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Reviews

The myths of Indian nationalism

- Reviews section -

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First published as a series of essays in the London Review of Books, this is a provocative book that deftly cuts through the mythologies of Indian nationalism. The essays and the book have elicited several critical responses from Indian readers; this review concludes with a defense of Anderson's core project and pace a few of his detractors. Taken together, these essays offer a challenge to Indian intellectuals, particularly of the Left, to break decisively with a set of ideas that make up what Anderson calls the Indian Ideology. The Indian Ideology relies on and reinforces a series of myths that project India as having miraculously achieved what other post-colonial nations have not: a functioning democracy, a secular state, and a united body politic. Anderson's critique takes in a wide range of scholarship to systematically demolish each one of this triune of cherished myths.

Review by

Anderson offers his book as "a short study . . . a synthesis [with] no pretension to exhaustive totalization." His aim is to take a critical look at an "overlapping consensus" between Indian liberalism—exemplified in the work of Amartya Sen, Ramachandra Guha, Sunil Khilnani, and others—and the rhetoric of the Indian state. This consensus mystifies the past and glosses over the contradictions of the present. Not only liberalism, but also "wide reaches of the area self-defined as to the left of this mainstream" have accommodated to the Indian Ideology, "a nationalist discourse in a time when there is no longer a national liberation struggle against an external power, and oppression where it exists has become internal."

India is often spoken of as a nation with an ancient past, bound by common traditions several millennia old. A dream of unity and continuity through the ages is the cornerstone of nationalist conceptions of India. However, "the sub-continent as we know it today never formed a single political or cultural unit in pre-modern times," writes Anderson. "Of the three larger empires it witnessed, none covered the territory of Nehru's Discovery of India." Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and other leaders of the Indian National Congress (later the Congress Party) held firmly to this dream of unity, insisting on seeing the subcontinent as "one undivided land made by nature," as Gandhi put it. The "idea of India" was of European origin, writes Anderson, but soon became the sine qua non of anti-colonial thought.

The Father of the Nation, however, was a late convert to anti-imperialism and the demand for full independence from the British. Gandhi said he embraced swaraj (which Anderson likens to Home Rule within and under an overarching imperial sovereignty) over independence; he considered the latter "a foreign importation of doubtful value." Moreover, if Gandhi was opposed to communal (Hindu-Muslim) conflict in the name of national unity, he was opposed to class conflict as well, and infamously stood against strikes and other forms of class struggle against landlords and employers. Gandhi also fought to maintain elite leadership and control of anticolonial agitation. "He did not want to evict the British in India if to do so was to risk a social upheaval. Revolution was a greater danger than the Raj."

While there was something "distinctive and spectacular" about Gandhi's ability to mobilize masses of people, charismatic leaders, writes Anderson, are "largely a given in any nationalist movement." Gandhi was "a first-class" organizer and fund-raiser who transformed the Congress from a cohort of lawyers and professionals into a mass organization. But Gandhi introduced "a massive dose of religion" into the national movement, and his deeply held religiosity had fatal consequences for the movement and the subcontinent as a whole. His religion "was to a peculiar extent home-made," a "strange pot-pourri . . . [of] Jain-inflected Hindu orthodoxy and late Victorian psychomancy." While he might have been sincere in his personal belief that all religions are equal, politically, Anderson writes, "one religion was, inevitably, more equal than the other." Gandhi did little to prevent the marginalization of Muslims within

and by his own party.

Gandhi's reputation as a champion of oppressed castes is likewise overrated, for while he rejected the jati system of sub-divisions among the major varnas (castes), he never repudiated caste as such. As Anderson writes, "In due course, he would try to dilute varna with successive adjustments to make it more palatable to egalitarian opinion, [saving] the irreducible core of its identification with Hinduism itself, as religious belief in the moral duty of hereditary avocation and its bearing on the transmigration of the soul." Gandhi's fast unto death against the "communal award" was directed against Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates for Untouchables (Dalits, in today's language).

Nehru, although not a believer himself, tacitly accepted the expediency of yoking religion and politics together. He saw Hinduism as (in Nehru's words) "a national religion, with all those deep instincts, racial and cultural, which form the basis everywhere of nationalism today." Muslims had steadily lost ground politically and economically under the British Raj, but the Hindu-dominated Congress did little to accommodate their particular demands.

