

CHINE-INDE : LA GRANDE COMPÉTITION

Gilbert Etienne



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PARIS: DUNOD,
2007 – 224 p.

Gopalan Balachandran, Professor of International History and Politics presents Gilbert Etienne's new book.

Professor Gilbert Etienne enjoys a reputation as one of the most knowledgeable Western scholars of rural India. He has observed and written about Indian agriculture and its rural economy now for over five decades. I know of no other scholar who has brought to these subjects the same keenness of eye and erudition over this long a period.

Remarkably, Professor Etienne has also studied Chinese economic development for nearly as long. He first began studying China and India when the East appeared to be turning “red”, and many in the West were wont to see them as locked in a contest whose outcome would determine the future of the “free” world.

Now, after five long decades China and India are once again painted as potential rivals, and as apt subjects for comparison. Presenting two such large and diverse countries in a coherent comparative frame is no easy challenge. We should therefore welcome Professor Etienne’s bold attempt in his latest book at a comparative historical and institutional portrait of contemporary India and China, and their future challenges.

It is impossible to summarise here the insights and analyses of this information-packed, engagingly-written book. Interspersing personal anecdotes with broader analysis, the first chapter establishes the book’s intimate, firsthand tone by recollecting the author’s personal encounters and experiences of China and India. After a brief historical snapshot of the two civilisations, the third chapter summarises political, economic, and social developments in the early decades of independent India and revolutionary China. The next two chapters discuss the reforms pursued by them from the early 1980s, and their subsequent development.

The book next moves on to the constraints and challenges – infrastructural, demographic, environmental, etc. – facing China and India as they attempt to sustain (in India’s case, accelerate) growth, to bring more people out of poverty and further raise living standards.

A distinctive feature of Professor Etienne’s research is his practice of returning at regular intervals to the same sites of study. He can therefore describe for us, as few others can, continuities and change in these societies over five decades as their populations experienced them. His work is thus of interest also to historians and anthropologists who are increasingly interested now in “experience” of the state, development, etc.