

What Is India? Why India's boom years have been a bust

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***An Uncertain Glory. India and Its Contradictions.* By Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen.**

***The Indian Ideology.* By Perry Anderson.**

In May, in a national election widely perceived as marking a dramatic new phase for India, the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won an absolute majority in Parliament. The Indian National Congress Party (INC), the country's oldest political party and the winner of more elections than any of its rivals, saw itself jeered to defeat, its prime-ministerial candidate, the Harvard-educated Rahul Gandhi, portrayed as an ineffectual representative of a political lineage out of touch with the impatient, assertive mood of contemporary India. That mood, it was said, was far better captured by the 64-year-old Narendra Modi, who led the BJP campaign and is now the fifteenth prime minister of India. Of far more humble origins than Rahul Gandhi (the scion of a family that has produced three generations of prime ministers), Modi is thought to have presided, as chief minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, over a remarkable economic and social renaissance in his home state, even as India, under the tutelage of the Congress Party, went from boom to bust.

But in this contest of a self-made son of the soil against a member of the ancien régime, why were Modi's most vigorous supporters the elites themselves, from the corporate and media oligarchs and their camp followers among the professional classes to the prosperous Indian diaspora in the United States? As Modi promised, on the campaign trail, to build a hundred new "smart" cities and bring in high-speed bullet trains of the kind already common in China and Japan, suited Indian men affiliated with universities and think tanks appeared on television shows and in the op-ed pages offering paeans to Modi's pro-business record. There was no talk, at these levels of discourse, of Modi and the BJP as representing anything other than business and efficiency. It was only in India, after the electoral victory, that the point was made more explicitly. In *Open magazine*, whose political editor had been removed prior to the elections, perhaps for being too critical of the BJP, the cover story celebrated Modi's victory under the headline Triumph of the Will.

And so the tradition of dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. Modi, who, in his long run-up to the prime minister's seat, had begun the practice of distributing bearded, bespectacled masks of himself among his supporters, has, underneath that pro-business, pro-efficiency veneer, also been the man who started his political career as a member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the volunteer paramilitary organization that provides muscle for the BJP's well-larded front. In 2002, soon after Modi became chief minister of Gujarat, one of the worst modern pogroms in India occurred there, with at least 1,000 Muslims killed by Hindu mobs while the police ignored the violence or, in some cases, helped it along. And while it is true, as Modi's advocates proclaim (the shrillest of them men with Hindu names and postal addresses in California, Massachusetts and Michigan), that nothing has ever been proven in court linking Modi directly to the riots, it is also true that the pogrom was followed by a pattern of extrajudicial executions or "encounter killings," the most notable of these being the deaths of three men and a young woman,

all Muslim, said to have been on their way to assassinate Modi, and who were probably abducted and murdered in cold blood by the police. (It is likewise true that those few policemen who tried to stop the Gujarat rioters have seen their careers suffer.)

But again, nothing has been proven in court, and not a word of all this has been mentioned by Modi's supporters or allies on the various websites, social media forums, op-ed columns or television shows about the new leader, which have been used largely to present the business-friendly face of Modi and his party. The brief congratulatory message released by the White House similarly focused on "economic opportunity, freedom, and security for our people and around the world," choosing to ignore the fact that in 2005, a previous US administration had denied Modi a diplomatic visa (and revoked his tourist visa for good measure) for "severe violations of religious freedom" under his watch in Gujarat.

But Modi is, of course, a persona as much as a person – someone who would have to be invented if he did not exist. If the face behind the mask is associated with hatred, especially of Muslims, and the mask itself is associated with market-driven prosperity, both impulses originate with the elites who see in Modi a triumph of their majoritarian will. These are people energized by talk of the free market and by denunciations of minorities, people who speak the language of TED when selling a product or service and who leave behind chilling genocidal comments when trolling news and opinion sites. It is they who coined the popular campaign phrase "Modi-fied" to capture the idea that a massive transformation was needed in India. And now that India is indeed being Modi-fied, the question concerns what form this transformation will take, and whether it will remain possible to maintain what has always been an artificial separation—more in the eye of the liberal beholder than in reality – between the business of violence and the violence of business in India.