The "legitimizing ideology of the Congress had always been a secular nationalism" but it was a "monolithically Hindu" organization by the mid-1930s, when Muslims constituted a mere three percent of its membership. Congress had the support of the overwhelming majority of the Hindu electorate, but it could point to only a few Muslims among its leadership.

"Common sense indicated that from a position of such strength, it would be necessary to make every feasible concession to ensure that the quarter of the population that was Muslim would not feel itself a permanently impotent—and potentially vulnerable—minority. Ignoring every dictate of prudence and realism, Congress did the opposite. At each critical juncture, it refused any arrangement that might dilute the power to which it could look forward."

When Congress triumphed in regional polls (with a limited franchise) in 1937, Nehru took this as a sign that Congress now represented all Indians, when in fact the party had been unable to even field candidates in "close to 90 per cent of Muslim constituencies." Congress's ultimate failure lay in its refusal to drop "the fiction that it represented the entire nation." Accommodating itself to Hindu majoritarianism while standing for an undivided India, Congress "accepted Partition as the price of a strong centralized state in which it could be sure of a monopoly of power." In other words, although Congress saw itself as the sole representative of a singular nation—thus rejecting the "two-nations theory" of Jinnah and the Muslim League—this "monopoly of national legitimacy" was easily traded in for a "monopoly of power" in a divided nation, once Partition was on the table.

To those schooled in Indian nationalist history, Anderson's most unsettling claim is that the Raj cannot be seen as an "efficient cause" of Partition. Colonial divide-and-rule policies were not the reason for the schism between Hindus and Muslims, he insists; rather, "[t]he ultimate drivers of the split were indigenous, not imperial." He writes that while the British acceded to demands for separate electorates for Muslims and Hindus with alacrity, they thereafter did nothing to deliberately stoke communal strife. Their ideal, Anderson suggests, was the Punjab, characterized by "inter-confessional unity . . . a strong regional identity [and] loyalty to the Raj." Here, Anderson underplays the lasting significance of instituting separate electorates for Hindus and Muslims, as it facilitated the subsequent spectacular growth of Hindu-dominated Congress political machinery.

Some reviewers have bristled at what they identify as Anderson's Orientalism when he asks whether division along religious lines was inevitable among a people "so steeped in the supernatural." Indeed, Anderson doesn't quite renounce the essentialist argument but his analysis is somewhat more probing than such a reading would suggest. Indian intellectuals, he writes, are "caught in a fork" when it comes to understanding Partition. On the one hand, if Partition was inevitable, then "the culture whose dynamics made confessional conflict politically insuperable becomes [an] occasion for collective shame." On the other hand, if Partition was avoidable, then "the party that led the national movement to such a disastrous upshot stands condemned." While one could argue that the divisions between Hindus

and Muslims ran so deep that no political force could overcome it, and that therefore Partition was inevitable, Anderson insists, Congress must ultimately be held accountable for not taking “any intelligent steps to avert it, and many crass ones likely to hasten it; and when it came [for acting] in a way that ensured it would take the cruelest form, with the worst human consequences. For even were a scission of the subcontinent foreordained by its deep culture, its manner was not.”

With Partition, Congress inherited (wrested control of) the lion’s share of the colonial spoils. It also inherited the British system of representation, and adopted a Westminster parliamentary model that eschewed any notion of proportional representation—evidence, Anderson writes, of the “Anglophone provincialism of the Congress elite.” The Constituent Assembly was itself a British-created body, and was thus “not an expression of [Indian democracy], but of the colonial restrictions that preceded it.” While the Constitution was a progressive document for its time, it nevertheless reflected the interests of this elite, so that “some 250 of its 395 articles were taken word for word from the Government of India Act passed by the Baldwin cabinet in 1935.”

Moreover, the Constitution did not . . . describe India as a secular state, a term that it avoided. Nor did it institute equality before the law, a principle also eschewed. There would be no uniform civil code: Hindus and Muslims would continue to be subject to the respective customs of their faith governing family life. Nor would there be interference in religious hierarchies in daily life: untouchability was banned, but caste itself left untouched. Protection of cows and prohibition of alcohol were enjoined, and seats reserved in Parliament for two minorities, Scheduled Castes and Tribes—“Dalits and Adivasis in today’s terminology”—but not for Muslims.

