

## Book Review

### *The Karma of Brown Folk*, by Vijay Prashad

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*The Karma of Brown Folk*, by Vijay Prashad (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 253 pp.

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Nearly a century ago, W.E.B. Du Bois asked, "How does it feel to be a problem?" Framing the challenge of the twentieth century around the "color line," Du Bois would, over the course of his lifetime, continually rework the problem of advancement for African Americans in terms of the struggles of people of color across the globe. The battles of the "darker" and "lighter" races of the world provide a brilliant, straightforward assessment of the similarities and linkages of race-based struggles for equity and justice taking place in geographic regions of vastly different social, political, and economic makeup. It became impossible, after that point, to ignore the connections among the struggles of peoples of color worldwide.

What would be the "solution" to the problem identified by Du Bois? How could the color line be crossed, broken, erased? It is this question that sets up *The Karma of Brown Folk*, a provocative examination on race in America written by the historian Vijay Prashad. Its title an obvious play on Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Prashad's study of South Asians in the United States considers Du Bois's question from the standpoint of a minority subgroup that is conventionally represented as the lesson for black America, as the "model minority" that black America should emulate: Be more like the South Asian immigrant, and you (the black American) will have a better chance of full

participation in the American citizenry. While social movements were demanding concrete changes in financial institutions, municipal agencies, real estate boards, and the like, conservative constituencies in America were slowly galvanizing around an uncritical pluralism, showering South Asian immigrants with praise for laboring quietly (in largely white-collar trades) and holding them up to black Americans as evidence for the sound state of the American social order.

The celebration of the "model minority" was made explicitly by politicians, pundits, and academics in the late sixties, as South Asian immigration increased with the passage of the 1965 immigration law. For example, in 1966, Prashad notes, Irving Kristol asked why the African American cannot "follow the path of previous immigrants or is his a special, 'pathological' case?" (p. 168). The debate was framed, and the broader discourse of "black pathology" that was ushered in by Moynihan's report on the purported inadequacies of black family structure (as against "mainstream Americans") now included the comparisons of blacks with other ethnic immigrants: South Asians in particular were cast as another normative index against which the African-American experience should be assessed, against which the black "problem" could be framed. And in the contemporary era, Thomas Sowell, Dinesh D'Souza, and Senator Phil Gramm have made similar spirited arguments, affirming the effectiveness of American social institutions by recasting the exclusion of African Americans as a behavioral and cultural problem, not necessarily a structural one.

## The Karma of Brown Folk

*Karma* is less a definitive history of the American tenure of South Asians than a lively and engaging look into the ways in which South Asians figure in the gyrations of American nation building and national identity construction. Prashad begins *Karma* with a critique of "U.S. orientalism," wherein American authors such as Thoreau and Emerson constituted India as the spiritual locus of Man (that civilized creature). Numerous Westerners followed their lead. They too would seek to remedy their own feelings of moral and cultural bankruptcy by noting the *techne* of an older, supposedly more wiser civilization, one that apparently had found the key to mortal fulfillment:

India did not vanish from the western lands [after Vasco de Gama corrected Columbus's error by finding the original India by sailing around Africa], now called the Americas. As an idea it was to reappear numerous times, but mostly to chastise the opulent flamboyance of the Americas. It continues to appear in our own day, in the body of people such as Deepak Chopra, those sly babas (Godmen) who peddle opiates that comfort our decrepitude rather than challenge us to change what produces our distress in the first place. (p. 2)

From Thoreau to the 1960s hippies to the modern-day technocrats who crave the Indian engineer, Americans have continually projected onto India their awe and respect, although these emotions manifest in essentialist constructions of innate Indian brainpower and medicinal powers.

It is instructive that Prashad does not offer the South Asian as victim. In the discussion of the "Indian" in popular culture, Prashad mercilessly exposes the attempts by Indian organizations in the United States, usually under the unremarkable guise of religious or cultural groups, to mobilize support for nationalist, bigoted projects that threaten other populations (e.g., Pakistanis, Indian citizens of Islamic

faith) or other means of identifying as Indian (e.g., gay and lesbian South Asians). To be sure, the common initiatives by South Asians in the United States to host dances and festivals, to celebrate Indian holidays, and to sponsor concerts of Indian music enable the immigrants to constitute a cultural self in a nation that often excludes them from cultural institutions. But it risks reproduction of a one-sided image of India and of the Indian presence in America and one that can be radically divorced from the trenchant political and economic challenges that face South Asian households and the communities in which they live. Only in the past decade are the struggles of domestic abuse, bigotry, and labor exploitation being given attention by the press and academics in discussions of the South Asian experience.

