

HEDGEHOG AND FOX



*the fox knows many things,
but the hedgehog knows one big thing*

SERIES EDITOR

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The Indian Ideology

THREE RESPONSES TO PERRY ANDERSON

PARTHA CHATTERJEE
SUDIPTA KAVIRAJ
NIVEDITA MENON

With an Introduction by
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Introduction

SANJAY RUPARELIA

In the summer of 2012 the renowned Marxist historian Perry Anderson published three essays in the *London Review of Books*. The essays, “Gandhi Centre Stage”, “Why Partition?”, and “After Nehru”, provoked immediate attention.¹ Anderson had produced a formidable array of essays, reviews, and books over several decades, analysing the comparative intellectual history and political sociology of continental Europe and the United States, including many incisive analyses of their present condition. Indeed, his interventions often extended further afield, incorporating East Asia and South America. Yet South Asia figured little in his writing. Thus the attempt by Anderson to analyse twentieth-century India aroused genuine curiosity in

¹ See the *London Review of Books*, 5 July, 19 July, and 2 August 2012.

the subcontinent and beyond. Explaining and assessing its cumulative record of democracy, secularism, nationalism, development, and statehood—*vis-à-vis* analogous developments in Jamaica and Sri Lanka, Israel and Ireland, and China and Brazil—yielded the possibility of fresh theoretical insights in comparative historical perspective. Arundhati Roy endorsed the essays, subsequently published as *The Indian Ideology*, for uncovering the “serious structural flaws and deep seated prejudices of those who have administered the Indian State in the decades since Independence.”² Indeed, a number of commentators praised his intervention. But its selective basis and scathing tone caused much dismay as well.

On the one hand, Anderson interrogated the prevailing national discourse in India, which allegedly celebrated the “democratic stability, multi-cultural unity and impartial secularity of the Indian nation-state as a national miracle.”³ In particular, he attacked the myth of historic

² Perry Anderson, *The Indian Ideology* (New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2012, and London: Verso, 2013). All subsequent citations refer to the Indian edition. The quote by Roy can be found on the inside jacket of the book.

³ See “Respect Gandhi if You Will, Don’t Sentimentalise Him”, Praful Bidwai interview with Perry Anderson, *Outlook*, 12 November 2012, <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?282832>.

subcontinental unity; castigated Mahatma Gandhi for infusing Hindu religiosity into the national imaginary during the anti-colonial movement and blamed the Indian National Congress for the atrocities of Partition; and highlighted the shortcomings of the postcolonial democratic state, simultaneously enabled and undermined by the institution of caste, under Jawaharlal Nehru and his successors. The shortcomings of the nationalist movement, Anderson claimed, exerted mighty path-dependent effects. The patterns of deprivation, inequality, and coercion that afflict India today reflect the sins of its origins. The stunning parliamentary victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party in the 2014 general election, which saw Narendra Modi swept to power with the near-unanimous backing of leading Indian capitalists on a wave of widespread electoral support that decimated a fragmented political opposition, seemed to vindicate the thesis that modern Indian democracy was a Hindu polity with deep autocratic tendencies.

On the other hand, and more controversially, Anderson declared that India’s leading intellectuals had failed to expose the “pieties” of official state nationalism.⁴ Notwithstanding their unsparing analysis of deep social inequalities, he contended, few voices within condemned the coercive

⁴ Anderson, *The Indian Ideology*, pp. 168–79.

foundations of modern Indian democracy or the partialities of its professed secularity. Perhaps most damagingly, hardly anyone challenged the official state claim to national unity. According to Anderson, the primary intellectual responsibility lay with members of the liberal intelligentsia, albeit some more than others. With the exception of a few courageous individuals, however, the failing tarnished the broader Indian left too. The result was “a culture of euphemism and embellishment”, inducing “a passive accommodation to the myths of the Indian Ideology, and the crimes of the state committed in its name.”⁵ Anderson chided self-described secularists, fearful of the dangers of militant Hindu nationalism, for not repudiating the Nehru–Gandhi dynasty: “‘Children always cling to nurse, for fear of finding something worse,’ is a poor motto for adults.”⁶ Yet the indictment, suggesting that Congress’ demise would be salutary, ran much deeper.

