

BOOK REVIEWS

Jacob Palaparambil. *Person in Sankara Vedanta: The work of Richard De Smet*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2024. ISBN: 978-93-5966-998-4 Pages: 482.

The notion of the term ‘person,’ either consciously or unconsciously, shapes the way individuals interact with each other, irrespective of their worldviews. The Christian West has seen a development in the notion of the term ‘person’ over the years and has given expression to it through various definitions. While the Indian East is noted for its deposit of knowledge related to human beings spread across its numerous philosophical works, its understanding of person (in the holistic sense of the term) is still open to study and research. Richard De Smet, a Belgian Jesuit missionary and an expert from both these worlds has explored and presented the possibility of the notion of the term ‘person’ in the Indian philosophical writings. His extensive research on this topic has been studied at length, interpreted with care and critically presented by Jacob Paramparabil in his work *Person in Sankara Vedanta: The work of Richard De Smet*.

The book comprises four chapters with a general introduction and a general conclusion. In the General Introduction, the author enumerates the reasons that initiated Richard De Smet to take on this campaign of uncovering the holistic understanding of person in Sankara’s Advaita. The novelty of the research and the structure of the book provide the necessary framework for the reader to engage in this work.

In Chapter One, “Richard De Smet and Adi Sankaracarya: Biographical Notes,” the author records the experiences that shaped the world of Dr. Richard De Smet and Adi Sankaracarya. It features the life journey and the scholarly works undertaken by Richard De Smet as an Indologist and a man of dialogue. It outlines the life (although little known) and legacy of Adi Sankaracarya as an outstanding religious philosopher and an epoch-making reformer of the Vedanta school of philosophy. The chapter highlights that Richard De Smet, among his many accomplishments, has addressed the traditional understanding of Nirguna Brahman in Sankara’s Advaita as mistaken and offered a new interpretation which facilitates parallels between the God of Christianity and the Parabrahman of Sankara’s Advaita.

Chapter Two “Richard De Smet’s Study of ‘Person’ in the West” offers an extensive work on the development of the notion of the term

‘person’ in Western thought. This historical presentation follows De Smet’s tripartite division of discovery, loss and rediscovery of the notion of the term ‘person’ in the West. Its discovery is associated with the accretion of layers of meaning over centuries provided by the culture, society and individuals. The high point to this phase is accredited to Thomas Aquinas’s holistic view of the person. The reduction of the term person involved its meaning being restricted and limited solely to human beings. This period concluded that a person is nothing more than an autonomous being. In addition, the misrendering of ‘saguna’ and ‘nirguna’ with the terms ‘personal’ and ‘impersonal’ by the great translators of the Sanskrit works had an impact on the Indian philosophical system. Eventually, the term ‘person’ regained its holistic character with the great influence of personalists and the existentialists. This rediscovery restored the term ‘person’ with its metaphysical status and did away with any form of dualism or scepticism concerning it.

Dr. Jacob in chapter three, “Richard De Smet on Elements of ‘Person’ in India” exhibits Richard De Smet’s contribution in finding an equivalent of the term ‘person’ from the Indian philosophical heritage. According to De Smet, Indian philosophical literature has often used the Sanskrit terms ‘atman,’ ‘purusa,’ ‘jiva’ and ‘vyakti’ while dealing with human being or the Deity, which he explains bring a certain limitedness to the holistic conception of the term person. Among the theologies and the various anthropologies of the Indian tradition, an unique and important contribution is made by the Bhagavad Gita’s conception of the human being. De Smet affirms that the contemporary India does accept a conception of the human being and identifies three elements, that is, the old hierarchical casteic conception of society, the modern conception of society and the philosophy of Neo-Hinduism, which complement, enrich and offer a possible unitary view of the human person.

In Chapter Four “Richard De Smet on ‘Person’ in Adi Sankaracarya”, the author explicates De Smet’s work of finding common ground between the anthropology of Sankara and the notion of the human person in the Christian West. The uniqueness of God as one, complete, self-subsistent and intellectual Absolute is narrowed down as the close resemblance between the Nirguna Brahman of Sankara’s Advaita and the transcendent God in Christianity. This was made possible by De Smet’s effort to have a deeper look into the Vedanta tradition through Thomistic perspectives. The author further explores De Smet’s proposal on the correspondence of the term ‘person’ to Vedanta anthropology and concludes with De Smet’s declaration that the discovery of the notion of ‘person’ is congenial and

suitable to Adi Sankaracarya's Advaita Vedanta conception of the human being.