In subsequent decades, Muslim fears of marginalization within a Hindu-dominated political system would prove to be warranted; the government-sponsored Sachar Commission report of 2006 establishes beyond doubt the second-class status of Muslims in India.

Anderson compares India with Ireland and Israel as examples of a sub-group of twentieth-century nationalisms in which religion played a central role from the outset. Although India did not institute a confessional state, “no Congress leader had been capable of openly and vigorously combating Gandhian pietism. . . . After Independence, Gandhi’s own doctrines were consigned to the museum, but his saturation of politics with Hindu pathos lived on.” While Nehru’s daughter and political heir Indira Gandhi made “a show of secularism by writing a belated commitment to it into the constitution,” in practice she too made appeals on the basis of religion when the occasion demanded. In this Hinduized political milieu, the turn to neoliberalism in the late eighties and early nineties provided fertile ground for “the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party] to enter, Likud-style, into its inheritance.” The problem, Anderson suggests, is that “Indian secularism never sharply separated state and religion, let alone developed any systematic critique of Hinduism.” Instead, Hinduism has been embellished as a faith of tolerance and pluralism, “its teeming multiplicity of different deities, beliefs and rituals a veritable template for a modern multi-culturalism.” Such an enfeebled secularism could scarcely withstand the rise of the BJP-RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) variety of Hindu nationalism.

While criticisms of the Indian state’s compromised secularism and shaky democracy abound, few intellectuals have broken with the idea of a unified India based on the borders inherited from the Raj. According to the Indian Ideology, the unity and integrity of this inheritance is nothing short of miraculous, a testament to the validity of the Idea of India and to the secular and democratic nature of the Indian state. As Anderson points out, however, post-Partition India was consolidated as a Republic through the most undemocratic means. If Congress failed to achieve the unified India of Nehru’s dreams, it did manage to wrest the lion’s share of the spoils of the Raj including its administrative and repressive apparatus, which it retained more or less intact. The first decades of the Republic saw the continuation of many colonial practices of repression and control, and colonial-era laws were retained or brought back into service as necessary to put down challenges to Delhi’s rule.

Repression was central to the process of national “unification.” Hyderabad, for instance, was brought to heel but only after nearly 40,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed by bands of Hindu pogromists aided by government forces in a two-week massacre that few Indians learn about today. Kashmir was annexed through a combination of diplomatic

deceit and military intervention and continues to be held against the will of its inhabitants, yet most Indians hold firmly to the idea that Kashmir is an inseparable part of India. The northeastern states were similarly annexed but with an even greater degree of impunity. The king of Manipur was summarily deposed when he declared independence and the kingdom was incorporated into the Indian union. The notorious Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), based on British colonial legislation, was put into effect by Nehru in 1958 in a bid to repress demands for an independent Nagaland, and remains to this day the legal fig leaf for brutal state repression wherever Indian rule is challenged. Indian democratic institutions “were thus from the start anchored in a system of electoral distortion, and armor-plated with an ample repertoire of legal repression.”

Anderson acknowledges that in this respect, India is not alone: “All liberal democracies are significantly less liberal, and considerably less democratic, than they fancy themselves to be.” What then is the secret of Indian democracy? With appalling levels of poverty and inequality, and with multiple regional challenges to the union, what has held Indian democracy together? Why has mass discontent “not exploded in demands for social reparation incompatible with the capitalist framework”? Anderson writes that the answer lies in “the historic peculiarities of [India’s] system of social stratification,” namely, the caste system, which with the truly deep impediments to collective action, even within language communities, let alone across them, lay in the impassable trenches of the caste system. . . . Hindu social organization fissured the population into some five thousand jatis. . . . Caste is what preserved Hindu democracy from disintegration. Fixing in hierarchical position and dividing from each other every disadvantaged group . . . it struck away any possibility of broad collective action . . . that might otherwise have threatened the stability of the parliamentary order over which Congress serenely presided for two decades after independence, as it became the habitual framework of the nation. (111-12)

Anderson’s view of caste in this account is one-sided and top-down. While he correctly identifies the hierarchies of the caste system as an obstacle to social change, he does not pay enough attention to the history of struggles from below that challenge a rigid and static view of the hegemony of the system. Interested primarily in the form of the state that emerged with independence, Anderson focuses on the battles fought by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, the great Dalit leader and drafter of the Indian constitution, against a privileged, caste-ridden, Hindu-majoritarian, Congress-led state bureaucracy.