A variety of reviews of *The Indian Ideology*, most reflecting positions on the broader Indian left, emerged after its publication. Many commentators heaped praise, noting minor disagreements, on ostensibly Marxian grounds. Pritam Singh commended the book for its “path breaking”

⁵ Ibid., pp. 3–5.

⁶ See Bidwai, “Respect Gandhi if You Will, Don’t Sentimentalise Him”.

critical review of extant scholarship, setting a new intellectual agenda. Notwithstanding Gandhi’s deep ecological critique of modern industrial society, which Singh admired, Anderson “has for the first time launched an intellectually powerful frontal attack on the icons of Indian nationalism.”⁷ Namit Arora noted that Anderson had unearthed few new facts regarding the anti-colonial movement. He also argued that Gandhi’s appeal had many non-religious dimensions, particularly his courage to lead by example, and that Nehru was a more complex personality than Anderson had depicted. And the book discounted the role of “imperial venality in the decision to create separate electorates—which arguably sowed the seeds for Partition before Gandhi even joined the Congress”—and oversimplified the reasons why representative democracy has survived in India. Nonetheless, Arora ultimately declared *The Indian Ideology* to be a “masterwork of critical synthesis—trenchant, original and bold”, bound “to help clear some cobwebs of the mind” and open “new avenues of self-knowledge in the Subcontinent.”⁸

⁷ See Pritam Singh, “The Indian Ideology by Perry Anderson—A Review”, *Socialist Resistance*, 16 June 2014, available at: <http://socialistresistance.org/6414/the-indian-ideology-by-perry-anderson-a-review>.

⁸ See Namit Arora, “Revisiting the Idea of India”, 3 *Quarks Daily*, 3 December 2012, <http://www.3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2012/12/revisiting-the-idea-of-india-part-1.html>.

Similarly, Yahya Chaudhry observed that Anderson addressed the writings of the prominent liberal voices at the heart of his critique very superficially and overlooked the contributions of the Indian left in uncovering many historic failings, while Nagesh Rao noted how the book failed to investigate the rich history of struggles from below by various lower castes against Hinduism. Yet Chaudhry applauded the book for its “stunning indictment”,⁹ while Rao dismissed its critics for their anti-Marxist reflexes, asking why the Indian left had not repudiated the Indian ideology, “questions [the book] leaves tantalizingly unanswered”.¹⁰

Achin Vanaik provided the most extensive critical appreciation. On the one hand, he argued, most critics failed to grasp its aim: to expose the nationalist discourse of the Indian state and to explain the personalities, events, and conditions primarily responsible for its emergence, character, and survival. On the other, they had “fail[ed] to properly address, let alone counter, what [Anderson] is saying and claiming”. Indeed, Vanaik credited the comparably better

⁹ See Yahya Chaudhry, “The Poverty of the Indian Ideology”, *Jacobin*, 5 December 2013, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/12/the-poverty-of-indian-ideology/>.

¹⁰ See Nagesh Rao, “The Myths of Indian Nationalism”, *International Socialist Review*, Issue #94 (Fall 2014), <http://isreview.org/issue/94/myths-indian-nationalism>.

records of revolutionary anti-colonial states in Asia in removing mass poverty, most obviously China and Vietnam, and asserted that Indian foreign policy had a proto-imperialist tenor since its inception. That said, Vanaik challenged the claim that India was a “Hindu confessional state”, noting its official secularism, highlighting that Hinduism was not a confessional religion and criticizing the depiction of Hindus and Muslims as monolithic religious communities with “incompatible religious systems”. He also expressed unease with the recent parliamentary collapse of the Congress, despite its manifest political flaws, creating an opportunity for militant Hindu nationalists to consolidate their gains. Ultimately, however, Vanaik argued that nobody to date had synthesized the strands of the Indian ideology into such a powerful overarching critique.¹¹