The General Conclusion provides a critical appraisal of De Smet's fresh interpretation of Sankara's Advaita, beginning with the contentions expressed by the orthodox Advaitins. It analyzes De Smet's preferential option for choosing Sankara over Ramanuja and Madhva, De Smet's reservation regarding the problem of rebirth, the dark christian history and the exclusion of subaltern perspective in De Smet's presentation of person in India. Dr. Jacob concludes with the final remarks offering a comprehensive picture of the entire work and provides enriching insights as takeaways for further research on the topic.

Dr. Jacob's work succeeds in offering an understanding of person in Sankara's Advaita and attests the possibility that it is at least 'congenial' to the notion of the term person in the Christian West. The book, as a whole, in its approach and execution, is a commendable work of scholarship. The readers would need a basic knowledge of Indian and Western philosophy in order to patiently read through this scholarly work. The Sanskrit pronunciation guide and the glossary of Sanskrit terms in the appendix are a great help in getting familiar with the terms of Indian philosophy and supply the necessary background to facilitate smooth reading. The scholars engaged in the promotion of 'Advaitin-Christian' dialogue will appreciate it to be a desirable read and an enriching work. It will also serve as good 'textbook material' for those looking for the development of the term 'person' in the West and the East. Finally in the words of the author, "This research work is a humble beginning in striving towards understanding De Smet's reading of Sankara in regard to the understanding of person."

Lawrance Vincent

Savarimuthu, Albert Kumar. *John Henry Newman: A 'Kindly Light' in a Godless Age*. Delhi: Christian World Imprints, 2026. ISBN: 978-93-6065-684-3. Pages: xx +139; Price: Rs 450.

The book, *John Henry Newman: A 'Kindly Light' in a Godless Age*, by Dr Albert Kumar Savarimuthu, offers a compelling take on the relevance of John Henry Newman's epistemology for contemporary times. Newman, the author categorically notes, is not a relic of the nineteenth century, but a living guide to our godless age. As the author rightly points out, "we live

in an age of 'less-God,' not of 'no-God'. The difficulty is not a deficiency in spiritual sensibility or a lack of desire for the divine, but that God no longer occupies the central position in human consciences" (p. 11). Savarimuthu writes: "The sacred has not disappeared; it has migrated;" from de-deification to self-deification, from self-deification to techno-deification (p. 9). It is in this sense of a godless age that Newman's "Kindly Light" articulated in the *Grammar* arrives with revelatory force. It guides us through the shadows that close in around us, restoring our vision of the transcendent purpose for which we exist. The book's central contention is that Newman's philosophical wrestling with faith and reason provides the necessary tools to 'dethrone' what the writer describes as 'the impoverished self' and rediscover the transcendent reality.

The author begins by introducing the intellectual context of Newman's life (p. 17-28), which can be worded as a battle against religious liberalism. He then clarifies that Newman did not oppose political liberty; instead, he opposed the 'false liberty of thought' in religion, which seeks to scrutinise divine revelation under the narrow constraints of human reason. The book expertly delves into how nineteenth-century rationalism paved the way for an 'epistemological reductionism,' limiting knowledge to the strict scrutiny of formal logic and the empirical sciences. Savarimuthu notes that this reductionism makes religious belief unacceptable by creating a false dichotomy: if a belief is personal, it is deemed irrational; if it is logically demonstrable, it is often considered abstract. Newman's solution to the reductionism of his days is to develop a defence of faith that is both intimately concrete and intellectually rational.

The core of the book analyses Newman's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. Savarimuthu unpacks multiple complex concepts (p. 33-54). For instance, the distinction between 'apprehension' and 'understanding' is crucial to understand the difference between real and notional assent and to affirm that one can give valid assent to a proposition without wholly comprehending it. 'Illative sense,' for the author, is a master concept of Newman that bridges the gap between probabilistic evidence and unconditional certitude. He explains that the illative sense is a rational faculty rather than a mystical intuition. It is the convergence of possibilities into a single judgment. By validating this personal mode of reasoning, Newman paves the way for the democratisation of certitude, particularly in religious matters. It means that religious belief is no longer the privilege of the scholars but is accessible to all through the rational power of the illative sense and the universal experience of conscience.

