

Reading for the Future

By Dilip Menon | May 19, 2023

Reading is, more often than not, an act that does not attend to consequence. It is an inconsequential act, not in the sense of it being of no consequence, but rather, that it is not dependent on generating consequences. One reads for pleasure, to gain erudition, or just to be well informed. That, of course, is the ideal. For students in the hothouse schools of Asia, reading is of the greatest significance. In fact, gratuitous reading might take away from the purposive reading that is required for high grades in the public examinations that determine life trajectories. For those in academe, again, reading is instrumental as one crafts one's career. Reading widely is good, but one reads within paradigms and locates oneself within them towards the building of putative communities of affinity. Reading too widely can be counterproductive and may bring upon oneself the mild scorn reserved for mere bibliophiles. For after all, reading is labor towards generating a product that stands in for one's merit and originality and allows one's peers to judge the extent of individual scholarship. The question raised by Elam's book of inconsequentialist reading interestingly works with an unlikely cast of characters: deeply political beings, anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian by temperament. These figures include the early Indian nationalists Lala Har Dayal and Bhagat Singh, and the contending dyad at the heart of Indian modernity: BR Ambedkar and Gandhi. Elam argues that their practices of reading were not teleological in terms of a desired outcome, nor instrumental in the sense of fashioning a new world in the present. There was indeed something gratuitous about their reading: Bhagat Singh while waiting for the gallows; Har Dayal cultivating self towards an ambiguous future; Ambedkar while waiting for a non-arriving landscape of freedom; and Gandhi reading and writing prodigiously, and promiscuously, towards an unremitting fashioning of an ever-changing identity. This is a counter-intuitive reading of a cast of characters who, in our general understanding, were unrelenting and intransigent in their demand that the world could be otherwise.

Much of course turns on a set of ideas that Elam proposes, centering on "modes of refusal, non-productivity, inconsequence, inexpertise, and non-authority" (x); "revolutionary inconsequentialism" (xii); and "a celebration of unknowingness ad infinitum" (xii). Given what we know of the lives and plangent thought of the protagonists here, devoted to an anti-colonialism under the sign of an utter commitment to engagement with institutions as much as ideas, this exposition might appear either eccentric, or merely contrarian. However, if we think with a narrative of unintended consequences and the deep irony of the authoritarianism of the postcolonial state (the object of Fanon's coruscating predictions), then one could ask, surely, "inconsequentialism" is not what these individuals had in mind as the terminus of their thinking? Acknowledging that they, like all humans, made history, but not in the circumstances of their choosing, we can be wary of judgment. However, in choosing these particular individuals Elam's argument about their commitment to unfinishedness—a thinking of ends as dedicated to a staying with beginnings—is made easier. Three of them did not die a natural death: Lala Hardayal died at 54 of suspected poisoning, Bhagat Singh was

martyred, and Gandhi was assassinated. Ambedkar died at the age of 65, with the unfinished manuscript of his book on the Buddha and his Dhamma awaiting completion on his study table. None of them lived to see their life's work to completion (if indeed there was such a trajectory, and I believe there was). Can we conjecture from these special circumstances that they were interested only in a "politics of the meantime" (6), that they were working out a politics of eternal deferral of resolution, willing to exist in the "waiting room of history"? Elam suggests, along with David Scott, that we must think less with the romance of anticolonial engagement and more with the idea of tragedy. While I am in agreement with rejecting romance as a trope, how would the idea of tragedy work alongside Elam's argument that none of his protagonists had a political trajectory of fulfillment in mind. Inconsequentialism has filiations with detachment, quietism, even irony—but tragedy? Implicit in the idea of tragedy is the notion of a future—inevitable or unexpected. Can there be tragedy within a conception of contentment with an eternal present? What mood indeed, can we attribute to the imagination of "worldwide egalitarianism in the unlikelihood of any future at all" (5)?

