

Revisiting the idea of India: review of Dennis Dalton's 'Indian Ideas of Freedom'

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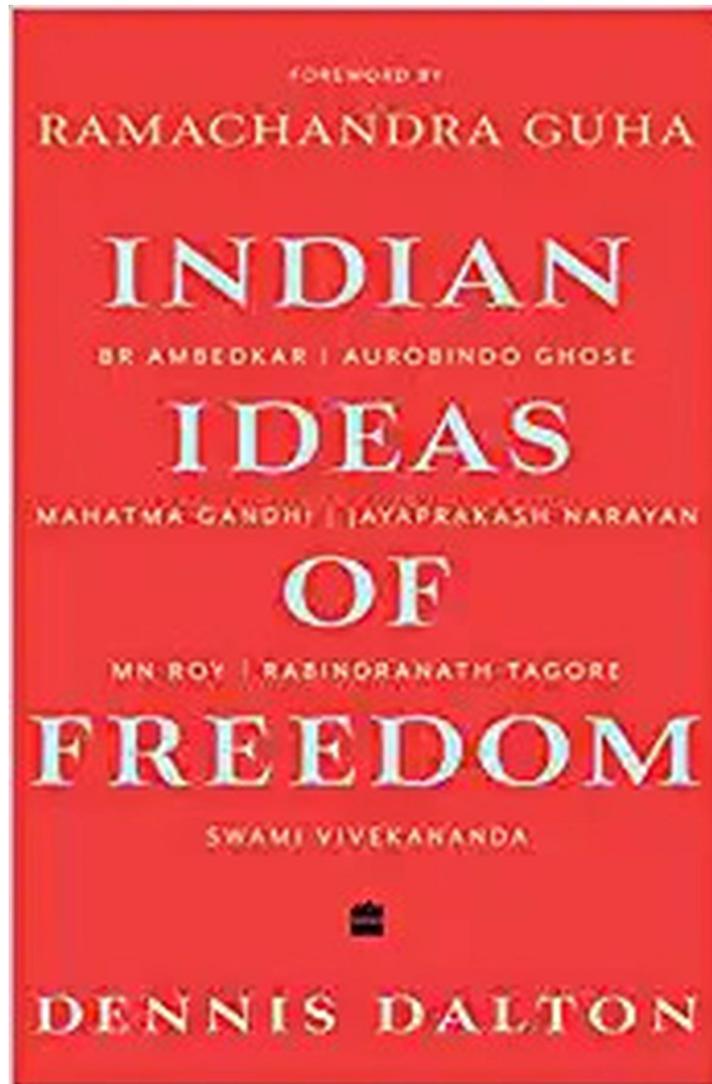
Through the eyes of seven thinkers, Dennis Dalton unpacks an alternative concept wherein 'freedom' is not mere independence, but self-transformation

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(L to R) Mahatma Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghose, B.R. Ambedkar (bottom), Rabindranath Tagore, M.N Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Jayaprakash Narayan. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

Colonialism sought to re-describe Indian society through its own cognitive lenses. The paradox of the anticolonial response is that it had to adopt colonial techniques to challenge its rule. Traceable to the ferment in late 19th and early 20th-century India, the concept of “freedom” drew from Indian intellectual ideas against the backdrop of liberal political theory. The encounter produced a series of complicated sub-plots reordering Indian culture. Yet, as Dennis Dalton brilliantly undertakes in his book, *Indian Ideas of Freedom*, the modern Indian conceptualisation was not simply derivative of the Western discourse. Central to his claim is that swaraj is a civilisational ethos of self-transformation, echoing Gandhi’s famous insight: “It is swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves.”



In a book spanning over 500 pages, integrating his earlier edition in 1982 and his recent works, the Gandhi scholar and activist, Dennis Dalton, re-centres a contemplative and philosophical practice of freedom at the root of the national imagination. The book is a meticulous reading of texts and demonstrates strict textual evidence in support of its claims. It includes important interlocutors who participated in the circulation of these ideas, especially their intellectual influences. In what he terms the “group of seven”, Dalton astutely analyses key exponents of Indian political thought namely Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghose, M.K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, B.R. Ambedkar, M.N. Roy, and Jayaprakash Narayan to animate an arc of thinking about freedom as spiritual and ethical conduct.



“It is swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves,” Gandhi famously said. | Photo Credit: Shashi Ashiwal