Savarimuthu turns to Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* as a case study, demonstrating that the theories in the *Grammar* were born of lived experience (p. 55-64). The author writes: "Newman's *Apologia* is far more than a spiritual autobiography; it is the lived testament to the epistemological theology he would later systematise in the *Grammar*" (p. 55). The author displays this through Newman's life journey from Anglicanism to Catholicism. By tracing Newman's intellectual journey from an early intuitive certainty of God to the complex, evidence-based conviction that led him to Roman Catholicism, he shows how the *Grammar*'s key concepts—informal inference, the illative sense, and the convergence of probabilities—are embodied in the concrete development of a single, searching mind. The *Apologia* thus emerges as a decisive validation of Newman's philosophy, demonstrating that profound religious certitude is not a rejection of reason, but its most personal and rigorous exercise. This section stands out for its precision and effective integration of theory and example.

The book's most contemporary contribution lies in chapters 4 and 5 (p. 65-98), where Savarimuthu places Newman in dialogue with the 'New Atheism' of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett. First, in Chapter 4, the author discusses what New Atheism is and how it is not a fresh perspective but merely recycled ideas; it is not intellectually unique but a repackaging of 19th-century scientific rationalism. In Chapter 5, the author then dismantles Dawkins' God Hypothesis. Dawkins treats God as a scientific theory to be tested and either proved or disproved. Drawing on Newman, the author shows how Dawkins commits a logical category error. God, according to Newman, is not a scientific hypothesis but a personal reality experienced through the cumulative probabilities, guided by the rational power of the mind, illative sense and the moral sanction of conscience, culminating in Revelation. While Dawkins describes religion as a 'mind virus,' Savarimuthu employs Newman's thought to present the experience of God as a 'protein'—a vital nutrient that enriches the moral and intellectual life of believers.

John Henry Newman: A 'Kindly Light' in a Godless Age succeeds in presenting Newman's thought as a robust antidote to the encircling gloom of modern scepticism and practical atheism. By reclaiming the dignity of informal reasoning and the authority of the conscience, Savarimuthu validates that "everyone who reasons is his own centre." As Daniel Pratt Morris Chapman affirms in the foreword, this book is a valuable resource for those seeking to understand how religious faith, especially the Catholic Faith, can remain an objective and rational response to the godless world.

It is an invitation to acknowledge that the path to the divine runs not through the laboratory, but through the profound depths of the human person.

Thomas A.

Lahav, Ran. *What is Deep Philosophy?: Philosophy from Our Inner Depth*. Vermont: Loyev Books, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-947515-10-9. Pages: 144; Price: Not mentioned.

The book is authored by Ran Lahav, a doctor of philosophy, a member of the philosophical practice movement, and founder of the Deep Philosophy Group, which aims to help people practice philosophy as a form of contemplation. This book contains the essential principles and methods practiced by the Deep Philosophy Group; one could call it a textbook of sorts, not only because it provides important information but also contains exercises used for philosophical contemplation.

The term 'Deep Philosophy' refers to the locus of the activity of philosophizing rather than a concept. Basically, it is a philosophical-contemplative quest that paves the way to see the bigger reality that is beyond human perception. This approach is an alternative to conventional philosophical practices. Instead of treating philosophy as merely an intellectual task, Lahav takes the path of contemplation, thereby seeking to awaken deeper understanding through inner reflection and meaningful dialogue. This book presents the theory behind Deep Philosophy but does not consider itself to be a theoretical treatise, besides acting as a practical guide for those seeking an experiential relationship with philosophical wisdom.

The book consists of twelve chapters, which are organized into four parts. The first part aims to present the theoretical dimensions including the basic concepts and principles on which the practice of Deep Philosophy is based. The second and third parts present the historical dimensions, specifically its historical roots and sources of inspiration. The fourth part explores the dimensions of practice, including its general methodological principles and contains exercises and procedures.

The first chapter, 'Glimpses of Deep Philosophy,' presents the power of Deep Philosophy. Deep Philosophy begins with the precious experience of everyday life. As we go about our daily activities, we receive moments

of insight or understanding. The author calls such experiences ‘bubbles of understanding.’ He posits that these bubbles emerge from the depth of our mind beyond the conscious surface. An alternative starting point of Deep Philosophy is a philosophical text. By slowly and attentively reading philosophical texts, we connect ourselves to that which feels deeply real. This contemplative action “gives birth to those new understandings, a hidden fountain beyond the usual confines of my mind, or a vast ocean of meanings that pours its precious waters into me” (p. 4). Deep Philosophy is better practiced in a group because it becomes all the more profound when we share, discuss and dialogue.

