

Sultan, Nazmul. *Waiting for the People: The Idea of Democracy in Indian Anticolonial Thought*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2024. ix+ 301 pages. Hardcover, \$45.

The global rise of democracy as a normative ideal when it comes to political governance was not (and arguably is still not) devoid of challenges and contradictions. In his latest book, which is based on Sultan's doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Chicago in 2020, Sultan critically exposes the rather "illiberal" nature of Western democratic theory that worked in conjunction with imperialism to further the colonial project in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by using the idea of "peoplehood" and popular sovereignty as an analytical category. Additionally, Sultan chronicles how various Indian anticolonial thinkers responded to such a colonial construction and casting of democratic theory.

For Sultan, the rise and growth of democracy was founded on an acceptance of the notion of "popular sovereignty". Despite the many contradictions and construals of the term, Sultan claims that the notion of acquiring a certain "democratic authorization from the people" is key to the practice, establishment, and spread of the democratic tradition. Two issues of crucial importance are derived from here. Firstly, the centrality of the idea of "the people" in the establishment and working of a democracy. And secondly, in the light of the separation of "popular sovereignty" from "the government," the growth of many and often competing claims of legitimacy of having "popular sovereignty" based on different conceptions of the "people" that allowed both the extant state and non-state actors to present such claims. Based on the first issue, Sultan argues that the complementary rise of Western democracy and the imperial project in the nineteenth century served to validate colonialism under the veil of "democracy" by adopting a position that the people in the colonies were unfit to practice democracy themselves. This provided a legitimizing mechanism for the colonial civilizing mission and liberal developmentalism that narrowly visualized only a single trajectory of human development, defined in liberal Eurocentric terms. The centrality

of the book is not, however, in this critique of Western liberal imperialism that “co-opted democratic theory” to further the colonial project but on how various Indian colonial thinkers responded to such a practical and theoretical imposition of parochialism. Sultan meticulously presents how various Indian thinkers such as B.N. Seal, R.K. Mukherjee, M.K. Gandhi, Dadabhai Naoroji, Jawaharlal Nehru, and B.R. Ambedkar sought a rethinking of the phenomena by “pluralizing, rejecting or critically appropriating” the Western premises and presumptions that had become so messily entangled with the practice of democracy. For Sultan, the anti-colonial project in India required not only a rejection of the visceral aspects of colonial rule but also a critical rethinking of the very conception of democracy as presented by the West.

Waiting for the People is an excellent work in post-colonial studies. Democratic theory and also global intellectual history. It is also a significant contribution to the rapidly developing subdiscipline of comparative political theory, that seeks to incorporate the traditions of the non-West in theorizing politics and democracy, based on the notion that “political theory so far as been Eurocentric.”

Sultan joins a long and revered tradition of theorists such as Fred Dallmayr, Ramin Jahanbegloo, Anthony Parel, Rochana Bajpai, D.M. Temin, Stuart Gray, Amartya Sen, and Alexander Weiss, for instance, in arguing for a critical rethinking and reconceptualization of the idea of “democracy” as is conventionally understood. The book is a timely and welcome intervention in this field.

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