But while Ambedkar emerged as the pre-eminent Dalit leader, he was not alone. Indeed, his appeal rested on, and was amplified by, struggles from below. Largely missing from Anderson’s account is the rich history of movements of Dalits and oppressed castes, often involving alliances that crossed caste boundaries, often in coalition with Muslims, that continued into the decades leading up to independence, and have continued since. Castes and caste-boundaries have been shaped and reshaped by such struggles; this malleability reflects the system’s strength, its adaptability, but also its impermanence. An excellent account of such struggles from below that challenged not only Brahmin hegemony, but also that potentially posed a challenge to nationalism itself, can be found in G. Aloysius’ *Nationalism without a Nation in India*.

Nevertheless, Anderson’s broader claim about the centrality of caste to the stability of Hindu-majoritarian hegemony in Indian politics is valid. Ambedkar had argued that caste inequality was a contradiction that Indian democracy would have to overcome if it were to survive. Anderson pushes this argument further: Ambedkar, he writes, “underestimated the system of inequality against which he had fought for so long. It was not a contradiction of the democracy to come. It was the condition of it. India would be a caste-iron democracy.” Caste, for Anderson, is “the secret of Indian democracy,” its enabling condition and not just an obstacle to its realization.

When first published in the *London Review of Books*, Anderson’s essays caused quite a stir, and several critical responses proliferated online. The book has likewise attracted criticism from different quarters. Ananya Vajpeyi’s review carried by *The Caravan*, a progressive Indian magazine, takes Anderson to task for presuming to write critically of Indian nationalism’s revered icons like Gandhi and Nehru. Pankaj Mishra, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, decries Anderson’s “world-historical pessimism” about the “future of India.” Vijay Prashad, in his review for *Naked*

Punch, complains that Anderson fails to recognize the “vitality” of Indian nationalism.

While the reviews differ in their specifics, they share a general disdain for Anderson’s claim to expertise on matters South Asian; as Ananya Vajpeyi uncharitably put it, Anderson’s essays exude a “sense of belated discovery.” Anderson’s arguments, writes Vajpeyi, “have been made much more thoroughly and consistently by Indians themselves, especially those who share his ideological orientation. We know quite well the clay feet of our heroes, the tarnish on their statues, the chinks in their armour.”

Other reviewers adopted a similarly defensive stance, chastising Anderson for saying what others have said before, and asking him to keep his Westerner’s views to himself. This begs the question: if Anderson is merely repeating what others have said before, then why the kerfuffle? The subtitle of Vajpeyi’s review is telling: “Why the idea of India cannot be trivially [sic] dismissed.” Each element of his critique on its own seems palatable enough to Vajpeyi and others, but questioning the very idea of India raises their hackles.

Vajpeyi faults Anderson for his “flagrant” nay, malign “misreading of the nature, meaning, and role of “Hinduism” in India’s political life,’ absurdly suggesting that Anderson sees Indian secularism as a “fraud and an exercise in bad faith because Indians are Hindus.” Nowhere does Anderson suggest this. What he does argue is that the leadership of the nationalist movement and the state that it inherited “have rested, sociologically speaking, on Hindu caste society,” hence the marginalization and treatment of Muslims as second-class citizens. This is why he argues that “Indian secularism is Hindu confessionalism by another name.”

