

VOLUME 28, ISSUES 1 - 4, JANUARY - DECEMBER, 2021

ISSN 0972-5563

Journal of Peace Studies



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PUBLISHED BY INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR PEACE STUDIES

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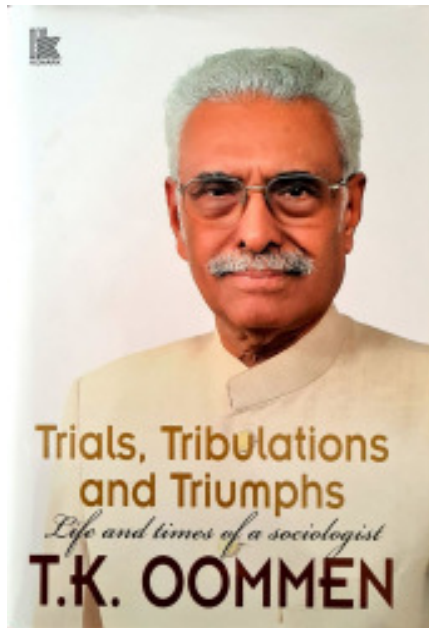
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BOOK REVIEW



Konark Publishers
New Delhi
2021
Pgs. 304
Price: INR 650.

Reviewing a Work-o-graphy

Anita K Behuria

All lives seem alike. However, some lives are special. While the all lives are marked by travails and

triumphs, the way one deals with them differentiates those who are special from those who are ordinary. The auto-biographical 'work-o-graphy' taken for review here deals with a special person whose professional journey has been laid out before us in first person assuredly enough, without self-eulogy, leavened by anecdotes as an inspiring tale of a life that negotiated challenges and seized opportunities with remarkable poise and grit. It is a humane tale that can be replicated if not copied, and make you aware of the snares and risks that await most of us while we embark on our own separate and often solitary voyages of our professional lives.

Prof. T.K. Oommen's honest recollections through the pages of this book make it a treat for aspiring researchers and academics looking forward to immerse themselves in the academia and carving out a niche for themselves. At the same time, for those already in the profession and coming of age, it may make them relive their own experiences in this field. Coming from an ordinary lower middle-class backdrop, Prof

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Oommen's trials and tribulations may look natural, the way he negotiated with life through its critical phases will certainly inspire many.

The work-o-graphy of the "Charvak of Indian sociology", as his teacher Damle fondly calls him, points to the existing anomalies in the system, the insipient biases and prejudices even in the minds of distinguished academics of his time, the prevalence of nepotism and favouritism as well as the reductionist mindset that characterises the thinking of people in high places. Prof Oommen had to weather all this and make the best of the opportunities that came his way to establish himself as a leading academic of his time.

He does not thank God or blow his own trumpet while underlining his achievements. On the contrary, he fills the pages, while narrating the most trying phases of his career, with the details of the efforts he made, which could even bore the reader, to underline that more than talent, what takes you ahead in life is your grit, your fortitude and untiring patience and perseverance, which is woefully in short supply among academics of our time.

Full of anecdotes, the author brings out one story after another about his interactions with leading lights in

sociology of his time from M.N. Srinivas, S.C Dube, G S Ghurye, Y B Damle, his Ph.D. supervisor, Yogender Singh, Dipankar Gupta, to Edward Shils, Neil J Smelser, Salvador Giner and many others. His unflattering accounts of these leading academics, often laced with his own personal frustrations at their inability to rise to his expectations, do humanise them in front of the readers rather than taking the credit away from them for their distinctive professional contributions.

His struggles as a Malyali Syrian Christian, passed off in the north as a 'Madrassi' as he would say, his non-selection as a lecturer in spite of topping the batch because he was not a Marathi speaker and later in Pune, and later his supersession by his student in Jaipur make interesting reading, reminding us of the persisting loopholes in the system that leave out many a talent from positions they deserve. He also talks about instances when his background as a Kerali stood him in good stead and secured him admission into the Pune University. He rues the 'patron-client relations' and 'kin-capital' that tend to determine the career-graphs of academics in Indian Universities in the book. "The prevailing academic milieu was and is a definite obstacle to creating the much-touted 'knowledge society' in India", he would aver.

Prof. Oommen's details his experience while contesting for Presidentship of the International Sociological Association in 1990 which also shows the envy, rancour and condescension that mark academic politics even at the international level.

The book could not have been complete without the author's comments about the academic environment in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) as an academic and as an administrator. He reconfirms the view that during his time in JNU, the left-wing politics held sway and he was often regarded as anti-left for taking positions that displeased certain professors and student leaders. He narrates his experience as Hostel warden as well as Dean of Student's Welfare (DSW) as an unenviable one because of the disparagement he had to suffer on account of his decision to act according to his conscience. The anecdotes he has chosen to share do not reflect too well on the leadership at the level of JNU teachers and students, although he seems to favour the idea of ensuring diversity in JNU as critical to sustaining its stature as a pre-eminent university in the country. He has been as disparaging in his estimates of academic environments in Universities in the

US and Europe. About University of Berkley, he says for example, he was surprised to see near total absence of contacts among teachers even for years!

He packs in reminiscences from his long stint in JNU as well as from his visiting assignments abroad, fellowships and sundry assignments both at home and outside that keep the reader's interest alive and helps him understand the eco-system in which he operated. He does not even discount the presidentship of the housing society he has chosen to spend his post-retirement years in. He has as many experiences to share as his professional assignments would bring into his life. The appendices towards the end contain his speeches and addresses on important occasions which can serve as templates for younger scholars embarking on their careers as academics and professionals.

The book is a must for readers looking for inspiration from 'lives' of excellence particularly when it comes from the pen of a sociologist of Prof. Oommen's calibre. The reader should stay prepared for some of his passing aphoristic observations like "human beings are rationalisers than rational" which will stick to the reader's memory, long after completing this work-o-graphy. ■