

Book Review - 4

‘The Vitality of India: A Regional Perspective’

Author: Gopal Krishan

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The title of the volume-“The Vitality of India”, does not, in the least, suggest its geographical character or that it is authored by a geographer, unless one is acquainted with its author, Professor Gopal Krishan, an emeritus Professor at Panjab University, Chandigarh. Indeed, the book is in a different genre altogether, different from the one familiar to most geographers. It rhymes well with ‘Personality of India’, written by B. Subbarao, a distinguished archaeologist, or Sunil Khilnani’s well known text – ‘The Idea of India’ published a couple of decades ago. Yet, it remains geographical, synthesizing, as it does, various aspects of India’s history, religion, language or ethno-linguistic composition, economic development and such other attributes that have a bearing on India’s vitality.

As it appears from the preface, the inspiration for writing the present volume came from a series of Conference-based books on the vitality of different countries, like the Vitality of Britain (1997), Vitality of Japan(1997), Vitality of Netherlands (1997), Vitality of China (2004) and Vitality of Russia (2004), published by the Luxembourg Institute for European and International Studies. The Centre of Research for Rural and Industrial Development (CRRID), Chandigarh, inspired by these studies, discussed the idea of the ‘Vitality of India’ in a conference held at Chandigarh in 2004.

The papers presented at this seminar were edited by Gopal Krishan and published in a book form, carrying the same title, as the present volume - The Vitality of India. The present volume is, thus, a sequel to the one edited earlier in 2004. While the edited volume contained a variety of views and perspectives from different individuals, often at odds with each other, the present book represents a thoughtful approach to evaluating India’s vitality, in all its regional manifestations, in a cohesive manner.

The volume is organized in nine chapters, the first two essays disentangle, layer by layer, the concept of vitality as it existed in history and in the contemporary context, based on attributes like the country’s civilizational unity, its System, of governance, economic dynamism, and its constitutional framework that keep the component units together, not ignoring the all-too-important regional vitality. The subsequent five chapters evaluate the relative vitality of different states, the building blocks of the author’s study of regional dimensions, measured and ranked on the basis of five distinct attributes: Quality of Governance, Economic Dynamism, Rise of Middle Class, Management of Multiculturalism, and the Indian Diaspora. The pen-ultimate chapter titled ‘India in the National Geographic (1947-2015)’, defines the importance of India, through its

publication of 94 articles on different facets of India, in a span of 68 years, making six percent of the total articles published in the magazine, during the same period. The author closes the book with 'Synthesizing Regional Vitality', the last chapter, where he ranks the states on the basis of a composite vitality score, the sum of the multiple vitality scores for each state, based on the quality of governance, economic dynamism and the middle class. The book ends on an optimistic note reflected in the spirit of the last sentence - 'One thing, however, stands sure that many strengths, some known and many unknown, will nourish and endure the vitality of India'.

Some comments: The introductory chapters, 'The vitality of India' and 'Regional Vitality' as a quality of a people, a nation or a region resting, as in case of India, on the pillars of civilizational unity, country's resourcefulness, sanctity of the places of pilgrimage and their role in defining a sacred India, its linguistic diversity and a sustained vibrant democracy, are a 'MUST- READ' part of the book. In his quest for the meaning and the role of vitality, the author enters into a serious discussion of the rise and fall of the Greek and Roman empires, taking in its sweep the great Empires of India: the Mauryan, the Gupta and the Moghul. The discussion, in subsequent chapters, of the significance of various parameters, like the quality of governance or economic dynamism, in determining the vitality of a region fully displays a geographers' craft. The regions, co-terminus with the states and union territories, have been sequentially ordered rank wise or grouped into classes, and illustrated in clearly drawn maps to make a visual impact. To quote a few, the quality of governance is sought to be ascertained

by applying indices, like the Ease of Doing Business or Devolution of Powers as witnessed in different states. Similarly, a Compound Annual Growth Rate of per capita, Net State Domestic Product, and Quality of Living Space, Index of Poverty Decline and some other indices are used to determine the economic dynamism of the states. Management of Multiculturalism is determined by the density of places of worship, linguistic diversity and interstate migration, for each state. All the indices are, finally, transformed in a composite index to establish the relative vitality of the states.

The qualitative discussion of each variable, preceding its adoption for a quantitative measurement, is very readable and a positive measure of the depth of the author's scholarship. Often, each of the five chapters discussing different variables start with the history and evolution of the concept and its present usage. One can have a glimpse of this in 'Management of Multiculturalism' (ch.6) where history of the concept is discussed at length, including what the author labels as 'The Indian Panorama', a discussion of 'ethnicity vs class', diversity vs homogeneity: or the debate centred around 'Diversity vs Development' provides the necessary background for the subsequent analytical part. Outlining the situation in India, the author observes "For coping with a bewildering social complexity, internal cultural variety and historical political fragmentation, India had to muster its skill in management of multiculturalism" (p.159).

While the ranking scores and their cartographic depiction appear flawless, the approach adopted in the study based on numerical indices may emerge as one of the contentious issues in the book. Extended

to smaller spatial units, the same variables may produce a picture, different from the one in which each state, large or small, is adopted as a spatial unit of analysis. In a situation where large states are taken as a single unit, many of the poorly developed units are concealed in the prosperity of the richer parts of the state. To quote an instance, the under-development of Marathwada is completely obliterated by its inclusion in a prosperous Maharashtra. Similarly, the other way round, the prosperous districts of Western U.P. are completely ignored as their prosperity gets smudged by the poorer districts of Eastern Uttar Pradesh. One may also argue that the different indices to measure vitality relate to a specific year or at best a decade, and thus have a timeframe, and may change over a short period of a few years. Seen after a decade the same exercise may present an altogether different picture. Is vitality such a transient phenomenon? A very pertinent question that often crops up in almost all comparative studies hinges on an established norm or a benchmark. The inter-state comparison in the present study suffers from the same disability. One may ask, does the vitality of a nation or a segment of humanity have an established benchmark with which to compare?

The author has a unique style of writing. While a string of quotes from scholars ranging from Arnold Toynbee to R. Guha and Joseph Stiglitz to Amartya Sen, sprinkled all through the text, point unfailingly to the intellectual distance the author has travelled to seek clarity, the analytical core of the discussion appears to have lost the primacy it deserved. The numerical information provided in the text, like several economic parameters relating to each state, citing

original sources and illustrated through a series of well drawn maps - there are thirty-five of them - leaves no place for questioning the authenticity of the author's presentation of what he considers the basic attributes to determine the vitality of each state.

The book is in a piece of its own, and presents a model that demonstrates how abstract qualitative traits like vitality could be presented in quantitative terms amenable to scaling and comparison of different spatial units. The qualitative discussion of each attribute that, in combination with other attributes, is a literary piece that shouldn't be missed by any serious reader. The book represents a rare combination of an in-depth literary presentation and the application of quantification to measure an abstract quality like 'Vitality'. It must be added that the quality of printing paper, the fonts chosen and the printing itself are of superb quality - well composed and error free.

Moderately priced, the book will certainly capture the imagination of not only the geographers but equally the social scientists who may learn a thing or two about a geographical approach to abstract themes.

Strongly recommended.

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