Political and spiritual

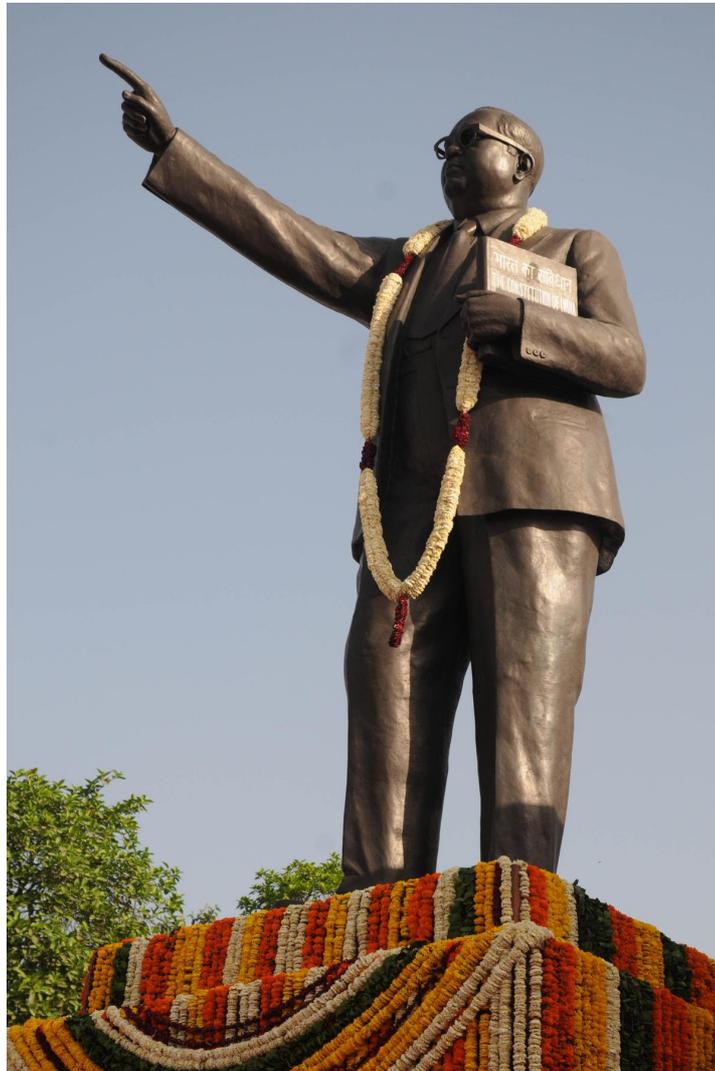
The book undercuts the modern liberal individualist discourse by reconciling freedom with a spiritual quest. Dalton unpacks an alternative conception wherein freedom is not mere independence, economic emancipation, or individual rights, but self-transformation. He elucidates freedom as “internal”, referring to the thinking in Indian traditions about overcoming obstacles or impediments through self-purification and self-restraint. An individual entered the political domain to achieve unity with all beings. The Indian portrait stood for knowledge of the self where duragraha or violence was the condition of being severed from such an end.

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Be it Ramakrishna Paramahansa's divine influence on Vivekananda, Aurobindo's evolution from a swadeshi radical to spirituality, Gandhi's formulation of swaraj and satyagraha, Tagore's critique of nationalism, Roy and Jayaprakash Narayan's break from Marxism, and Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism—each of them transformed politics into a medium of learning and underwent intellectual and spiritual transformations, which Dalton fascinatingly extends not only as political theories but personal journeys in swaraj. Identifying them as a “cluster of ideas,” the author highlights a shared concern of reconstructing Indian intellectual ideas around what it means to live a good life.



Statue of Babasaheb Ambedkar at Parliament House in New Delhi. | Photo Credit: V.V. Krishnan

The author would term as simplistic any attempt to view these ideas as anti-political and he instead foregrounds power as generative to action. Underlined throughout is a shared scepticism of transformation seen as changing structures of state and law through masses, political parties, and revolutions, which can be instrumental, violent and temporary. The basis of change was converting the other through persuasion, grounded in the notion of means-ends. Thus, we have the lineaments of ideal political life in ethical action and nonviolence, social inclusiveness, egalitarianism, and participatory rule.

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Review of Vappala Balachandran's Intelligence Over Centuries: the art and science of intelligence gathering

The philosopher, K.C. Bhattacharyya, in his 1928 lecture "Svaraj in Ideas" famously called for a culture-specific form of engaging with knowledge and one's problems, and at the same time, spoke about developing an Indian insight into global knowledge. A natural question arising from the book is whether doubles like "inner" and "outer" freedom make culture a theoretical and interiorised mental phenomenon. Recall that Isaiah Berlin, who represents the commonplace theory of liberal individualism, spoke of states of "inner" freedom as "higher" and "lower" selves. Further, the interpolations around the term "spiritual" used throughout the book suggest something of a floating signifier, occupying various meanings in different places.

What is "Indian" about these ideas shorn of the fact that it emerged from the subcontinent? At any rate, Dalton is not alone here, Ashis Nandy talks about some of the figures discussed in this book like Vivekananda and Dayanand Saraswati, as tragically refashioning Indian culture along colonial Western values or what Nandy observed as Christianising Hinduism.



Swami Vivekananda | Photo Credit: Getty Images

Friendship through letters

An extraordinary aspect of this book is its immersive quality. Dalton is by no stretch an ivory tower theorist, revealing his time of living and corresponding with some leading figures and their interlocutors. The pages are testimony to a mind that sought “conceptual correspondences.” The author has been an advocate, in the West, of Indian political and cultural ideas, and his deep admiration of it comes across in this work. Readers need not be intimidated by the serious subject matter, and they will find Dalton’s sensitive and compassionate tone inviting.

Combining theoretical acumen and rich archival materials, the author has attempted to reconstruct a theory of freedom unique to the spiritual history of India. This timely book revisits the debate about the “idea of India” articulated as experiential truth. Defying Euro-centric stereotypes, Dalton has furnished us with a highly informed and enduring work whose implications stretch far beyond its immediate estimate.

Indian Ideas of Freedom

Dennis Dalton

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