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Book Review

INDIA THAT IS BHARAT: COLONIALITY, CIVILISATION, CONSTITUTION

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Introduction

India, that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilisation, Constitution by J Sai Deepak is an intriguing and meticulously researched book that delves into the complexities of India's civilisational journey, its colonial past, and the impact of Western thought on Indian polity, culture, and identity. It is the first of a trilogy that aims to critically assess India's history and the ramifications of colonialism on its present. Deepak, a lawyer by profession, takes a legalistic approach to analysing how India's identity has been shaped over centuries, specifically focusing on the effects of European colonisation, particularly that of the British.

Deepak's book is unique in its scope and ambition. Rather than focusing merely on historical events, it goes deeper into the civilisational ethos of India, comparing and contrasting it with the Western worldview. The title itself, "India, that is Bharat," is derived from Article 1 of the Indian Constitution, symbolising the dual identity of the nation—one rooted in its ancient heritage (Bharat) and the other shaped by its modern, colonial past (India).

Structure and Themes

The book is divided into three major parts: "The European Colonial Project", "The Abrahamic Coloniality", and "Coloniality, Civilisation, and Constitution". Each section offers a deep dive into how colonialism—both physical and ideological—has attempted to reshape India and continues to influence its identity today.

The European Colonial Project

In this section, Deepak examines the expansion of European powers, focusing particularly on how the British and other European colonisers sought to establish control over India's economy, politics, and social structures. He describes colonialism not just as a military or economic venture but as an attempt to rewire the fundamental nature of Indian society. The imposition of Western institutions, ideas, and values was not benign; rather, it was designed to replace the native ethos with European ways of thinking.

Deepak argues that the colonial enterprise was not limited to political domination but extended to the colonisation of the mind and spirit. Indian education, culture, and even religion were targeted for transformation. The Macaulayan system of education, which promoted English and Western thought while de-emphasising Indian knowledge systems, is a prime example of this attempt to colonise Indian intellect. Deepak carefully presents evidence showing that the impact of this colonial project continues to manifest in contemporary Indian governance, law, and society.

Abrahamic Coloniality

In this part, Deepak moves beyond the physical aspects of colonialism and delves into what he calls "Abrahamic coloniality." He explores how Abrahamic religions—specifically Christianity and, to some extent, Islam—were used as tools to justify and sustain colonialism. This section is one of the most provocative, as it challenges widely accepted notions of religious neutrality and secularism, pointing out that these concepts were often employed to erode India's native belief systems.

Deepak argues that Abrahamic thought systems, with their exclusivist, monotheistic frameworks, were fundamentally at odds with India's pluralistic, inclusive, and polytheistic traditions. The book provides ample documentation of how Christian missionaries, often in collusion with colonial administrators, attempted to undermine Hinduism and other indigenous belief systems. This aspect of colonisation, according to Deepak, has left a lasting imprint on India's religious and cultural landscape, contributing to the erosion of native traditions and the adoption of Western-centric models of secularism and governance.

Coloniality, Civilisation, and Constitution

The final part of the book is perhaps the most critical, as it ties together the themes of colonialism, religion, and culture and examines their impact on India's Constitution and its civilisational identity. Deepak critiques the Indian Constitution for being excessively rooted in Western, especially British, legal traditions and not adequately reflecting India's civilisational ethos. He does not argue against the Constitution per se, but he questions the assumptions and frameworks that informed its drafting.

Deepak suggests that India's current legal and political systems are, in many ways, a continuation of colonial governance structures. He also posits that the Indian state, in its attempt to be secular and democratic, has neglected its civilisational roots, resulting in a form of governance that is alien to the native populace. The book calls for a reassessment of the Constitution and governance models to better reflect India's unique cultural and civilisational identity.

Strengths of the Book

Research and Rigor

One of the book's biggest strengths is the depth of research that Deepak has put into it. Every argument is supported with ample citations from historical records, legal documents, and scholarly works. This lends the book an air of credibility and intellectual rigor that is often missing in polemical works on Indian history and identity. Deepak's training as a lawyer is evident in the precision with which he presents his arguments, making the book not just a work of history or political science but a legal and civilisational critique.

Fresh Perspective on Colonialism

While there are many books on Indian colonial history, *India, that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilisation, Constitution* offers a fresh perspective by focusing not just on political and economic aspects but also on the cultural and psychological impacts of colonialism. The book's emphasis on "coloniality" rather than just "colonialism" is crucial, as it shifts the conversation from historical events to enduring structures of power and thought that continue to shape India today.

Civilisational Focus

Another significant strength of the book is its civilisational focus. Unlike many works that examine India through the lens of modern political ideologies (liberalism, socialism, etc.), Deepak places India's ancient civilisational identity at the centre of his analysis. This offers readers a new way to think about India—not just as a modern nation-state but as a civilisation with a unique worldview, belief systems, and ways of life that have been eroded by centuries of colonial rule.

Criticisms

Overemphasis on Western Guilt

While Deepak's critique of colonialism is well-reasoned and supported by evidence, there are times when the book tends to overemphasise Western guilt while downplaying the agency of Indian actors. While it is true that colonialism had a devastating impact on India, the narrative sometimes portrays India as a passive victim of Western forces, without adequately exploring the internal dynamics and failures that contributed to the situation.

Complexity of Argument

The book's legalistic and academic style, while a strength in terms of intellectual rigor, can also be a barrier for general readers. The complexity of the arguments, combined with the dense prose, makes it a challenging read for those not already familiar with the subjects of law, colonial history, and civilisational studies. Some readers may find themselves overwhelmed by the level of detail and analysis, especially in the sections dealing with constitutional law.

Limited Focus on Non-Hindu Traditions

While Deepak does a commendable job of critiquing Western and Abrahamic influences on India, his analysis is predominantly centred around Hinduism. Other indigenous traditions, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, receive relatively little attention, even though they too form an integral part of India's civilisational heritage. A more balanced analysis that includes these traditions would have enriched the book further.

Conclusion

India, that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilisation, Constitution by J Sai Deepak is a bold and thought-provoking work that challenges many of the dominant narratives about India's history, identity, and Constitution. Its critique of colonialism, both physical and ideological, is compelling and well-supported by evidence. While the book's complexity may deter some readers, it offers a fresh and much-needed perspective on the enduring impact of coloniality on India's civilisation.

Deepak's call for a reassessment of India's governance and constitutional structures in light of its civilisational ethos is sure to spark debate and discussion. Whether one agrees with his conclusions or not, *India, that is Bharat: Coloniality, Civilisation, Constitution* is an essential read for anyone interested in India's past, present, and future. It is a clarion call for India to reclaim its civilisational identity and assert its unique place in the world, free from the shackles of colonial thought and structures.