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Manali Desai (2007): *State Formation and Radical Democracy in India*, London,Routledge

Studies that employ inter-state comparative method in the arena of state politics have gained momentum with the realisation that India provides an ideal environment for comparative political analysis. The diversity of these states can be balanced against their development in the same evolving framework of the Indian federal system. India is also an 'ideal ground for comparative analyses', as Desai puts it, for 'holding constant certain factors such as its position in the sphere of international relations, geography, ecology, religion and early political formations' that provides a 'range of variations in key social, political and economic preconditions and outcomes' (pp. 22–23), enabling a comparativist to draw lessons from these diverse regional experiences.

Desai is primarily concerned with an in-depth historical analysis of the political and economic directions Kerala has taken on the way to its remarkable success in bringing about important anti-poverty reforms within a formal parliamentary

democracy. However, she also undertakes a comparative study of West Bengal to address the interesting puzzle of why the same Left parties have been unable to experience the same degree of success in providing access to welfare, literacy and basic subsistence. The puzzle deepens if one considers the fact that Kerala's Left, which has been more consistently activist and has implemented more anti-poverty policies compared with West Bengal, has been in power for a shorter period and is also confronted with a much stronger opposition coalition.

Desai looks to solve the puzzle by examining the historical legacy in each state, the process of Left party formation and its mode of engagement with civil society in each case. She suggests that even a Left party with a significant electoral base and a radical agenda can bring about significant change only if it retains its

movement character. The Kerala experience shows a dynamic relationship between the Left parties and their affiliated movements and organisations promoting low caste and working-poor mobilisation. Desai argues it is this that has led to a substantive shift in the social basis of political power in the state. What is striking is that the policies, aimed at poverty reduction and comprehensive development, continue even when the Left parties are out of power. The West Bengal Left parties, despite being in power for longer, have weaker links with civil society movements and depend heavily on the parliamentary mechanism for driving policy forward. The historical circumstances inherited by the communists in West Bengal were not as favourable as in Kerala if one considers the close correspondence between caste and class in Kerala. This connection made the outcome of class politics inevitable once lower-caste agrarian and industrial workers began organising. The Left in Kerala gained from the open circumstances in which it formed, in contrast to the mostly underground cells in Bengal (or elsewhere in India).

Desai makes a commendable effort to historicise and concretely specify the critical role Left parties have played in Kerala. The comparative focus on West Bengal brings out the crucial differences in the nature of the Left-led mobilization and rule in the two states that is reflected in their respective social regimes. Desai's book will be of wider interest to those interested in the study of political change and it is a fine illustration of how sub-national comparisons between states in India can be used to advance the study of comparative politics.