Central to the book is the practice of reading of a particular kind. Isabel Hofmeyr's excellent recuperation of Gandhi's practice of, and exhortation towards, slow reading—a democratization of scholastic forms of attention—is a model here. However, in Hofmeyr, what we have is an attention to *process*—reading widely, making scrapbooks, copying out inspiring quotes, making connections, and so on. There is no disavowal of *ends*; Gandhi's reading is about a refashioning of self, of rendering oneself less than hermetic, opening up individuals to filiation with others. Elam is right in pointing out that this is not about mastery. However, it is not about disavowal either; there is an end in mind. An idea of reading that foregrounds its "own incompleteness, in-expertise, and often its own implausibility" (12) seems rather etiolated given the sheer energy and incandescence of the readings of Elam's protagonists. However, to be fair, Elam states that he is "not interested in any demonstrable act of reading per se" (14) and therefore "readers and reading are irrelevant to this book" (15). This does sound like a Humpty Dumpty method: when Elam reads a text, "it means just what [I] choose it to mean—neither more nor less." It is poignantly true that "we must begin a mission in relative opacity, without guarantee of fulfilling it" (18). However, would it not be pathological to relinquish an engagement with the future at all? What if we are to think with the idea of guarantee through Stuart Hall—of recognizing that we are always dealing with a "story without end, a narrative which doesn't have a conclusion," and that, indeed, is the ground of our politics of futurity, as, arguably, it was for Elam's protagonists? Hall makes a resonant case for a politics without telos, which is not a politics of abnegation, in looking to a "Marx who offers a marxism without guarantees, a marxism without answers" (Hall 1983, 43).

Har Dayal writes in the aftermath of the quashing of what came to be known as the Ghadr conspiracy, in which expatriate Indian revolutionaries worked towards overthrowing colonialism, and in Har Dayal's vision, creating a World State under which the voiceless would find voice. The future, he believed, "will come in its own good time" (Elam 2020, 38) given that the trajectories of History were chaotic: "irregular, disorderly, and haphazard" (33). In his writings, Har Dayal, a polyglot, engaged with translations, emphasized cooperative study, and in keeping with the times, wrote down copious quotations from the originals. Ambedkar also cited authorities profusely, and in the case of his acknowledged teacher, John Dewey, reproduced verbatim his words without quotation marks. Gandhi, in his journal *Indian Opinion*, very much followed the same practice, as did Bhagat Singh in his notebook,

reproducing verbatim from Upton Sinclair's compendium of revolutionary texts (as Elam shows with some detective acumen). What are we to make of this use of other people's words? Elam argues that this is a reading "without a goal of mastery" (103), a "renunciation" of one's own reading (87), and so on.

Here there is insufficient engagement with the historical practices of reading and the taking of notes. As Stuart Hall points out about Marx's notebooks, there are entire chunks copied out from authors he reads, particularly Adam Smith. Or again, when we read Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* project, it is a collection of quotations from contemporaries with which he thinks. In neither of these cases is there an abnegation of authority; these extensive quotations were the provocations to thought and writing that would indeed fashion them masterfully into a coherent narrative. Both *Capital* and the *Arcades* project are unfinished, a status occasioned by the death of their authors, not because of a refusal of mastery or a politics of deferral. These notebooks, etc., must be read not in themselves but for the fact that they point to a place outside themselves.

About Gandhian reading strategies, it is not clear what Elam means when he says that "Gandhi reveled in his ability to *not* make sense" (68). That he provides a list of authorities at the end of *Hind Swaraj* need not be interpreted as the surrender of his mastery by deferring to the authorities, any more than Elam providing a bibliography to his book need be read as his surrender of self to those listed there. That Gandhi adopts a strategic humility (a rhetorical strategy as in the *Hind Swaraj*) should not be mistaken for a surrender of authority. Bose, Ambedkar, and regional Congress leaders, who were resolutely subordinated and sidelined as Gandhi emerged as the sole spokesperson for the Congress, were the people least deluded about "Gandhian" surrender of authority. Ajay Skaria's phrase "surrender without subordination" acquires another meaning when we look at Gandhian political practice. Elam discusses the incidents of Gandhi's non-engagement with Margaret Sanger on birth control (of which he disapproved) (78-9) and with Tagore on the Bihar earthquake as a punishment from god (Tagore thought this was wrongheaded). Gandhi avoids both agreement and disagreement through the strategies of sidestepping and disengagement with the arguments presented to him.