The second chapter, ‘Moments of Contemplation,’ describes the way Deep Philosophy unfolds in daily practice, both individually and in groups. The author explains the contemplative process of using exercises like ‘centering,’ ‘interpretive reading,’ ‘philosophical ruminating,’ ‘precious speaking’ and ‘voicing.’ These practices are not so much external activities as much as guides to internal action; they are designed to foster philosophical contemplation in a spirit of reflective silence, meditative reading and sharing. These moments of contemplation leave powerful personal experiences allowing new insights to emerge from the depths of one’s being. One cannot help but notice how closely this practice resembles the *Lectio Divina* of the Catholic tradition; in fact, the author acknowledges this inspiration (p. 60).

The third, fourth and fifth chapters offer an overview of the objectives, rationale and core beliefs of the practice. The author makes it clear that Deep Philosophy does not satisfy existing desires instead, it awakens yearnings for something greater. The process of listening to the inner self is more important than the results. Deep Philosophy always tries to blend thinking and experience in order to produce experiential understanding. This understanding is not merely something intellectual but is real—the author uses the term ‘realness.’ This sense of precious realness is equated with mystical experience. We experience inner depth and uncover hidden aspects of our being—an inner centre that the Stoics called “the guiding principle.” From this inner centre flows “a fountain of creative energy that is giving birth to rich insights and understandings. New ideas...and...different experiences” (p. 41).

Part two consisting of chapters six and seven explain the origin and evolution of the Deep Philosophy group as well as its roots in the history of philosophy. The movement began with a dissatisfaction with academic philosophy which resorted to merely proffering theories. In an attempt to bridge the gap between philosophy and life, Deep Philosophy was

developed as a way of using philosophical texts to elicit deeply personal reflections. Inspired by the contemplative lifestyle of Catholic monks, Ran Lahav combined “the philosophical quest with spiritual practices into a contemplative kind of philosophy” (p. 59). The historical roots include Neo-Platonists like Plotinus and Proclus, German Romanticists like Friedrich Schlegel, and philosophers like Henri Bergson and Edmond Husserl who propagated alternative forms of thinking about life, experience and reality. Deep Philosophy draws from the history of philosophy the conviction “that philosophy can help us go beyond the boundaries of normal thinking and reveal hidden aspects of reality that are not normally accessible to us” (p. 68).

The seventh chapter, ‘Historical Roots,’ presents Deep Philosophy as a way of thinking that is both new and old. It became clearer between 2017 and 2020, but it has its deep roots in ancient and historical philosophy. Unlike regular academic thinking, Deep Philosophy uses contemplative, poetic and intuitive methods. It believes that true understanding needs more than just logic. It also requires inner depth and special sensitivities. Even great philosophers considered philosophy as something which helps us grow, connect with our true self and reach higher understanding. Therefore, Deep Philosophy values the power of philosophizing in togetherness, self-transformation and connection to everyday life.

Part three contains two chapters that summarize and reflect on ‘the seven pillars of Deep Philosophy.’ The seven pillars are yearning for: realness—it is a deep longing for truth and meaning beyond self-interest; inner depth—it is a special state of mind that goes beyond ordinary awareness and connects us to something of fullness; philosophy—it is a search to understand fundamental realities of life through deep and thoughtful ideas; contemplation—it is a mode of thinking that makes reality present within us; resonating in togetherness—it is a shared, non-judgmental communication where we respond meaningfully to each other; voices of reality—they are the deep meanings that reveal themselves within us, beyond logical ideas; and finally, transformation—it is a shift in awareness and being that touches a deeper part of ourselves.

The fourth part deals with the practice of Deep Philosophy. It explains ‘the general setting,’ the ‘methods’ and the post-session exercise. The recommended setting is a guided group session, wherein participants engage with short philosophical texts to awaken inner depth and personal transformation. Through silent reflection, poetic reading, and shared resonance they endeavour to move beyond the ordinary meaning of the

text in order to uncover other meanings. The facilitators who act as guides need to create the atmosphere for this deep practice.

Some of the methods outlined are meditation and yoga, centering exercises to quiet the mind, followed by interpretive reading to gently understand a text; tools like mapping ideas, precious speaking and repetitive recitation help to bridge intellectual understanding and inner meaning; other methods like gentle reading, writing, free-floating reading and guided philosophical imagery foster deeper non-linear engagement. Exercises such as speaking out of experience, enrichment and voicing, identify the philosophical encounter, and help to identify the existential meaning. Creative expressions like poems, philosophical drawings and reflection help to integrate philosophical insight into lived experience.

