

V.S. SRINIVASA SASTRI. A STUDY

Mohan Ramanan

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In his analysis on the close connection between identity and violence, Amartya Sen affirms that:

The violent events and atrocities of the last few years have ushered in a period of terrible confusion as well as dreadful conflicts. The politics of global confrontation is frequently seen as a corollary of religious or cultural divisions in the world. Indeed, the world is increasingly seen, if only implicitly, as a federation of religions or of civilizations, thereby ignoring all the other ways in which people see themselves. (2007: xii)

Against this background, Mohan Ramanan's study on an Indian writer and politician with a "cross-bench mind" offers a crucial contribution for those anxious to go beyond confrontational monoculturalisms. These confrontations, more often than not come from a restricted reliance on the construction of people's identity within the limits of a certain community. The links that tie human beings within the frontiers of these groups are, nevertheless, imagined, to use Benedict Anderson's well-known expression (1991: 6-7). In spite of that, current nationalisms are still based on artificial constructs that are frequently created, extended and naturalised according to the interests of those in power. The use of history to make sense of a preferred present-day view of a nation is an effective and extended practice (Hall 1997: 53; Black and MacRaild 2000: 5-6; Guha 2002: 18; White 1990: 10). Hence, the recovery of relevant figures that contradict or

question a restricted and influential dominant view of the past becomes a pivotal task. This is precisely what Ramanan offers in this monograph. He reflects on the question “why should one write a book about an almost forgotten figure?”

I thought that a small tribute to his thought and values would be in order at a time when increasing globalisation and economic liberalization the Indian body politic is suffering from strains and there is a need to reorient our priorities in a rapidly changing world. What is required, I make bold to say, is the balance which Sastri set much store by, because, on the one hand we seem to have uncritically accepted globalisation which has a strong sense of American hegemony in it. On the other hand the centripetal urge makes us xenophobic and narrowly nationalist, with its attendant conceptions of a pure nationhood which aggressively excludes major collectivities in our plural culture from a reasonable stake in nationhood. (2007: 4)

138 An excellent piece of writing, combining almost poetic passages with a didactic and readable style, Ramanan’s study aims at encapsulating V. S. Srinivasa Sastri’s main ideas in a book addressed to the general reader. Since Sastri seems to be a “forgotten” figure overshadowed by Gandhi and other well-known agents in the independence of India, this book is an extremely useful study that may serve as a point of departure for those who want to research into that fascinating period of the history of India. On the other hand, the book can be particularly relevant not only for experts on Indian culture but also for those interested in learning about different perspectives that can broaden a dialogic conception of identity, a respectful and unrestricted construction of the concept of nationhood, a democratic view on politics and on local and global relationships across the world.

The volume is also very well structured. Before the actual analysis of Sastri, the book includes a note on documentation with the basic source materials the author has relied on, and a helpful chronology which helps the reader situate the public figure under study within his historical and biographical background. Starting with a global view of Sastri’s life, thoughts and writings, the book is divided into eleven chapters that correspond to the main ideas held by this Indian teacher, writer and politician and a twelfth one that concludes the book with a summary and reflection on the main points put forward in the monograph.

Apart from justifying the need for rescuing Sastri’s life from historical oblivion, in the introduction Ramanan sets the main objectives of the book. Since the figure under study was not only a prominent politician but also a relevant Indian writer in English, this book sets out to make a “small contribution to Indian intellectual and cultural history” (2007: 5). After the introduction, the second chapter, entitled “Srinivasa Sastri: A Renaissance Man”, offers an overview on Sastri’s life and thoughts. In this chapter Ramanan explains that from that moment on he will add the suffix *-ar* to Sastri as a Tamil sign of respectful address. Besides, this suffix is

used in the South of India, which indicates the origins of this important figure, whose place of birth may also have contributed to his erasure from “official” historical books. Ramanan here vindicates the importance of the recuperation of conscious or unconscious historical gaps which may be the result of several factors, not only political, but also ethnic or geographical—not to mention those related to issues of gender, race and sexuality. In this sense, Ramanan’s book becomes an excellent contribution to those studies devoted to rescuing hitherto silenced people and events from the past, and thus providing different perspectives on the construction of past and present historical identities. It is not by chance that the key word frequently used in this work to describe Sastriar is *balance*:

There is no doubt that Sastriar was a deeply religious man but his religion was rational and humane and certainly had no truck on superstition, fundamentalism and fanaticism. A constant fear, though, of the darker side of the human experience, of the unknown, left him sleepless and tormented [...]. This dual nature in him—rational but also spiritual, transcendental but also deeply aware of the phenomenal— allowed him a rare and difficult balance. (2007: 7)

Taking into account Sastriar’s “down-to-earth and practical spirituality”, together with his work on politics, the reader cannot help comparing him with Mohandas Gandhi. According to Ramanan, Sastriar was Gandhi’s “conscience-keeper”. Both of them, however, had serious disagreements regarding India’s home-rule and the path to independence. Unlike Gandhi’s demand for home rule and independence, Sastriar always advocated a Dominion status for the colony. The important question that Ramanan foregrounds, though, is Sastriar’s readiness to dialogue with those who opposed his beliefs. That is why, in spite of all their differences, his relationship with Gandhi and also with Gokhale was very fruitful and a true example of dialogue, tolerance and understanding. Following the dialogic nature of the *Bhagavad Gita*, these relevant figures in Indian history and culture offer the reader a “third way” to escape the increasingly binary and fundamentalist ideologies of our contemporary world (Hardiman 2003: 6-9). This very first chapter is therefore a living proof of Amartya Sen’s thesis of the long dialogical history of India in his well-known book *The Argumentative Indian* (2005). The issue at stake is, therefore, not to agree with or propagate Sastriar’s defence of a moderate consensus, which has often been accused of revealing an old-fashioned conservative position, but rather the method he followed to develop them, his peaceful open-mindedness and the way he “spiritualised politics” in an attempt to provide peace and harmony in his country (Ramanan 2007: 8).

