



KARUNA MANTENA

Professor, Political Science, Columbia University, USA and Co-Director, Conference for the Study of Political Thought

Karuna Mantena is Professor of Political Science at Columbia University and co-Director of the Conference for the Study of Political Thought. Prior to joining Columbia, she was Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Yale University and Visiting Assistant Professor in the Government Department at Cornell University. Prof. Karuna Mantena studied at Essex University and the London School of Economics and received her Ph.D. from Harvard University in 2004.

Mantena has received numerous honors and awards, including the Elizabeth Adiseshiah Award, the Balzan Skinner Fellowship, the Gaddis Smith International Book Prize, and the Senator Charles Sumner Prize for the best dissertation at Harvard.

Karuna Mantena is a prolific researcher and her book, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton University Press, 2010), is widely cited and celebrated for its originality.

SOCIAL SCIENCES

The Infosys Prize 2023 in Social Sciences is awarded to Prof. Karuna Mantena for her groundbreaking research on the theory of imperial rule, and the claim that this late imperial ideology became one of the important factors in the emergence of modern social theory. Her book and related papers are landmark publications in political theory with implications for all social sciences.

SCOPE AND IMPACT OF WORK

Prof. Karuna Mantena is an outstanding scholar and political theorist, having published numerous papers and books, which are widely cited in the literature in political science, with implications for related disciplines, ranging from moral philosophy to political economy. Her book, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton University Press, 2010), is an impactful work that helps us understand that the dramatic shift in imperial policy, following the 1857 rebellion in India, was not a straightforward reaction to this traumatic event but legitimated by a new ideology of indirect imperial rule that was carefully crafted by the ingenious conceptual work of thinker-administrators such as Henry Maine. The purpose of the Empire from then on was no longer to civilize the ‘natives’ and prepare them for self-rule, as suggested by liberal thinkers like Mill, but instead marked by a custodial conservatism, an ideology that remained paternalistic but left Indian communities to run their own internal social (private) affairs. For Maine, the goal of imperial rule must be to preserve customary forms of legal and social practice through codification of the rule of law. The public and political sphere, on the other hand, must remain in the hands of imperial powers. By making this change from direct to indirect rule, the empire found a perfect alibi to perpetuate itself: The ‘natives’ were not capable of self-governance, or what Gandhi later called “Swaraj”.

Several of her papers constitute major contributions to political theory. ‘Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence’, *American Political Science Review* (2012) provides a consequentialist interpretation of nonviolence. By moving away from the conventional deontological explanation, she opened new avenues for analyzing non-violence as a political instrument.

CITATION BY THE JURY

The Infosys Prize 2023 in Social Sciences is awarded to Karuna Mantena, Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, for her ground-breaking research on the theory and ideology of imperial rule, and their implications for action on the ground. Her claim, that the late imperial ideology witnessed on the ground in India became one of the most important contributory factors in the emergence of modern social theory, has received a lot of attention and scrutiny. Prof. Mantena’s book *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton University Press, 2010) is a landmark study with implications that go beyond normative political theory and sheds light on the moral responsibility of groups. In other work, she examined the role of Gandhian nonviolence in terms of consequentialist ethics. This has been influential and prompted others to engage in the debate.



Congratulations to Karuna Mantena for winning the Infosys Prize 2023 in Social Sciences. As we zeroed in on her from among a highly talented group of contestants for this year’s prize, it turned out to be a wonderful experience for me and my jury colleagues, as we read and came to grips with Prof. Mantena’s creative approach to examining age-old questions concerning political power and nonviolence, and the underlying ideologies and mechanisms that shape them. Her work has influenced researchers in different fields of the social sciences and I hope it will contribute to better policymaking in India.

Kaushik Basu



POLITICAL IDEAS AND POLITICAL PRACTICE

Prof. Karuna Mantena is a political theorist who traces the connections between political ideas and political practice: how ideas and theories emerge in moments of political crises and how they inform and are transformed through political practice.

Was the British Empire a liberal empire? To what extent did it aspire to modernizing Indian society and preparing Indians for self-government? *In Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism*, Prof. Mantena shows these commitments to be much more fragile and never as dominant as they seem in retrospect. *Alibis of Empire* focuses on a pivotal moment, the aftermath of the 1857 rebellion, in which liberal ideas of civilizing native society were largely abandoned as an alternative vision of empire took hold. Conservative strategies of indirect rule, which viewed the rapid transformation of Asian and African societies as difficult and dangerous, flourished. The work of legal scholar Henry Maine was a key driver of this ideological change. Armed with new racial and cultural theories that highlighted the custom-bound nature of traditional society, imperial administrators sought to preserve and codify its practices and institutions, with long-standing repercussions. Protecting traditional society from disintegration proved to be a perfect alibi for empire to perpetuate itself and defer self-government.

In current work on Gandhi, Mantena continues to explore how ideas are born and evolve in relation to events in the world. Gandhi was unique amongst modern thinkers in the extent to which he generated theory through political action. Karuna Mantena details how satyagraha was invented and developed in

response to crisis, failure, and criticism. Most important were the outbreaks of violence—what Gandhi called his ‘Himalayan miscalculations’—that accompanied his first experiments in mass satyagraha, the Rowlatt Satyagraha and the Non-Cooperation movement. These setbacks pushed Gandhi to better understand the impulses towards violence in politics, and refine satyagraha so that it could temper them.

By examining such moments of theory-building, Prof. Mantena shows satyagraha to be much more than a way to inject morality into politics. Satyagraha was disciplined political action, which in Gandhi’s view, was more effective than traditional politics or violence for overcoming oppression and securing social change. To understand and assess the plausibility of this claim, Prof. Mantena reconstructs Gandhi’s implicit theory of politics, especially what he took to be the challenges to political persuasion, such as the psychological dimensions of conflict that lead to recalcitrance and retrenchment.

That violence can compromise and undermine political ends remains a recurring blind spot of modern political imagination. Myriad political actors—from imperial policy makers, populist leaders, to revolutionary movements—assume that force leads to compliance. As Gandhi warned, and as the history of empire demonstrates, more often it leads to resistance and reaction. And when societies become habituated to force, universal moral and political values become most fragile.