The final chapter lists out methods of recollection that help a person further their contemplation outside of a Deep Philosophy session. The author suggests 'gentle reading,' 'philosophical note,' 'calligraphic contemplation' and 'inner conversation with a text' as efficient means to sustain and further contemplative insights. Deep Philosophy, borrows the outcome as it borrows the methods and styles of monastic contemplation and psychological counselling—it also aims at a transformation of the individual. The final words of the author are extremely insightful; he points out that the fruits of Deep Philosophy similar to the fruits of contemplation and counselling are never final, and therefore, require constant nurturing. In order for the seed of wisdom to take root and bear fruit in one's life, it is necessary to water it regularly, allow for sufficient sunlight and turn the soil from time to time. This is where the group dimension plays a significant role.

This book offers an interesting and novel approach to philosophy and philosophizing. The author skilfully presents the nuances and the importance of developing a deeper understanding of philosophical ideas, while also ensuring engagement with some of life's most fundamental desires. The chapters are well-structured, with logical flow and clarity of thought, and the work stands out for its uniqueness. Considering its proposition, the book is an interesting read. Those interested in pursuing philosophy as a spiritual activity over an academic degree will better appreciate this approach. There are useful elements that teachers and students of philosophy can pick up to make the teaching and study of philosophy more effective. The ideas in this book can be used to help individuals appreciate the impact of philosophy and can be useful tools for introducing philosophy to beginners.

Ian Pinto and Praveen M

Merriam, Dena. *The Untold Story of Sita: An Empowering Tale for Our Time*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House, 2023. ISBN: 978-93-5971-933-7. Pages:378. Price: Rs. 495.

Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religious traditions. It comprises not only philosophical teachings and ritual practices but also a vast body of mythic literature that has shaped the moral and cultural landscape of southern Asia. Among all the sacred texts, the *Ramayana* holds a significant place in Hindu faith. This ancient Sanskrit epic, attributed to Valmiki and dated to around the 4th century BCE, consists of seven *kandas* (books or chapters). Its principal characters are Lord Rama—the seventh avatar of Vishnu—and his consort, Sita.

In *The Untold Story of Sita: An Empowering Tale for Our Time*, Dena Merriam presents the *Ramayana* from a new and compelling perspective. She narrates the epic through the lens of Sita and the women surrounding her, centering women's contributions throughout the narrative. Consequently, the epic is recast as both Rama's and Sita's journey.

Apart from a mere retelling of the epic, Merriam explains Sita's journey not merely as Rama's attachment, but as a seeker in her own right. Through her past life recollections, she witnesses her spiritual evolution in a male-dominated world. She perceives these memories as an integral part of her own soul's journey. She shares this view following the yogic concepts of reincarnation and karma. This concept is vividly seen in Vedanta and Buddhism. According to them, the soul is seen as reincarnating through many lifetimes, and also occasionally participates in major historical or mythological events. I feel Merriam draws from this worldview. She expresses the story in the voice of Meenakshi, a girl who is shown to be an incarnational soul or past-life self of a maidservant in the palace of the king of Videha, closely associated with Sita. This story narrates Meenakshi's experiences, memories and reflections in Mithila, and also her service and emotional progress.

As the narrative progresses, especially around the chapter titled 'Rebirth in Ancient Ayodhya,' it gradually shifts focus to Soma, Sita's closest attendant and spiritual companion. The character of Soma becomes the leading voice in the narrative, more specifically in narrating Sita's time in exile, her captivity as well as the more mythical and spiritual aspects of

Sita's journey. This shift from Meenakshi to Soma is explicitly framed by the author as a movement from one incarnational soul-memory to another, both representing different sides or incarnations of the author's spiritual experience. The author accessed these narratives through deep meditation, spiritual visions, and memory transmissions. Rather than recounting the epic solely in the first person, the author employs these recurring soul-personalities to foster an intimate, experiential connection with the figures and events of the book.

Merriam's deeply felt and insightful writing style enables the readers to participate in Sita's inner life, portraying her not just as a spiritual being but as a seeker of truth, a daughter, a wife, a mother, and finally a divine feminine incarnation. Merriam gives a peculiar note to the readers in her book about Sita that "while Ram is an incarnation of Vishnu, known as Narayan, Sita is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu's female counterpart, Mahalakshmi, called Narayani. In the celestial realms, they are known as Narayan and Narayani, while on earth they are known as Ram and Sita" (p. v). Through poetic narration and the choice of reincarnational memory as narrative device, the author ties Sita's story to enduring feminine struggles and aspirations, offering a narrative that empowers modern readers, especially women, to discover spiritual intervention in their lives. The book thus transforms a mythical story into a mystical lived experience, and exhorts the reader engage with this epic from a spiritually introspective point of view.