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But why did India, a success story not so long ago, need to be Modi-fied at all? Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, sliced open by neoliberal knives into a realm of information technology, real estate and conspicuous consumption, the country was widely celebrated, both by its own elites and its Western boosters, as having entered the realm of true democracy. The four previous decades of postcolonial India were consigned to a conceptual darkness that was sometimes called "socialism" and sometimes, in a slightly more accurate reference to the heavy bureaucratic role of the centralized state, the "license-permit Raj." In contrast to this was the celebration of the present: the new, market-friendly nation, tiger rising and "India Shining" (the latter a slogan coined by the BJP in its failed re-election bid in 2004), and particularly its growth as measured by GDP, averaging 8 to 9 percent throughout the first decade of the new millennium and peaking at 10.3 percent in 2010. Fed largely by flows of foreign capital and inherently weak, the tiger has since shrunk to the size of a goat, with growth having fallen to 4.7 percent in 2014 – which goes some way toward explaining why both the Indian oligarchs and sections of the population turned against the Congress Party toward the end of its ten-year rule and began to clamor for Modi to take over.

Still, twenty-plus years of growth does not, on the face of it, seem like a bad thing. And while growth is an abstraction, the feedback loop of reality experienced by the Indian elites seems to provide plenty of evidence for how much wealthier the country has actually become, with its new airports, a real-estate boom of condos, villas and shopping malls, a heady swarm of international consumer brands, its fifty to seventy billionaires (depending on whom you ask) and the creation of the Indian Premier League, a corruption-laced cricket competition with a generous display of white cheerleaders for the local voyeurs. Given all this, and considering the apparently innate genius of Indians in harnessing the power of capitalism (celebrated not that long ago by Thomas Friedman in *The World Is Flat*, a bestseller in India as much as in the United States), why should the recent downturn have led to such angst? Didn't we already have those bullet trains and "smart" cities?

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The left-liberal economist duo Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, the former an Indian citizen of Belgian origin and the latter a Harvard-based Nobel laureate, have a different account of the boom years in their book *An Uncertain Glory*. To begin with, they offer a historical context for India, with the caveat that the Indian economy, if measured only by growth, was not quite the sluggish it was made out to be in contemporary accounts. It rose from 3.7 percent in the 1950s to 5.2 in the early '90s, before the changes that ushered in a high-growth India took place. And this early phase of postcolonial growth happened, the authors point out, in a country where the majority had been devastated by colonial rule, a fact conveniently consigned to oblivion both by Western boosters of neoliberal India and their Indian counterparts. Yes, the British brought the railways, as Sen's Harvard colleague, the historian Niall Ferguson, likes to remind us (although the Indians also labored to build those railways, even as the taxes extracted from their use guaranteed profit to the British citizens who had invested in them), but growth during the Raj was at times negative: for example, the average life expectancy for Indians in 1931 was twenty-seven years. It is possible, as Drèze and Sen argue, quoting the economist Angus Deaton, "that the deprivation in childhood of Indians born around mid-century was as severe as any large group in history, all the way back to the Neolithic Revolution and the hunter-gatherers that preceded them."

But if the severe immiseration of the colonial period, including famines that killed millions, was no longer a regular feature of modestly growing, independent India, little progress was made in fundamental areas such as health and primary education. This stasis gives the lie, Sen and Drèze write, to the rhetoric that independent India was socialist in any meaningful way, but it also marks India out as different from a range of Asian countries across the political spectrum, including China, South Korea and Japan.

