



Ravinder Kaur. *Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-First-Century India.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 360 pp. \$89.20, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5036-1224-2.

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Roy on Kaur, Brand New Nation

Brand New Nation tells the story of how the twenty-first-century Indian state tried to create a brand image of the country to attract investments to India, and how a new idea of the nation unfolded through the attempt. The social construction of the Indian nation until recently drew upon the re-created and carefully nurtured memory of anti-colonial struggle, developmentalism, or religious identities. The nationalism behind the branding mission is different. It transforms the nation into “an income-generating asset ... a new imaginary of the national territory as an infrastructure-ready enclosure for capital investment” (p. 8).

India, of course, was not alone in re-creating the nation through advertising in investors’ clubs. Other emerging economies—poor countries with high economic growth, good business opportunities, and high cost of capital—did so, too. The 2010s were a promising decade for doing this as capital fled the richer world, where interest rates had dropped to zero in the aftermath of the disastrous financial collapse. One arena where the countries showcased themselves was the World Economic Forum at Davos. The book opens with an entertaining description of how the game was played and returns to the theme in chapter 5.

The broad claim leads the author to develop several interesting ideas. Until recently, sociologists asked whether globalization was making the nation-state weaker, as international organizations and world market forces limited their capacity to shape foreign and domestic policy. A popular backlash against globalization stemmed, partly, from this seeming opposition between the nation and capitalism. By suggesting that nations can devise another way to engage with the world than yielding to it, the book questions the opposition between the nation-state and capitalism. The “neonationalism” the book is about “does not weaken but instead strengthens the nation-state as a dominant player in global capital” (pp. 12-13).

The book calls the action of the state to regain agency “packaging”; the territory the state owns is advertised as a promising field for production, exchange, and exploitation of resources. The parallel, *Brand New Nation* says, between a movement in nineteenth-century continental Europe to define the nation as “an enclosed arena of production and exchange” (p. 32) and the twenty-first-century-project that involves redefining territory as an untapped asset is striking. The more attract-

ive the country is as an investment, the more robust it is as a nation.

Although a bureaucratic-political enterprise, a successful advertisement is a job for professionals. A big theme in the book is the semiotics of emergence and the reinvention of history. Professionals are necessary to devise the signs and write the parables. India's nationalists invented many slogans before. But this time around, they recruited "private sector executives as non-profit nationalists" into the mission (p. 37). Of the several publicity drives that came out of this collaboration, the ones explicitly directed at foreign investors used phrases like "India shining," "Incredible India," and "Make in India." Chapters 2 and 4 ("Economy of Hope," and "Icons of Good Times") draw on a cluster of posters that sold India as a land of hope, optimism, and business. Chapter 3 ("Remixing History") is about creating a fable. The land that was so rich and wondrous in ancient times rises again; emergence was not just a modern-day economic phenomenon, but India's destiny, or fulfillment. While making money, the foreign investor should feel proud of being a part of an ancient heritage that sets India apart from just any other emerging economy.

Chapter 6 ("The Second Liberation") takes leave from the advertising campaign and turns to politics. India's emergence—indeed, any other big country's emergence since 2000—was purchased at the price of a rise in inequality, the proliferation of insecure jobs, and a bigger scope for corrupt deals than before. Optimism bred anxiety about missing the bus or "being turned back from the door of a prosperous future" (p. 47) thanks to an inefficient government. The chapter describes the reinvention of a motif in the making of India's image in reaction to these anxieties, now meant for the Indians: the "common man." The short concluding chapter ("Uncommon Futures") claims that hypernationalism and authoritarian impulses are compatible with the making of the Indian brand.

In the last days of the doddering Austro-Hungarian Empire, Robert Musil's novel tells us, the imperial nationalists became busy with the Collateral Campaign, a magnificent, never-before way to celebrate the emperor's seventy-year reign. No one dared to plan anything definite in case someone else's plan looked even grander. But all agreed that the campaign "must culminate in a great sign ... it could not have just any goal [but one] that must stir the heart of the world." It must be "sheer poetry."^[1] A world war destroyed the dream. Would a global epidemic spoil India's dream? Unlikely, as India's growth resurgence is robust enough. The emerging-market index funds continue to outperform those investing in the rich countries. Still, for the world at large staring at images of dead bodies floating down the Ganges, a health warning should attach to the India brand.

Ravinder Kaur has written a perceptive, compelling, and very engaging book. This is the first systematic treatment of the remaking of politics and ideology in the wake of the economic resurgence in India and offers a radical rethinking of nationalism.

Note

[1]. Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, vol. 1 (New York: Capricorn, 1965), 208-09.

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