The book has two parts: Part 1, titled "Mithila," consists of 8 chapters and Part 2, titled "Ayodhya," consists of 15 chapters. In the last section of the book, Merriam presents a commentary, acknowledgement and appendices—a summary of the *Ramayana*, a cast of all the characters and a glossary to guide the readers. In her commentary, she shares the spiritual experience and insights gained during her research to produce this book. The author succeeds brilliantly in offering a spiritual autobiography of Sita, reframing her not as a victim but as an embodiment of *Shakti*, endurance and divine will. This work must be appreciated as a contemplative spiritual text rather than a literary novel or cultural heritage.

The author has to be appreciated for her innovative and spiritual approach. It is a peculiar choice to try to tell the story through the soul memories of Meenakshi (Sita's underworld maidservant) and Soma (Sita's maidservant, above ground), but it proves to be a good one, as it provides a fresh, intimate perspective on the life of Sita and the *Ramayana* itself. This perspective draws attention to marginal voices and highlights feminine wisdom, presenting a rare reformatory element within a historically

patriarchal tradition. The most distinctive element of the narrative is that it arises from the author's meditative experiences and grows out of sincere mystical vision, it takes on a devotional tone, and is loaded with spiritual insight, qualities that appeal to spiritual seekers and devotees.

The book challenges the misuse of power, such as cursing and violence, and promotes the idea of participatory, merciful corporate justice and the social order. The book considers themes like trauma, healing and reconciliation, thereby empowering those seeking spiritual or emotional transformation. The book directly addresses modern interests of female empowerment, social justice, ecological consciousness, and a non-patriarchal spiritual path.

Owing to the contemplative nature of the book, some readers might find the slow pace and prioritization of inner experience over action unattractive. Readers familiar with traditional versions of the *Ramayana* might be surprised or even disturbed by how this new version puts Sita at the center of the story, openly questions the old patriarchal tone of stories, and challenges the way some things are seen for example, showing Sita's time in captivity as something she chose, not just as her being a victim (p.190). The book is narrated exclusively through the incarnational perspectives of Meenakshi and Soma, which potentially limits the story's scope to their interior and subjective worlds and leaves aside the perspectives of other major figures of the epic. Since the author presents the mystical reconstructions in didactic style, the narrative appears like an instruction or moral lesson rather than a story.

Dena Merriam's production challenges the patriarchal perspectives of viewing traditional stories and myths. This book would be of great interest to those interested in fresh recounts of classic stories. It offers an interesting account for those who want to experience the story from Sita's point of view. In terms of critical appeal, this book does not offer much, even though it offers a fresh perspective and an innovative approach to unlocking the spiritual treasures of the epic.

Ian Pinto and Albert Antony Joseph

Sood, Gaurav. *Fake News: Spot it, Stop it*. Haryana: Penguin Random House India, 2023. Rs. 399, Pp. 289.

Gaurav Sood's book *Fake News: Spot it, Stop it* attempts to trace out how the 'fake news factory affects public discourse.' The book makes a solid case for the dangers of fake news and invites the reader to act before it is too late. It is divided into four parts, each containing significant views on how fake news operates. The author explores the phenomenon of fake news: who creates it, why it is created, how it spreads, and affects the audience; he also provides concrete responses accompanied by clear examples. This book also speaks to a general topic that is relevant around the world and not just in India.

Gaurav Sood offers an insightful and comprehensive overview of the fake news problem, from its history to its current societal impact. The book lays out important case studies and theories to show how fake news is used as guerrilla communication (see Chp 1) to promote ideologies and agendas, while undermining the ideals and efficacy of democracies. The spread of fake news in India has been responsible for inciting communal violence, lynching and riots, spreading rumours about public health issues especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, and influencing political opinion.

The author also addresses the psychology of fake news and its effects on buyers and consumers. Misleading product reviews, false advertising claims by companies, disinformation campaigns by competitors or others, and fabricated news articles are all responsible for swaying consumers and influencing their choice of products. The 'fake it till you make it' policy promoted by media influencers has proven to be dangerous in a world proliferated by fake news. While fake things can pass off as fake without much damage, real things when passed off as fake can lead to huge losses. Kalyan Jewellers in India were victims of a fake video that showed that their jewellery was made mostly out of impure gold. This scheme cost the company INR 500 crores in losses besides damaging their reputation.