The book is at its best when it does close (and may I say masterful) readings of Ambedkar and his engagement with Spencer, Nietzsche, and Dewey. Elam's original interpretation of the idea of endosmosis, central to Ambedkar's thinking (of the projected porous nature of humans as with cells), draws upon the hitherto unacknowledged influences of Henri Bergson and William James. The argument of a "relationship of shared consciousness and perception" (58)—which would undergird and generate a "contagious fraternity" (59) and emphasize contagion, contamination, and contaminability towards blowing apart the separation and non-touchability inherent to caste—is an original and provocative one. Here again, it is not clear why Elam characterizes this as "hesitant thought" (63). Arguably, Ambedkar had little time to make haste slowly. There is an evocative phrase on Ambedkarite politics — the abandonment of abandonment (124) — which profoundly and poetically captures the moment that Ambedkar, through conversion, leaves the poisonous embrace of Hinduism, while taking with him those otherwise condemned to a permanent subordination within its structures. The last chapter provides a set of reflections on freedom which point to the central antinomy of the book. Elam argues for an emancipatory politics that is both postcolonial and antiauthoritarian

and seeks “increased affinities” (119)—a call to “leave our own selves in favor of the collectivity of unknown comrades” (119). This is a utopian call, arguing from the shackles of the present, and certainly not premised on inconsequentialism, hesitation, or the lack of telos. And in another masterful phrase, Elam advocates that instead of the Gandhian advocacy of “stopping without leaving” (125) that left the subordinate running to stay in the same place, we should stop and leave (118). A resounding yes, such as Molly Bloom would have approved of.

This book on inconsequential reading begins with S. R. Ranganathan, mathematician and librarian, who created the colon classification for libraries to address the inadequacies of Dewey’s decimal classification system. Ranganathan believed that reading as an enterprise was vast, unending, and anti-authoritarian in its impulses. He also believed that every book had its reader, and every reader had their book. The classification system was premised on the notion of the colon notation revealing everything that there was to know about the book in question, so that a librarian would not only be able to find a book but match a reader to a book. This was a notion of mastery bordering on hubris; the essence of a book rendered to a few letters of the alphabet and a few punctuation marks. In fact, the very antithesis of the surrender of mastery as life-principle that runs like a vein through the book. Ranganathan was a man with a plan—a fulfilled plan that, once mastered by a reader, no library was unconquerable. I can testify to this as, armed with Ranganathan’s system, I strode through Indian libraries with unwavering steps in search of my quarry.

A vein running through this book is the attempt to think philological criticism and anti-colonial thought together (5), engaging with the putative resonances in their mutual reveling in impurity (the idea of translation and incommensurability), anti-mastery (the insufficiency of one’s knowledge), and heterogeneity (the premise of comparison) (12). Auerbach’s stress on points of departure and starting points is emphasized over resolution, mastery, and telos. Perhaps we could think with Auerbach’s most sensitive interlocutor, Edward Said, while reflecting on the central premises of Elam’s book. One needs to study beginnings, but one needs too to move beyond—to take the leap. As I have been arguing, this is indeed what Elam’s protagonists did, except that Elam imprisons them within his rather tendentious argument about their radical hesitancy. “There is always the danger of too much reflection on beginnings. In attempting to push oneself further and further back to what is only a beginning, a point that is stripped of every use but its classified standing in the mind as a beginning, one is caught in a tautological circuit of beginnings about to begin” (Said 1968, 53).

References

Hall, Stuart. 1983. “For a Marxism without Guarantees.” *Australian Left Review*, no. 84 (Winter): 39-43.

Said, Edward. 1968. “Beginnings.” *Salmagundi* 2, no. 4 (8) (Fall): 36-55.

About the Authors

Dilip M. Menon is a cultural historian and works on literature, film, and social theory. He is currently a Professor of History at the Department of International Relations at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and Director of the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa. He has worked on issues of social inequality in India but over the past decade his concern has been with oceanic histories and knowledge from the global south. This has resulted in two edited volumes, *Ocean as Method* (Routledge, 2022) and *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South* (Routledge, 2022).

How to Cite

Menon, Dilip. May 19, 2023. "Reading for the Future." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.