But many disagreed. Ajay Gudavarthy saw the book as containing “all the familiar ingredients of a critical recipe”, failing to engage previous assessments of nationalist history by Dalit scholars or to recognize the limited presence of the Indian ideology in academia and politics.¹² Vijay Prashad

¹¹ Achin Vanaik, “Factual Accuracy and Logic of Argument”, *Mainstream*, LI, 25 (8 June 2013), <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article4228.html>.

¹² Ajay Gudavarthy, “Review of *The Indian Ideology*”, *Studies in Indian Politics*, 1, 1 (2013): 115–17.

stressed that many Indian Marxists, intellectuals as well as politicians, had offered powerful critiques of the anti-colonial movement and post-independence politics. Liberal capitalist triumphalism, he claimed, arrived quite late. Few of the liberals Anderson criticized could be characterized as its cheerleaders, Prashad observed, as their apprehensions about the future made clear.¹³ And Prabhat Patnaik criticized the book for ignoring the impact of capitalism altogether. According to him, Congress' failure to implement the more radical demands of the nationalist movement, embodied in the Karachi Resolution of 1931 and the party manifesto of 1937, reflected greater commitment to capitalism rather than the purported religious sensibilities of its leadership. Moreover, all postcolonial states had attempted to maintain their territorial boundaries, including socialist China. Yet the commitment to "an overarching anti-imperialist nationalism" and the unprecedented willingness to introduce universal mass suffrage in a society marred by untouchability, Patnaik asserted, was a deeply revolutionary move. It was precisely these reasons that made it difficult for the communist Left to achieve greater political success. Combating the dangers of militant Hindu nationalism and growing economic inequalities in a neoliberal era, he

¹³ Vijay Prashad, "A Flawed Project", *Naked Punch*, 26 December 2012, <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/158>.

concluded, required the Left to recover these earlier nationalist commitments.¹⁴

Finally, several reviewers challenged the larger cultural vantage of the book itself. Some critics, such as Pankaj Mishra, demurred gently. Mishra highlighted the "consistent Indian pattern of silence, evasion and distortion" in Kashmir, allowing a "regime of extrajudicial execution, torture and detention" to prevail, while agreeing that a "primordial politics of caste and religion" had enabled a "patrimonial state built on nepotism and dynasty worship" to survive. He also defended Anderson against accusations of Western imperiousness, citing his record of "excoriating the pretensions of the British ruling class" and its counterparts in Europe and the United States. Nevertheless, Mishra drew attention to the diversity of movements of resistance in modern Indian history, suggesting that Enlightenment universalism and "post-Marxist realism" had created an "iron cage of Western interpretative categories", obscuring the multiple historical trajectories of modernity.¹⁵

¹⁴ Prabhat Patnaik, "Modern India sans the Impact of Capitalism", *Economic and Political Weekly*, XLVIII, 36 (7 September 2013): 30–5.

¹⁵ Pankaj Mishra, "India and Ideology: Why Western Thinkers Struggle with the Subcontinent", *Foreign Affairs*, 92, 6 (November/December 2013), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140167/pankaj-mishra/india-and-ideology>.

Other reviewers, notably Ravi Palat, were less forgiving. According to Palat, *The Indian Ideology* dismissed how British colonial rule “elevated” the categories of caste, religion, and tribe to become “organizing principles of Indian society”. Moreover, the book ignored how both Congress and the Muslim League sought to mobilize these identities for instrumental purposes, and the ways in which class dynamics shaped key historical junctures. And it understated the unprecedented historical conditions facing Indian democracy. The result was a thesis invoking the “age-old tradition of a people without history!”¹⁶

The three essays presented here pursue these observations. Originally published in the US-based journal *Constellations*, in June 2014, each has been revised for this volume.¹⁷ In contrast to previous reviews, all three contributions provide a more hard-hitting appraisal. Indeed,

¹⁶ See Ravi Palat, “Review of *The Indian Ideology*”, *Critical Asian Studies*, 45, 2 (2013): 323–30; quote on p. 327.

