

# BOOK REVIEW

## FROM THE RUINS OF EMPIRE

**BOOK:** *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia* **AUTHOR:** Pankaj Mishra **YEAR:** 2012 **FORMAT:** Hardcover **EDITION:** First **PUBLISHER:** Penguin Books, India **PRICE:** 699.00 (Shortlisted for: Orwell Prize 2013)

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## FROM THE RUINS OF EMPIRE: REVIEW

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A Chinese exile in Japan, Tang Tiaoding once mournfully concluded:

*“They provide plenty of indisputable evidence on the extent of the primitive customs and ignorance of the native people, as proof of why these people deserve to be conquered. This type of praise [for themselves and condemnation [of others]] is done with an eye towards the final judgment of history. Egypt, Poland, Cuba, India, South Africa, all these regions: just read the books on history of them perishing!... I had often felt that the situation demanded that these countries could not but perish...But now I know that these books were all written by white people, where truth and falsehood are confused... I know one thing for sure: if you seek the truth about the Philippines in the history books of the Spaniards, you would not doubt for a moment that the country*

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\* Law Clerk cum Research Assistant to a Hon’ble Judge of the Supreme Court of India. B.A. LL.B.(Hons.) W.B. National University of Juridical Sciences (2012). I wish to express my gratitude towards Prof. (Dr.) Mahendra P. Singh for his blessings and constant mentoring and also for sparing his valuable time to read whatever I write with my limited understanding. I also wish to thank Rajat and Siddharth for introducing me to interesting books, encouraging me to read more and most importantly, write what I have learnt.

*is ignorant and vile, and you would only wonder why it had not perished sooner.... Learned people of my country! Are there any of you who are getting ready to write our history? Do not let white children, laughing behind our backs and clapping their hands with glee, take up their pens and paper [to write our history for us]!"*

These lines set the objective for Mishra behind writing this book. Quite evidently, the book sets an example of writing one's own history irrespective of what perspective one takes in it. The mutual admiration for the scholarships in 'Righteous Republic' by Ananya Vajpayee and of Pankaj Mishra in "From the Ruins of Empire" is quite interesting. While Righteous Republic aims at search of 'self hood' by the eminent visionaries of Indian freedom struggle, "From the Ruins of Empire" presents a broader spectrum of the dilemma of the East in shouldering the burden of western modernity in their own civilization. I call the Western modernity a burden since the East lived in thousand years old civilizations with own sets of values most of which were contrary to the Western discipline. A glimpse through the book might invoke the idea that similar to Righteous Republic by Vajpayee, this book also focuses on three of the stalwarts of the East- Rabindranath Tagore, Jamal-al-din-al Afghani and Liang Qichao and their contribution in strengthening the Orient to stand tall against the West. However, it is a pleasant surprise to witness that the book takes the readers beyond these three singular characters. Mishra made an effort to acknowledge the contributions of not so popular characters in furthering the selfhood of the Orient. One such example was the story of martyrdom of Tan- a disciple of Kang Tan, along with Kang and Liang held meetings with the then 23 years old Chinese emperor Guangxu for radical political reforms against the then present unjust despotic government which boomeranged into unwelcome radical political moves thereby attracting the wrath of the dowager empress who was the Chinese emperor's aunt. Soon, death sentences were

issued against Kang, Liang and Tan. Liang persuaded Tan to escape along with them to Japan which Tan refused saying that China will never renew itself unless men were prepared to die for it. Mishra also mentions the work of the Bengali firebrand Aurobindo Ackroyd Ghose in overthrowing the British empire while the chapter focuses on Tagore.

The thoroughness and rigors of Mishra's work in this book lies in the tapestry which he weaves while discussing the Orient, be it the Islamic World of Central Asia and Middle East or the South Asian country such as India or the Far Eastern countries of Japan and China. The commonality of revolt in Orient is the use of paper and pen to generate scholarly arguments and debates as oppose to the use of guns and bonnets by the West to establish sovereignty/ imperialism or to be more sophisticated, social Darwinism. Revolt against the West witnessed emergence of many secret societies and magazines which became banned only to be imported to the country of original through reverse means. During this period, Al Afghani displayed an unparalleled level of journalism which helped in echoing the voice of the natives in the Orient.

The author has received prayers for this work as being at par with Edward Said's work on Orientalism. The book can be comfortably placed in the genre of Political and Cultural History but can have equal significance from the point of view of law in terms of constitution of modern societies. The author in this book has produced various examples of how the Orient, be it Confucianism or Islam, have looked into their religion rather than turning to western models to ensure civil rights and egalitarian society.