The supremacy of the market over the state in the 1990s did nothing to change the ongoing deprivation of the majority. While the booming wealth in India and China (to which India was compared favorably) meant increasing inequality in both countries, it was only in India, Drèze and Sen point out, that wages for the working classes remained "relatively stagnant." In terms of physical and social infrastructure – including electricity, sanitation, safe water and schooling – India lags not just behind China but also many of its poorer South Asian neighbors like Bangladesh. "To point to just one contrast," the authors write, "even though India has significantly caught up with China in terms of GDP growth, its progress has been very much slower than China's in indicators such as longevity, literacy, child undernourishment and maternal mortality". Whereas twenty years ago India generally had the second-best social indicators among the six South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan), it now looks second-worst. "India has been climbing up the ladder of per capita income while slipping down the slope of social indicators."

Although the abstract language of percentages and ratios cannot capture the sheer desperation of the people living through those sliding social indicators, the data are nevertheless unambiguous. Even accepting the government's official poverty line, with an absurd ideal budget for the poor that "includes princely sums of – forty rupees per month for health care" (an amount that "might buy something like the equivalent of an aspirin a day"), "a full 30 per cent of the population in 2009-10, or more than 350 million people," live below it. A more realistic poverty level, on the other hand, would include nearly 80 percent of the population. In most other social indicators, too, the India portrayed by Sen and Drèze is an unfamiliar one, invisible in the deluge of commentary, films, and books produced by the Indian elites and their overseas patrons. "Nutrient intakes (calorie, protein, micronutrients?almost anything except fat) have decreased? in ?the last twenty years," while children and adult women "are more undernourished in India (and South Asia) than almost anywhere else in the world." India is rated "as the most polluted among 132 countries for which comparable data are available," while "one fifth of all Indian men in the age group of 15-24 years,

and one fourth of all women in the same age group, were unable to read and write in 2006.”

The dystopic details don't end there. The use of new technology to abort fetuses selectively has led to a rapidly declining female-to-male birth ratio, with a nationwide average of 914 girls per 1,000 boys in 2011, as opposed to 940 to 950 girls in European countries – and with Gujarat, its development such a shining exemplar in the Modi campaign, boasting an average of 891 girls in 2011, among the lowest such numbers in India. At the same time, India – and especially in states like Gujarat – is a growing provider of rent-a-womb services for wealthy European and North American couples. Minorities, those designated as lower castes and Adivasis (the indigenous groups outside the caste system) all fare badly not just in the traditional structures of power in India, including the police, judiciary, media and civil services, but also in the shiny new market sectors: “in a recent study of corporate boards in India,” Drèze and Sen write, “more than 90 per cent of their members were upper-caste, and almost half” were Brahmins, “although Brahmins themselves were” slightly outnumbered by Vaishyas, “the traditional business and trading castes. Indeed, on 70 percent of the corporate boards,” there was no ‘diversity’ at all, in the sense that all members belonged to the same caste group. “Nevertheless, Modi and his elites continue to adopt a Tea Party-style rhetoric drawn largely from the same Randian-Reaganite influences – one that depicts them as resolutely opposed to big government, except when it comes to expanding the national-security state and protecting and advancing the interests of those elites. These ideas are, of course, peddled by the prosperous Indian diaspora in the United States and its upper-caste, upper-class relatives back in the motherland, all of them capable of spouting the latest jargon about “networking” and “equity” while also offering a curiously dated reverence for those icons of privatization, Reagan and Thatcher.

As a result, while the rhetoric is about the especially the minority poor – leeching off the state, the reality is somewhat different. Power and fuel remain subsidized by the state, benefiting the “privileged urban residents who enjoy the luxury of modern gadgets and affluent lifestyles at public expense,” as well as “telecom companies and air-conditioned shopping malls.” The same elites that scream themselves hoarse at the thought of a living wage, supplementary nutrition, and support for education or healthcare for the masses remain resolutely committed to subsidies to sate their craving for gold and diamonds – which, Sen and Drèze point out, cost double the amount in foregone annual revenue that it would take to institute a modest national program providing subsidized food to the poor.