The common conditions that encourage the spread of fake news are:

1. Emotional reasoning – people are more likely to believe in something that appeals to their emotions over facts.
2. Confirmation bias – people tend to promote information that confirms their existing beliefs while ignoring information that contradicts or challenges them.
3. Lack of critical thinking skills – perhaps the most important of the lot. Lacking the ability to evaluate matter critically, identify logical fallacies and seek verification for information are primarily why the fake news factory continues to blow smoke. While there

are cultural factors that contribute to this lacuna, the quality of education is also responsible.

4. Lack of knowledge – people who are not well-informed about a topic are more gullible to accept information that aligns with their half-knowledge.
5. Tribalism – people are more likely to believe things that are accepted or promoted by their social group. This is evidenced by an ‘us vs them’ mentality that is acted out in disastrous ways.

Reliance on gadgets like smartphones and computers has reduced our memory and cognitive capacities. We have grown accustomed to passively receiving ‘knowledge’ with which we are bombarded especially through social media. Such conditions foster ‘cognitive laziness,’ impeding the cultivation of a research-driven and fact-verified approach to media consumption. As a result, fake news continues to thrive and Whatsapp has reached the status of a deemed-to-be-university, as the stand-up comedian, Shamik Chakraborty, humourously noted.

The book outlines how the rapid growth of fake news in mainstream media is responsible for manipulating millions of viewers. The insane race to be the first one to break a story or an event without proper verification of the information has led to many embarrassing and damaging outcomes. In 2020, Zee News was accused of falsely reporting that Covid-19 spread in India largely due to the Tablighi Jamaat event organized in Delhi. Truth is often sacrificed in the effort to sensationalize the news. Prioritizing stories that are attention-grabbing results in the buildup of a bias about reality; constantly hearing about train accidents might lead a person to avoid trains altogether. Republic TV in India is largely branded as a sensationalist.

The media has been considered a pillar of democracy—a watchdog. But of late, it has become more of a lapdog. Media today is largely used for propaganda. While the media continues to exert tremendous influence on how people think, feel, perceive and act, it turns into a threat when it oversteps its scope and begins to manipulate public opinion and promote a certain agenda. Two ways in which media outlets make this happen are selecting stories to highlight and selecting panelists for debates. While manipulation can happen actively as indicated above, it happens more systematically simply by omitting information or views that are challenging, failing to provide context for statements and selectively editing statements or videos to support the agenda. What is consoling is that many mainstream and social media outlets are taking serious steps to curb fake news. Prominent platforms like X, Facebook and Instagram

regularly pull down posts which are fake. AI is being used to identify and remove false content. But lots is left to be done. “A combination of technological innovation, public education and awareness, and policy interventions” will be needed to keep fake news out of the media (p. 178).

Sood clarifies that not all information shared with the audience is bad, but a lot depends on the creator who might have the wrong intention to create it with only sole purpose of getting benefit. Netflix used the ‘distracted boyfriend’ meme to perfection in their marketing strategy to promote the show *Stranger Things* (p.142). Social media tends to amplify news and along with it, the fake version as well, on account of its wider outreach. FOMO (Fear OF Missing Out) plays a big role in the creation and spread of fake news. In the pressure to feel relevant, people can resort to promoting what is fake. Social media algorithms are also inclined to cause fake stuff to go viral on account of greater engagement by way of likes, shares and views. While this strategy is not bad of itself, it remains problematic. Companies like Netflix, Amazon and Spotify use a system called ‘Collaborative Recommendation’ to tailor suggested content to the interests of the individual. This reduces the possibility for inappropriate material to spread.

Reading this book empowers a reader to spot fake news and take steps to prevent it from influencing oneself and others. The last chapter deals exclusively with this theme, even though there are suggestions made in every chapter. The language used is simple, thus making the ideas accessible to anyone with a basic knowledge of English. The author impresses the need for vigilance and a critical mind, capable of reflecting on any piece of information, be it political, religious, or commercial. The book extends its appeal beyond common people to marketing professionals and brand managers who ought to examine threats to public reputation.

The book is informative but tends to get repetitive both in analysis and in suggested solutions. We suppose the lack of scientific rigour contributes to this problem. While there are plenty of endnotes, they are almost exclusively examples. There are hardly any endnotes providing information about serious scientific studies. This, in our opinion, prevents the book from being considered any more seriously than an amplified newspaper report.