In contrast to this, interesting to observe that the founding fathers of our Constitution have borrowed from the best of the Constitutions to make our own Constitution inclusive, humane and

democratic. Our Constitution has borrowed from the western ideas with much ease and comfort while imbibing the values of our own Civilizations which go back to thousands of years. It is much like Kang Youwei of China re-reading the values of Confucianism to suit Chinese Civilization to modernity. It is also similar to what Tagore claims in his essays on Nationalism as 'Fluidity of Culture' which is based on the premise of humanity as opposed to nationalism and compartmentalization of culture. It is intriguing to see as to how the Orient stretched across millions of miles found one common evil as a root of their destitution- western imperialism and materialism.

Mishra quite successfully highlights the Western notion of equality which the White race intends to impose on the Orient that, they believe, is known for practicing the natural order of inequality. Yet, in 'educating' the Orient, Mishra noted, that the West failed to treat the East as equals and rather treated them as subordinates or more precisely, as lesser civilized race thus practicing, something which can be called social Darwinism.

The Brahmins or the powerful upper class/ caste elites of the Orient found it wrong to be treated as subordinate to the West. They felt humiliated in being termed as the 'natives' of uncivilized societies whereas within the Orient itself there is a vast and deep sense of casteism and inferiority within the societies whereby for example, the Dalits in India have been treated as lesser intelligent and impure by the same Brahmins. Further, their martyrs and heroes have been treated as villains. Mahisasura, Mahabali are to name a few.

This is about time that the East begins writing its own history vis-a-vis the West and Mishra's book contributes to the effort. In spite of the excellent research conducted by the author for this piece, a few point remains to be emphasized upon. To begin with, Al-Afghani's record has significantly been overemphasized in this piece so much so, that

the book almost portrays a biography of the character and the other characters begin fading in the backdrop. Al-Afghani's intellectual flexibility to acknowledge the dogmas associated with his own religion is, his justification as to how the overthrowing of Shah in Iran by protestors was not an act of religious fanaticism but was made with an intention of bringing social reform and legal code, have been well documented in the book. Al Afghani's opportunistic characteristics have also finds mention in the work whether in the form of dissociating himself from the assassin of Shah who had claimed to be immensely inspired by Al Afghani or in the way Afghani tried talking Randolph Churchill to give up Egypt so that Islam joins hand with Britain to fight Russia on failure of which he tried conniving with Russia against Britain.

As a whole the reader might feel that Al Afghani received more attention in the book as compared to other significant figures that Mishra chose to present as heroes of Asia. This is so much so that the chapter on Al Afghani becomes drab towards the end and dilutes the attention of the readers. However, other chapters of the book are more moderate and conclude their addresses on pleasant notes.

The wisdom of the book however becomes manifest in the last chapter called 'Asia Remade' where Mishra concludes with the comment that "It took much private and public tumult, and great physical and intellectual journeys, to bring these thinkers to the point where they could make sense of themselves and their environment, and then the knowledge they achieved after so much toil was often full of pain and did not offer hope. They often seemed to change their minds and contradict themselves. As some of the firsts to break with tradition, they were faced with the Sisyphean task to finding their bearings in the modern world and reorienting their minds to new problems of personal and collective identity. They were conscious of belonging to civilizations that had not so long also been great and self contained but were now growing infirm against a successful and

vigorous West. So the manifold adjustments to a new and largely painful historical situation led them into apparent inconsistencies: a figure like Liang Qichao, for instance, upheld Chinese tradition and then rejected it in toto before embracing it again; al- Afghani went through phases of bitterly arraigining Islam and then passionately defending it; Sayyid Qutb was a fervent secular nationalist before he turned into an uncompromising Islamist. Even the most conservative of Asian intellectuals and activists- Gandhi, Kang Youwei, Mohammed Abduh- were forced to radically interpret their own traditions- Hindu, Confucian and Islamic”.

This book celebrates the eternal spirit of man for creating a just and humane society and the journeys made in achieving this. The revolt of the East against the West, this Book successfully explains, did not comprise merely of assertion against the West but also included rigorous criticism of one's own system which paved way for the West to dominate over the East. The call was not only, therefore, for independence of East from the materialism/ imperialism of the West but also for introspection and deliberation of a just society premised on civil rights and egalitarianism. The experiment, the rise and fall, the happiness and despair everything which went into the formation of the Orient gets bundled into the singular energy of asserting ones identity and the endeavour to live with dignity in a just society which was manifest in the three main characters in Mishra's book- Rabindranath Tagore, Liang Qichao and Jamal-Al-Din-Al-Afghani. Therefore, this book must find its place amongst law students as well since it quite convincingly makes one believe that one should not die for one's belief because one might be wrong. This belief transgresses the black and white structure of our legal system and often makes us look into the past for answers. This book answers some of our questions as law students, quite convincingly.