

Book Review
By
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Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (London: Penguin House, 2017), 406

The rise of Trump, the Modi-led 'Saffron revolution' in India, whose features, inter alia, include a rabid vigilantism to protect the sanctity of cows and an economic model based on deregulation and privatization, the emergence of ISIS and its glee for sadistic violence, Brexit and right-wing political movements in Europe seem to share nothing in common and have different political, social and economic roots, but for Pankaj Mishra these bewildering political developments are reflective of an era, which he characterizes as 'Age of Anger'. *Age of Anger* is a manifestation of a world in which 'individuals trained to believe in a lofty notion of personal freedom and sovereignty is confronted with a reality that cancels it'. This not only leads to 'gratuitous murderer and paranoid insurgency', but also provides germane ground for virulent nationalism and a cult for Nietzschean superman. To make sense of the resentment prevalent among the people, Pankaj Mishra takes a broad historical sweep with the aim of scouring similarities in today's world and a world gone by.

With the disintegration of Soviet Union and fall of Berlin Wall, free-market capitalism and liberal democracy were touted as the panacea for the social, political and economic problems of the world, ushering in a new era of prosperity and well-being. This triumphalism and a slew of theories accompanying it with its illusions of freedom, stability, security and opportunities soon gave way to an ugly reality of political disenfranchisement, greater economic inequality and increasing chasm between

lofty ideals and their realizations. The resultant resentment took shape of jingoism, paranoia and random and brutal violence, best exemplified by ISIS. In Industrial and developed world people channelize their anger against minorities, blaming them for the problems that afflict their society, in the process reviving the old orientalist notions and exaggerated stereotypes. This '*resentiment*', claims Mishra, has a historical precedent revisiting which could possibly help us to understand the bewildering political developments. He calls this links between the present and past as 'forgotten conjectures'.

The author traces this history by debunking the myths and deconstructing a spruced narrative of European civilization that squeeze out its brutal wars, great diversity and progress going in parallel with mass resentment and gross inequalities. Two of the most important and fateful events of human history were industrialization in Britain and political revolution in France. Mishra writes, "The changes brought about by two coalescing revolutions, the French and Industrial, marked a sharp break in historical continuity; they ushered in a new era of global consciousness....inaugurating what we call modernity." Modernity came with ideas of fraternity, equality and individual progress. The penetration of these ideas was confronted by scarce opportunities, making the achievement of these lofty notions an unfulfilled longing and creating a wave of alienation. Rousseau gave voice to this experience of loss. Pankaj says, Rousseau 'described the quintessential inner experience of modernity for most people: the uprooted outsider in the metropolis, aspiring for a place in it, and struggling with complex feelings of envy, fascination, revulsion and rejection". Unlike his contemporary political philosophers, Rousseau did not believe a just society could be formed through private property and self-interest. It was not surprising Voltaire called

Rousseau a ‘tramp who would like to see the rich robbed by the poor’.

But resentment was not confined to the ‘outsiders’ within the industrialized and developed societies, it also affected ‘latecomers to modernity’. Germany was a straggler in the race for industrialization and political revolution. Politically divided into hundreds of small states and facing the juggernaut of awesome military machine of Napoleon, German thinkers and artists resorted to cultural nationalism that asserted spiritual superiority and aesthetic ideology. Contra to French ‘civilization’ Germans started idealizing *Volk*, which, according to author, was defined as “an organic national community united by a distinctive language, ways of thought, shared traditions, and a collective memory enshrined in folklore and fable”. German writers built the foundation of Romantic Movement, defying the ‘Enlightenment’s notion of a single civilization’ and defining civilization as a ‘multiplicity of particular national cultures, all with their own special identity’. But it also contained an element of hatred against France and jingoism which, despite German unity under Bismarck in 1870s and its rise as a major industrial power, would mutate into more dangerous forms, ultimately culminating in fascist groups like NAZI party under Hitler. This sort of virulent nationalism spread among Polish and Italian nationalists too.

For Pankaj Mishra, the inward-looking movements and secessionists from civilizations, not unlike their predecessors, are a disenfranchised lot, unable to ripe the promises of a ‘world civilization’ that was supposed to yield prosperity, equal opportunities and individual empowerment. The subsequent resentment among the people would have catastrophic effects on the social and political fabric.

Age of Anger is a very good book. The author has gone through an overwhelming body of literature to present a novel explanation of significant political developments in contemporary world and finds similar patterns between past and present. There are times, however, when reader feels that the author relies too much on grand generalizations and ignores local factors and varied sources of resentment. Subsuming the experience of loss, alienation and frustration to the gap between promise the promise of a set of supposedly universal principles and a mundane reality of unequal opportunities, avoids the role of ideology and indigenous factors that might play an important role in their movements. Moreover, his scathing criticism of nationalism does not discuss its element of emancipation and its being a useful tool for oppressed nations to mobilize popular support. Nationalism is not a monolith; the sheer diversity it encompasses demands an approach that does not reduce it to the imaginings of an elite intellectual clique. Moreover, the author would have done well to focus in some detail on the important developments in the world that he thinks manifest anger against the contemporary economic and political order.

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