¹⁷ See *Constellations*, 21, 2 (June 2014): 162–98. I am grateful to Andrew Arato for encouraging us to submit these essays to the journal. I also thank Ertug Tombus for guiding us through the process of securing the right to republish the essays in revised form, and John Wiley & Sons Ltd for granting permission. Finally, Partha Chatterjee initiated the idea of publishing the book and suggested its title. I owe a great deal to him, Nivedita Menon and Sudipta Kaviraj for their inordinate patience at every stage, as well as Rukun Advani for enthusiastically backing the endeavour.

their polemical tone reflects the temper of *The Indian Ideology*. According to Anderson, “Polemic is a discourse of conflict, whose effect depends on a delicate balance between the requirements of truth and the enticements of anger, the duty to argue and the zest to inflame. Its rhetoric allows, even enforces, a certain figurative license . . . it is not under oath.”¹⁸ Yet a polemical attack can backfire if the desire to provoke exceeds the willingness to address competing explanations adequately. Each of the following essays challenges the empirical basis and interpretive persuasiveness of *The Indian Ideology* in various domains. Yet they collectively mount a systematic critique of its epistemic foundations. Nivedita Menon analyses the construction of its arguments. She exposes the failure of the book to engage the wealth of sophisticated critical appraisals by feminist, Marxist, and Dalit intellectuals, which wrestle with the possibilities, ambiguities, and contradictions of Gandhi and Nehru as well as the diversity of forces that shaped the anti-colonial movement and postcolonial nation-state. Far more seriously, she accuses Anderson of consistently ignoring scholarship from the subcontinent, confronting his claim to originality. Partha Chatterjee expands the critique.

¹⁸ Quoted in Kavita Philip, “Post-colonial Historiography and the Polemicist’s Task: Understanding Perry Anderson’s *Indian Ideology*”, *Social History*, 39, 3 (2014): 424.

He presents materialist counter-arguments of key historical episodes and contemporary developments, probing their complex causal chains, which counter the “Great Men” view of history that pervades the book. Yet Chatterjee also scrutinizes its assumptions and positioning, highlighting the surprising persistence of British colonial ideology, and demonstrating how the uncritical imposition of terms and concepts from Western intellectual history obfuscates political understanding. Lastly, Sudipta Kaviraj contends that enduring Orientalist tropes mar the book, tracing their origins to the nineteenth-century worldview of Hegel and John Stuart Mill. The theorization of non-European societies by such thinkers, of course, betrayed enormous asymmetries of factual knowledge. Yet the deeper problem with such accounts, Kaviraj asserts, is the tendency to define analytical categories in singular terms, whether of caste, religion, or nation, preventing the conceptual differentiation and temporal sophistication necessary for real historical explanation. Otherwise macro-sociological comparisons will inevitably reproduce, Kaviraj argues, Europe as the norm and exception of history. Understanding the trajectories of modernity in the post-colonial world demands far greater introspection on all sides of debate. Overcoming the lure of ideologies, colonial as well as national, requires genuine intellectual exchange.

Perry Anderson and the British Ideology

NIVEDITA MENON

The question that lingers with me after reading *The Indian Ideology* is not amenable to an easy resolution: What is at stake for Perry Anderson in making the breathtaking claim that his book, for the first time ever, in this second decade of the twenty-first century, exposes certain falsehoods within a celebratory discourse about India? I am not certain I will arrive at an answer by the end of this essay; at any rate, I suspect the answer will not be a polite one.

There have been several thoughtful reviews of Anderson's arguments already. Among others, Vijay Prashad and Dilip Simeon have written reviews of the book, and Ananya Vajpeyi has responded to Anderson's essay on