Prashad also uncompromisingly calls out the tendency among the middle- and upper-class strata of South Asians to accept their privileged state in the American social order and its hierarchy of race/ethnicity—namely, that of a successful minority. He notes the consequences that follow:

Desis seek out an "authentic culture" for complex reasons, among them the desire not to be seen as fundamentally inferior to those who see themselves as "white" and superior. To be on par with or at least not beneath these people, desis, like other subordinated peoples, revel in those among them who succeed in white terms . . .

When we [South Asians] tell ourselves and others that we are great, do we mean to imply that there are some who are not so great? White supremacy judges certain people greater than others, and some are frequently denied the capacity to be great at all. This is the root of antiblackness . . . (p. 157)

It is in their particular method of dealing with their own desire to assimilate and be welcomed in American society that desis partici-

pate in the reproduction of a racist view toward the "black" population in America, that is, that they participate in the reproduction of a white supremacist discourse on the "black problem." The silence of South Asians becomes deafening in *Karma*; their capitulation in the broader antagonistic discourse on race in America is only too evident in the seemingly innocent ways that family members "celebrate only those who succeed in terms set by white supremacy" (p. 158).

Where Prashad could have gone further is to interrogate the contradictions that the South Asians inhabit as they attempt to make meaning by drawing on a host of historical and cultural traditions. Prashad rightly (albeit too briefly) points to the dilemmas that South Asians face: "To be lost at sea in the midst of a relentless corporate ethic and a passionate consumer society is not comfortable for our souls; people seek some sort of shelter" (p. 118). In this context, as anthropologists continually remind us, people will come together not simply to adapt to hardship, but to forge a collective identity in the process. For Prashad, forging an "authentic cultural" self by South Asians is an embattled process in which the "culture" and the meaning that emerges is ahistorical and artifactual: It is based on a selective appropriation of Indian attributes that usually are based in food, religion, and national superiority. But there are a number of key actors in the drama that do not figure as prominently in the text but that are important in the overall process. Perhaps the most important is the educational system, in which South Asian parents are confronted with an idealized representation of India, and to ensure the well-being of their children react by affirming the mythic portrait that teachers and textbooks naïvely put forward. This is not to excuse right-wing and religious groups who voluntarily define "Indianness" around a pronationalist, antigay, antifeminist platform, but the process of becoming an Indian is rooted in a

set of institutionalized practices that could have been given more attention.

Perhaps the most factually illuminating chapters in the book center on the role of the state in shaping the South Asian population that would eventually blossom in the United States. It is instructive to cite the demographics of South Asians in the period after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. "Between 1966 and 1977, of the Indian Americans who migrated to the United States, 83 percent entered under the occupational category of professional and technical workers (roughly 20,000 scientists with Ph.D.s, 40,000 engineers, and 25,000 doctors)" (p. 75). In their rush to judgment, the media constituted desis as "model minorities" and conveniently forgot that the South Asian population was a thin sliver of the demographic pool of potential South Asian immigrants. "There was little recognition in the media that this was an artificial community, that most of those who migrated here came through the filters of the INS" (p. 169).

Prashad's political commitments are clear: to rethink and recast the South Asian American to enable progressive social movements to proceed in ways that both confront the challenge of the immigrant experience and reorganize the place of the immigrant (collective and community) in the larger society. The book emerges from the observation that "Since we, as desis, are used as a weapon in the war against black America, we must in good faith refuse this role and find other places for ourselves in the moral struggles that grip the United States" (p. ix). It is the refusal to see the history of South Asians as inextricably linked with that of other racialized formations, and the continual link made between the modalities of politics and culture, that make *The Karma of Brown Folk* required reading for scholars of race and African-American history and those laboring in the revived field of South Asian studies.