Where Vajpeyi, following Wendy Doniger’s lead in her book *The Hindus*, wishes to defend Hinduism and to distinguish it from the politics of Hindutva, Anderson is interested in how Hindu rule has been consolidated over and against the multiplicity of India’s famed diversity and stated secularity. He has less to say about Hinduism as such than about the instrumental use of confessional appeals by those who contended for and inherited the political machinery of the Raj. Vajpeyi’s defense of India’s “historically deep . . . modalities of toleration that have been explored and theorized in this part of the world over the past two-and-a-half millennia” does nothing to dent Anderson’s critique of the way that Hindu dominance has been written into its post-colonial political system. Meanwhile, her celebration of the “achievement of a democratic order in one of the world’s most diverse and hierarchical cultures” simply reiterates elements of the Indian Ideology that Anderson holds responsible for India’s milquetoast liberalism.

Pankaj Mishra, well known for his opposition to the Indian state’s treatment of Kashmiris and to the Indian public’s indifference to it, is no uncritical Indian patriot. But Mishra’s explicit anti-Marxism puts him at odds with Anderson’s project. Mishra too, like Vajpeyi, acknowledges the validity of the different strands of Anderson’s critique. Despite these points of agreement, just as Vajpeyi takes umbrage at Anderson’s temerity to question India’s “very existence as a single nation” so too does Mishra “balk at following Anderson to his final destination, which is to bluntly deny India much of a future in the modern world.” Mishra laments what he calls Anderson’s “world-historical pessimism” but being pessimistic about the permanence of nation-states isn’t an intellectual (or even a Marxist) crime. For Mishra and others, Anderson goes too far in his criticism of the idea of a united India. Mishra consequently misreads and distorts elements of Anderson’s argument. For instance, Anderson suggests that parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have led anti-caste struggles into a cul de sac of identity politics, but Mishra tendentiously reads this as an instance of Anderson’s “secular rationalism” and Western-centrism.

Vijay Prashad rightly points out that Anderson’s book would have been strengthened by a close reading of one or more of the texts that Anderson holds up as representative of the Indian Ideology today. But Prashad wishes to reclaim the Nehruvian era as a progressive one, and therefore takes issue with Anderson’s claim that the rise of the BJP does not signal a major break in the trajectory of the Indian state. Anderson certainly overstates his case, but Prashad’s defense of the Nehruvian state rings hollow against Anderson’s account of the combination of repression

and chicanery with which the Indian state was consolidated through those decades following independence. Prashad also highlights a glaring lacuna in Anderson's book—it lacks any discussion of the Indian Left.

Anderson acknowledges this gap in his Preface, and leaves open the question of the Left's relationship to the Indian Ideology, except to suggest that the hegemony of the Indian Ideology is something the Left has had to contend with. Prashad argues that “[h]ad Anderson engaged with the writings of the Left he would have [had] to concede an important point, that Indian nationalism was far richer than Gandhi's contribution and Gandhi was not as sacrosanct as Anderson makes him out to be.” He writes that vigorous critiques of Gandhi appeared from within the fabric of Indian nationalism, but Anderson “reduces nationalism to Gandhi . . . and fails to recognize its vitality that has only now seemed to run its course. Indian nationalism was not stillborn. It had a very good run, but now finds itself on life support.”

Prashad, in other words, urges us to pay closer attention to the writings of the Marxist left to reassure ourselves of the vitality of Indian nationalism. Where Prashad seeks to defend Indian nationalism in the name of the Left, presumably to safeguard it from appropriation by the Hindu Right, he fails to ask the questions that Anderson's analysis leads to: How has the Indian Ideology hobbled the Left? Why have Communists (with the notable exception of Maoists) taken the idea of a unitary India for granted? Why do Indian Communists continue to speak of national unification as a heroic accomplishment, and national unity as a sacred ideal, and what are the consequences of such thinking?

Anderson's critique of the Idea of India should not be seen as narrowly applicable to the liberal mainstream of Indian opinion. Anderson himself vaguely refers to “wide reaches of the area self-defined as to the left of this mainstream” that have accepted the Indian Ideology as their own. For the Left, Anderson's critique raises a number of questions that it leaves tantalizingly unanswered. If democracy, secularism, and national unity as they are enshrined in liberal nationalist thinking are values that the Left must give up, where does that leave us? What could or should replace the “Idea of India”? What are the implications of this analysis for our understanding of the subcontinental state system and for the future of struggles for national self-determination and social emancipation? The Indian Ideology offers few answers to these questions, but is an excellent conversation starter.