The third chapter, entitled “Life as a Servant of India”, gives an illuminating account of Sastriar’s life and deeds in the process that led to the independence of

India. This section offers a very good summary that exemplifies the main points and competing views that were all crucial issues at the same time in those turbulent years.

Each chapter that follows is devoted to one particular area of Sastriar's beliefs and thoughts. The first topic to be dealt with is the idea of the intellectual. Ramanan analyses Sastriar's reflections as a teacher and headmaster. The author focuses on the importance of education for the development of a country. According to Sastriar, the teacher or intellectual has the vital role of transmitting the culture of a country and thus preserving it through generations. Tradition and culture are crucial in connecting the past, present and future of a nation. Sastriar's ideas on education can be regarded as quite conservative. However, he denounced the role of teachers as mere suppliers of information and advocated interaction, debate and discussion between teacher and student. Accordingly, he highlighted the importance of encouraging pupils to develop a critical capacity that would make them question received truths. Needless to say, this notion of educational strategies is by no means obsolete. As Ramanan concludes: "Sastriar's example has a great significance for us. He represents for us, particularly the English teachers, what the teacher should be, one not only finely sensitive to the nuances of English and to literary expression, but also one concerned with the contexts of literature" (77). Likewise, the next chapter deals with education for citizenship. Following the same line of thought, Sastriar was a true defender of democracy. He particularly valued the importance of discussion and dialogue among political parties and the members of a party for the welfare of the nation. Hence the importance of taking into consideration the opponent's view rather than blindly defending one's position in political matters. Similarly, in the chapter entitled "Values in Life", Ramanan summarises Sastriar's main philosophy with the ancient Sanskrit words: *Asato ma Sadgamaya*, or "Guide me from what it is not to what it is" (89). This notion can be applied to education, politics and personal life. The ideal result would be to achieve balance and moderation, because it is through the endless dialectical process of questioning received "truths" that one acquires knowledge.

Although chapter VII is devoted to Sastriar's writings on citizenship at a time when India was a Dependency of Empire, Ramanan points out the resonance these ideas may have nowadays. Sastriar distinguished between "citizen", who enjoys rights, and "subject", who has duties. Both concepts are closely interrelated in the sense that the exercise of rights should be done without trespassing on someone else's. Ramanan indicates that this idea is not far away from the Indian conception of *Dharma*, thus exemplifying how Sastriar managed to "spiritualise" politics yet in a rational and non-fundamentalist way.

As was said before, one of the highlights of the book is its excellent structure and how the chapters are perfectly linked. After those sections devoted to citizenship,

Ramanan includes a chapter on the woman question in India based on Sastriar's 1928 speech. He vindicated gender equality and demanded more rights for women in terms of economic independence and education. Ramanan explores the opposing views on the issue, Sastriar's conservative and moderate ideas, together with his radical position in some other aspects on this question. It is a very interesting chapter because it shows the reader how the fight for gender equality in India does not come exclusively from the West but has its own history, which may legitimize contemporary feminism while also defending other traditional views of India as a nation, something that many nationalists still claim to be incompatible nowadays.

In the last chapters Ramanan makes an illuminating analysis of the difficult combination of Sastriar's thoughts, at once rational and spiritual, sceptical and mythical, and his "liberal-conservative reading of the *Ramayana*" (138). Since Sastriar devoted his last years to the study of the Indian epic and he left many of his writings in the English language, Ramanan foregrounds the importance of his figure as an ambassador of Indian culture. In the same manner, the following chapter exemplifies the dialogic relation Sastriar had with his contemporaries such as Gokhale and Gandhi, in the pieces he wrote about them. Finally, Ramanan finds it relevant to mention the high quality epistolary literature which Sastriar left, which not only enriches Indian literature in English but can also be regarded as a valuable historical and cultural record.

In the final chapter, entitled "The Man", Ramanan reaches the conclusion that "Sastriar's life was a saga of service to India". The author foregrounds Sastriar's moderate approach to public affairs and politics, and sincerity and endless interest in dialogue in personal relationships, which made of him an important figure to be rescued from the oblivion of history. The selection and interpretation of past events are often used by nationalists for specific confrontational purposes that serve as a means of inclusion and exclusion of certain individuals in certain communities. In Ramanan's book, however, the study of a historical figure is used to illuminate different paths that lead to dialogue and moderation rather than confrontation and fanaticism. This is, in my opinion, the strongest point of the monograph. I agree with the author on the importance of studying Sastriar in the field of English studies, literature, history, culture and post-colonialism. Since the book is addressed to the general reader, I think that it would have been worthwhile adding some footnotes to help the non-specialist reader to understand some issues on Hinduism and specific historical events or people. All and all, I find Mohan Ramanan's book a great piece of writing that makes an excellent contribution to both Indian and English studies. It is, therefore, highly recommendable to all those readers interested in getting to know philosophies that manage to combine apparently opposite ideas and thus do away with the confrontational dualisms which are, sadly enough, increasing in our contemporary world.

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