referred to as *non-Aryans*, a wealthy cattle raising group of the non-Indo European population. The relationship between the *Aryans* and *Dasa* has a history of its own; the linguistic identity and use of the language of the *Aryans* gave the children of *Dasis* their prized position in ancient Indian society.² Thapar tells us about the *Rishi Dirghatamas (Mamateya)*, who married a *Dasi* and whose son was *Rishi Kakshivant* (whose hymns are contained in *Rig Veda*). *Saint Kavasha Ailusha* was also the son of a *Dasi*, as was *Vidura* (a

¹ Romila Thapar, *Voices of Dissent: An Essay* (London: Seagull Books, 2020)

² *Ibid*, 10.

significant figure in the *Mahabharata*), the son of *Vyasa* and a *Dasi*. According to Thapar, the *Dasa* culture is the culture of the “other.”³

In this section, the concept of otherness is traced through culture. An emphasis is placed on how the history of the dissenters, or the others, has been written from the dominant group’s perspective. Hence, a straightforward narrative becomes complicated as it is diluted with prejudice from the dominant group. The spoken language was a critical requirement of identity in the Vedic times and the available sources came from the dominant group. The primary source from the time was the oldest religious texts of Hinduism, known as *Vedas* which were written in Vedic Sanskrit. To make one’s dissent articulated knowledge of Vedic Sanskrit was necessary, the education of the same was restricted only to members of the dominant classes. The investigation of the other group does become limited to a greater extent.

In chapters two and three, Thapar establishes how a new group consisting of the *Jain*, Buddhists, and *Ajivikas*, collectively referred to as *Shramanas*, became the new “other” in the 16th century of the new India. The dissent of these groups pertained to the interpretation of nonviolence and its justification. Nonviolence remains at the center of the teachings of Buddhists and *Jains*.⁴ The texts of *Mahabharata* and *Bhagwad Gita* state that violence was permitted if it was against evil. In toto, the code of ethics was questioned, and the issue of authority was threatened.⁵ Thapar goes on to establish similar links with Chandalas. The idea of otherness was broadened through the categories of the lowest strata of the society, which included the *Adivasis*, the lower castes, and the untouchables.⁶ The social laws were established based on the identity of a social class during this period. Under chapters 4 and 5, the 15th and 16th century dissenters have primarily been highlighted by the *Bhakti Sant* (*Sant* means a Saint in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism) and *Sufi Peer* (*Peer* means a spiritual guide in Persian).⁷ In addition with certain examples from the *Mughal*

³ Thapar, *Voices of Dissent*, 32

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56

⁷ Thapar, *Voices of Dissent*, 64

courts, especially that of Emperor *Akbar* through practices of introducing new religions in the Court.⁸

Thapar dedicates chapters six through nine of the book to the Indian freedom movement, *Satyagraha*, as the fight against the British colonial empire, and modern nationalism.⁹ She discusses accounts of civil disobedience and noncooperative moments, the events of the Quit India movement in the 1940s, and the mutiny in the Royal Indian Navy. These chapters draw out the role of dissent in Modern Indian history to look at how colonial interpretations of India's past still colour our understanding of religion in the subcontinent. This is followed by an examination of Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi's *Satyagraha* as a modern movement of dissent—relying heavily on the moral value of a renouncer figure. India's freedom struggle by itself was a form of non-violent dissent against the colonial British powers.¹⁰ Further, the concept of nationalism under the form of *Hindutva* or the concept of *Hindu Rashtra*, which represents the right-wing form of government in India, has been discussed to draw attention to modern democratic problems of extremist governments.¹¹

Finally, a dissection of the concept of protest has been provided by drawing inspiration from freedom movements. Thapar in the final chapter moves her analysis to the protests at *Shaheen Bagh* in New Delhi, India, where Muslims, especially Muslim women, came together to protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act "CAA" and the National Register of Citizens "NRC" in India—documenting her personal experiences at the site of protest and with dissent.

Thapar claims to provide a brief history of dissent and protest throughout the scope of India and links to the present circumstances in the Indian democracy, however, she fails to highlight the cases that occurred after the independence of India. The critical events from the 1947 partition of British India into two independent states, India and Pakistan, have not been discussed.

⁸ Ibid, 65.

⁹ Ibid., 102

¹⁰ Ibid, 104.

¹¹ Ibid, 112.

Subsequently, the protests against Prime Minister Indira Gandhi during the 1975 Declaration of Emergency seem to be missing chapters that need deep deliberation.¹² The treatment of dissenters, especially during the 1975 Emergency, is a crucial part of the historical evidence of the treatment of dissenters in an independent India.¹³

The essay argues an essential perspective on historical interpretations. It is not sufficient for historians to just find evidence of dissent, it is essential to go beyond and understand the circumstances for why such dissent had acceptability and by whom. The essay urges its readership to look at forms of dissent that had a responsive public nature and to examine whether the response had a consistent expression of dissent without any ill intention. The study of dissent is essential in understanding how civilizations evolved and how establishments were questioned and forced to change their outlook towards the outward group. From a sociological standpoint, for social change to occur, social deviance is necessary. This perceived notion of social deviance is interpreted in the form of dissent by several civilizations.

Analysis of judicial dissent is not addressed by Thapar, thus noting that the book provides a limited understanding of dissent in India. While the voices of people classified as others have been highlighted, those who occupied places in top administration roles have not been discussed. The supersession of Justice Hans Raj Khanna on account of his dissenting judgment in the Shiv Kant Shukla (Habeas Corpus Case) is evidence of judicial dissent and its consequence.¹⁴

The book has excluded the dissent from the judiciary of India through the Supreme Court of India. Though the book claims dissent as an essential factor to democracy, the book ignores one of the essential pillars: judiciary. However, it must be noted that the book does not provide these crucial details because it is not an elaborate account of dissent, rather a comprehensive guide to understanding the discourse in contemporary times. To attain an elaborate academic account on the

¹² Gyan Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 305.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 305

¹⁴ Yogesh Mehta. "Judicial Dissent: A Plea to Posterity." *Nirma ULJ* 1, (January 2012): 1.

nature of dissent in the Indian subcontinent throughout history, one should read Ashok Vajpeyi's "*India Dissents: 3000 Years of Difference, Doubt, and Argument.*"¹⁵ The anthology contains essays, letters, reports, poems, songs, and calls to action – from texts ranging from *Rig Veda* to Ambedkar's famous *Annihilation of Caste*; and several prominent figures from the Indian sub-continent. The sheer volume of the book portrays that what Vajpeyi struggles to provide is an armoury of dissenting opinion, rooted in religious and philosophical texts, in the works of writers, politicians, scientists and poets. Thapar's examination is very limited by comparison, due to its lack of content. In conclusion, Thapar's *Voices of Dissent* is an attempt to spark the interest in questioning dissent and she does it by providing instances from ancient India right upto the modern-day India. *Voices of Dissent* is a thought-provoking scholarship.

Vishwajeet Deshmukh

¹⁵Ashok Vajpeyi, ed., *India Dissents: 3000 Years of Difference, Doubt and Argument* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing Pvt. Ltd, 2018), 560.

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