Ian Pinto and Edmund Rynngnga

Anil Seth. *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*. London: Faber & Faber Ltd Bloomsbury House, 2021. ISBN: 978-0-571-3372-9. Pages 358. Price: Rs. 599.

The book, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness* is authored by Anil Seth, a British neuroscientist and professor. The book touches on a fundamental experience that is often taken for granted, the experience of being conscious. Consciousness encompasses the majority of our life experience. Without it, there is “no world, no self, no interior and no exterior,” (p. 3). The author uses a powerful example of being under anaesthesia and subsequently being unconscious, to illustrate the intimate connection between consciousness and experience, or better yet, the connection between consciousness and life.

The author defines the objective of the book as “the attempt to understand how the inner universe of subjective experience relates to, and can be explained in terms of, biological and physical processes unfolding in brains and bodies” (p. 5). He does this over the course of 13 chapters divided into four parts. The first part introduces us to the scientific study of consciousness. The second part deals with the conscious content of consciousness. The third part delves into the inward self, the conscious subject, and the last part focuses on the other and how his way of understanding consciousness extends to the non-human other, namely, animals and sentient machines. The author believes that dividing consciousness into these 4 broad categories will allow for understanding consciousness at a deeper level and as a concept that escapes simplistic reduction and explanation.

The first three chapters, titled, ‘Level’ set the context of the book. They explore the question, ‘what is consciousness,’ by tracing out the traditional philosophical and scientific responses. The author prefers explaining consciousness as a subjective experience—what it feels like to be—a thoroughly phenomenological approach. He introduces theories like perturbational complexity index (PCI) and integrated information theory (IIT) that seek to describe and scientifically analyze consciousness. He favours IIT because it offers the most believable explanation of the data and relatable insights.

Part 2 moves from the theories of consciousness to the contents of consciousness—consciousness is ‘always conscious of something or many things.’ This consciousness is then interpreted by our brain and is given meaning but is at best the brain’s ‘best guess’ at explaining the causes of sensory data. The author suggests that this guessing can be described as

‘controlled hallucination,’ which essentially means that our brains create perceptions of things rather than capture what they really are—an idea that Immanuel Kant propagated through his concepts of *noumena* and *phenomena* and John Locke indicated with his critique of causality.

Coming to the subject of consciousness—the self, the author attempts to uncover the consciousness of self in order to arrive at the self that is conscious. He asserts that the self that feels it is a distinct, perceiving individual is not a fundamental thing, rather it is another form of perception which is shaped by the brain. The experience of selfhood arises from various sources, such as personal identity, roles, and the sense of being a body. He speaks of different facets of the self like the *embodied self* which comes from being a body. The *perspective self* is the experience of a first person viewpoint, best illustrated in Ernst Mach’s *Self-portrait* (1886). The *volitional self* is the one capable of doing things and influencing outcomes. The *narrative self* is the continuation of the self through memories. The *social self* is how I recognized others and get affirmed by others.

Chapter 9 is an insightful presentation on the beast machine theory which holds that the self and consciousness are not separated or different from our body rather they are found in our being as a living, self-regulating organism. The author does not see the mind as separated from our living self as Descartes believed. Instead he says that our perceptions, emotions and the very feeling of being ‘me’ is a part of our brain activity to regulate for survival. This marks the breaking away from dualism. Another important implication of this theory is the distinction from AI; true consciousness is not only intelligence but a desire that drives us to stay alive. This arises solely from the experience of a living flesh-and-blood being. The author opines that our conscious experiences are shaped by our cognitions but more so by our feelings.

The final part of the book explores the question of machine consciousness: can artificial intelligence become aware? Most people make two key assumptions though they are not justifiable based on necessary and sufficient conditions. The first assumption based on a necessary condition is functionalism. Here, consciousness depends on what it does rather than what it is made of. If it does in the right way it can be conscious. This is a popular view among philosophers of the mind and among others. The second assumption based on sufficient condition links consciousness and intelligence or even considers them as the same thing. This view is not widely supported. The author concludes that his phenomenological explanation of consciousness does not exclude the

possibility of conscious machines but it certainly challenges the so-called threat to humanity that AI apparently poses.

This book is recommended for students of Philosophy, neuroscience and psychology. Those interested in the mysteries of the mind and consciousness. It also deals with artificial intelligence, the basis of consciousness and the future of brain science. It offers a scientific, personal, and accessible look into what it means to be conscious by combining rigorous research with the philosophical insight, to the readers making it a valuable for understanding the mysteries of the mind.

Ian Pinto and Thomiihie Kajiri
