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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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ON BALANCING HISTORIES LARGE AND SMALL:
MODERN INDIA AND K.M. PANIKKAR

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Mauro Elli and Rita Paolini, *Indian National Identity and Foreign Policy: Re-Evaluating the Career of K.M. Panikkar (1894-1963)*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, 270pp. (ISBN 978-3-031-36242-2).

Can an individual life speak to larger historical developments? A cursory glance at the bookcase in my office that is devoted to modern Indian history would answer this question in the affirmative: some of the most insightful works the bookcase contains, use individuals as prisms to shed light on India's larger story. Readers would seem to agree, too: such books draw large academic and non-academic audiences. This is as true for biographies as it is for books that do not centre an individual life, but rather use that life as an organizing principle for a broader narrative.

There appears to be much less consensus, however, when it comes to how the authors of these books view themselves, and this cannot be seen as separate from the awkward status of biography within the discipline of history. As popular as the genre of biography is with the general public, the profession has long considered biography as a “lesser” form of history. In a 2009 roundtable entitled “Historians and Biography” in the *American Historical Review*, Judith Brown opened by saying that she does not agree with the labelling of her books on Gandhi and Nehru as biographies: “I do not see myself as a biographer, or these works as biographies, in the accepted sense of tracking and interpreting a life from the cradle to the grave, and, more problematically, of taking the individual as the only intellectual and analytical center of the argument.”¹ Rather, she argues, following the course of a life can add depth and complexity to the analysis of larger developments.

I believe that the authors of *Indian National Identity and Foreign Policy*, who approach this topic through Indian historian-diplomat K.M. Panikkar, would largely agree with this statement. In the book's introduction, they state that “the purpose of this research is the study of a significant character because it is believed that, in this way, it might be possible to contribute to a better understanding of certain dynamics of great importance for the history of India ... this means that this will be a biography of Panikkar only

1. Judith Brown, “‘Life Histories’ and the History of Modern South Asia”, *The American Historical Review* 114:3 (2009), 587-595: 587.

to a certain extent, namely the intellectual and professional one.”² In other words, the book’s intent is not to illuminate Panikkar as a three-dimensional historical figure with a private life and the affective ties that come with it, but rather to centre his extraordinary career and prolific writings to view Indian national identity and foreign policy – as the main title tells us – from an underexplored angle.

This is a difficult balance to strike. After all, what is an affective tie and what is a professional one, and might they not sometimes overlap? How public is the private, and vice versa, for a diplomat – let alone one who actively published on not just the history and politics, but also the literature and poetry of the countries to which he was posted? Panikkar’s career trajectory, especially in the interwar years, took some sudden twists and turns, and some of the underlying reasons, by Panikkar’s own admission, were very much prompted by his private circumstances. It is impossible to make such separations neatly, which means that, over the course of this book, the reader must accept that some questions remain unanswered.

By contrast, the story of modern India that is offered by Elli and Paolini in this book is exceptionally clear, which is arguably a much harder feat to accomplish. The history of India’s late-colonial and early post-independence trajectory which they offer in this book is not just well-constructed, but the product of a clear set of thematic choices and an underlying primary source base that is both broad and deep. For readers that seek a history that has the thoroughness of a handbook but the readability that comes with life writing, I cannot recommend this highly enough.

Given the range of Panikkar’s writings, the authors have resisted the temptation of being encyclopaedic, while maintaining a chronological approach. The choices they made give the book direction. To highlight a few: they focus primarily on Panikkar’s Anglophone writings – some of which was originally published in Malayalam and later translated – and on his historical and political writings on India, rather than on his regional histories of Malabar or his literary work. I present this as a choice because there is certainly some bleed between these categories. Panikkar’s 1951 introduction to his *Modern Chinese Stories*, for example, is as telling of his views on modern China and modern Asia as his diplomatic missives, if less explicit.

Likewise, the authors have elected to focus on the national rather than the international for the 1920s and 1930s, touching only briefly on Panikkar’s second European sojourn in 1925-1927. Given that this sojourn gave rise to some of Panikkar’s writings specifically on Malabar, this is entirely consistent, even if it removes the possibility of tying his international activities in the interwar period to his international work as diplomat in the postwar years. Interestingly, given the large number of studies that have come out in recent years on Indian internationalism in the interwar years,

it has the added benefit of appearing as a refreshing corrective to recent trends. The international turn in the historiography of India has broken new ground and continues to produce exciting work. That the authors remain in conversation with this literature while electing to focus on the national story, adds credibility to their choice of narrative. Finally, it enables them to tell the history of the integration of the Princely States in a thoroughly contextualized way. Given the instrumental role Panikkar played in this regard, this too is a fitting choice.

It deserves highlighting at this point, that *Indian National Identity and Foreign Policy* is a co-authored book that is nevertheless very consistent in tone, style, and structure. It is also balanced in terms of its treatment of the pre- and post-independence decades. The subtitle, *Re-Evaluating the Career of K.M. Panikkar*, does leave the reader with questions about the “re” in the re-evaluation. Critics of Panikkar do emerge in the book, especially of the role he played in China, which is covered in the fifth chapter. But some of the criticism will appear surprising to readers who come to this book without prior knowledge of Panikkar’s life and work. Accusations of toeing the PRC party line appear counterintuitive to all the cautious and moderate politics covered in the preceding chapter, just as labels like “Mestophelian” or “without moral compass” will appear extreme.³ It is here, as with Panikkar’s role in China more generally, that one wishes for the authors to position themselves more clearly. How do they weigh these events? In short, if this is a “re-evaluation”, what is it, exactly, and whose prior evaluation should readers discard?

This is not to detract from the conclusion to the book, in which the authors do indeed attempt to evaluate Panikkar’s body of historical and political writing as a whole. They arrive at a set of “antinomies”, past/modernity and unity/diversity in particular, that are constants in his work. These elements change in relative weight along with India’s, and indeed Panikkar’s own, circumstances, but they remain present throughout his life.⁴ Given Panikkar’s range of subject matter, this is a wonderful note on which to end the book, given that these antinomies prominently appear in some of Panikkar’s literary work as well, such as *Parankippatayāḷi* (Portuguese Soldier, 1934) or *Keṭālasīnham* (Lion of Kerala, 1941), lending strength to the conclusion beyond the works discussed in the book.

In the end, *Indian National Identity and Foreign Policy* is an apt demonstration of the benefits of life-writing in telling larger histories in new ways. As Judith Brown notes: “acknowledging the collapse of many grand narratives of history, and the historical hollowness of some recent theoretical approaches, working in part with life histories enables a more nuanced methodology that allows the historian to shift gaze from the general theme and

3. 151.

4. 227.

theory to the particular and precise experience of people and groups, moving from one to the other as each type of focus checks and illuminates the other.”⁵ By telling the story of India’s pre- and post-independence decades through Panikkar’s involvement in them, whether central or peripheral, the authors have done just that.

5. Brown, “Life Histories,” 587.