J. Daniel Elam, *Impossible and Necessary: Anticolonialism, Reading, and Critique*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2021, 212 pp., ₹895, ISBN: 9788194925835

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In *Impossible and Necessary: Anticolonialism, Reading, and Critique*, J. Daniel Elam examines histories of comparative philology alongside anti-colonial thought that together, advocated an anti-authoritarian stance by fostering unknowability and inexpertise. Bernard Cohn, while

speaking of British colonialism, had famously said: 'the conquest of India was a conquest of knowledge'. By extension, this is true of all modern European colonialism(s). Driven by the impetus of profit making and industrialisation, and justified by the promise of 'progress', colonialism was undergirded by a definitive understanding of history and 'natural laws' that apply to all of human society, and colonial rule was also maintained by definitive understandings of the 'colonial subject', produced vis-à-vis modern knowledge regimes, to the end of creating a utilitarian legal system. As rightly pointed out by Elam, colonialism, which Europeans claimed would replicate the same civilisation of the European nation-states in the colonies, was a project of mastery—mastery of the human subject, mastery over nature, and thus, the mastery of history. When translated to political action, this resulted in the aspiration for sovereignty, in emulation of the European nation states, the postcolonial claim to national and cultural exclusivity, and a telos-oriented politics of development.

Thus, both postcolonial scholarship and politics, when thinking about anticolonial thinkers and activists, have chosen to focus on the acts that are overtly political and directly related to claims of sovereignty; in the case of the figures that Elam focuses on—Lala Har Dayal as the founder of the Ghadar party, Gandhi as the anti-imperialist who played a pivotal role in securing our constitution, B. R. Ambedkar as the one who fought for equal rights for Dalits and the chief architect of the Indian constitution, and Bhagat Singh for the killing of Saunders, and in the words of Nehru 'for vindicating the honour of Lala Lajpat Rai', as a martyr to the cause of Indian Independence. This is because the anticolonial movement, and the way it has come to be seen by the postcolonial nation state, has operated within the coordinates set by colonialism itself.

Elam proposes a new way of thinking postcolonial theory—and through this, he invites us to think about a politics of the present. The present is fleeting—it is outside our grasp, and therefore, it becomes messy, undefined, and the moment where human agency operates within and simultaneously produces unpredictability. The present therefore stands in stark contrast to both the past and the future—the past, which is governed through the writing of history, and the future, governed by deploying teleological laws of history. Laws, that would dictate how societies must and inevitably will mature in the steady march towards modernity, and therefore the sovereign nation state.

Yet, by focusing on the figures that Elam does, he asks us to focus on the unpredictability of the times that they inhabited, through which

the struggle for independence was mediated. The early twentieth century saw two world wars. On the Indian front, there was the rise of the Congress party, the promise of home rule made and shattered, and the increasing communalisation of Indian politics. It also saw rising retribution of the British imperialists who responded with an iron fist as they tried to maintain control over an empire in the face of rising anti-imperialist politics. In such times, Har Dayal, Gandhi, Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh took up the mantle of the anticolonial struggle in their own respective ways—not knowing though if, when, and how sovereignty would be achieved, and what independent India would look like. To say that they did not have hopes and any vision for the same would be facile, but Elam points out the necessity of placing each of these figures in the very moment in which they operated; and they did so while knowing the constant threat not only to the distant dream of independent India, but to their present, and sometimes, their very lives. Thus, by focusing on their present, and particularly on their practices of reading and writing, which are usually seen as aesthetic acts outside the domain of explicit political acts, Elam teases out an aesthetic politics—a politics through which these actors through their writings gave up their own claim to authorship. Instead, they focused on and urged others to read—and to read others, others who they saw as far more important thinkers than themselves.

Through this small and seemingly insignificant act, Elam demonstrates a political praxis that stands in absolute contrast to the imperial goal of mastery—and thus, also the telos-oriented chasing of national sovereignty. Through their writings, Elam suggests that his protagonists were thus inheritors of the legacy of comparative philology—which aims to awe; and thus, their aim was to create a community of readers, who would form a fellowship, that in their present gave them succour, and in their hopes, gave shape to a world of readers who gives up on the politics of mastery, and thus bring an end imperialism. In my view, this book presents to us a non-nihilistic approach to what Dipesh Chakrabarty called 'the politics of despair' in 'Provincialising Europe', which is much needed in such times, when even the future seems to hold nothing but a promise of constant crisis.

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