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A country functioning in this manner – such that India's biggest import after fuel is gold and silver (13.3 percent of total imports in 2011¹²) – is absurd from any point of view other than one devoted to aggressive short-term gains for a select few. But what made India like this? When *An Uncertain Glory* was published in India prior to the elections, the resulting debate was brief, devoted largely to the book's supposedly controversial arguments and the promotion of Sen to various right-wing hate lists. This dominant culture in India – one that allowed it not just to ignore the arguments in the book, but also to bring into formation a government devoted to greater inequality – is not something Sen and Drèze attempt to address. Nor can they, given their rational, data-driven arguments and their great faith in the Indian nation and state, as if all that prevents India from harvesting rainwater instead of hoarding gold and silver in great quantities is the lack – or ignorance – of the right information.

This is not surprising, because Sen at least has always had a somewhat roseate view of India, his liberalism shot through with an elitism whereby the masses provide the data and select dons, usually Oxbridge and Ivy League, the ideas. Perry Anderson, who shares (and, indeed, vastly supersedes) Sen's haute manner, has no such illusions when it comes to Indian rationality or the emancipatory possibilities of the Indian state. His *The Indian Ideology*, originally published as three essays in the

London Review of Books in 2012, emphasizes that the central ideas dominating India, even when they emanate from its liberal elites, are as flawed as the reality of India today.

Anderson's opening salvo, stocked with judiciously chosen quotes about the greatness and uniqueness of India proffered by "distinguished" Indian intellectuals (Sen among them), argues that, critical and erudite though their works might be, they share fundamental tropes "with the rhetoric of the state itself." These are characterized by Anderson, quite delightfully, as Hobson-Jobson pairings of "antiquity-continuity; diversity-unity; massivity-democracy; multi-confessionality-secularity." Identifying Gandhi and Nehru as the original purveyors of the above formula, Anderson sees in the former a "Jain-inflected Hindu orthodoxy and late Victorian psychomancy," while finding in the latter a person with "shallow-intellectual equipment" and a marked tendency to drift "from realities resistant to his hopes or fancies." Both were responsible, Anderson opines, for the Hinduism-inflected mass mobilization of the anticolonial movement, alienating the Muslims and leading to the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, a process that resulted in at least 1 million people killed and millions more displaced. Only B.R. Ambedkar, the Dalit leader who drafted the Indian Constitution and was of an egalitarian, even radical bent, comes off well in Anderson's survey of India's – but Ambedkar, as Anderson correctly points out, was frustrated more often than not by the Gandhi-Nehru combine.

As in inception, so in consolidation, Anderson shows, with a sharp eye for the ways in which a fledgling Indian democracy replaced ballots with bullets whenever democracy proved inconvenient. In Kashmir and the northeastern territories, which were policed by forces operating under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), "murder, torture [and] rape– multiplied," a process accompanied by the growth of an "immense apparatus of repression" that eventually numbered close to 2 million personnel. This apparatus now operates everywhere in India, keeping the nation's dissenters and marginalized in check, stamping out the rebellions inevitable in what Anderson sees as a Hindu state masquerading as a diverse democracy.

But if the state, as well as the myth that is its justifying principle and animating power, is patently false and self-serving, could this be only because of Gandhi, Nehru and the Congress Party? It is in this obsession with two personalities and one party that Anderson's analysis begins to look shallow. There is, to begin with, the dismissal of colonialism as not much more than a benign force, with Anderson arguing that it was the British alone who knitted together an Indian nation. It was the British, too, Anderson argues, who kept the Hindus and Muslims from cutting each other's throats, as they had apparently been doing for a millennium or more. There is little acknowledgment in Anderson's book of the brutality of colonial rule, or that the "antiquity-continuity" he mocks took much from the British Raj, including its central ideological tool of parliamentary democracy and its effective intermeshing of courts, bureaucracy, media and security forces to maintain the dominance of the elite. Of the AFSPA, Anderson writes:

"In 1958, Nehru's regime enacted perhaps the most sanguinary single piece of repressive legislation in the annals of liberal democracy, the Armed Forces Special Powers Regulation, which authorized the killing out of hand of anyone observed in a group of five persons or more, if such were forbidden, and forbade any legal action whatsoever against 'any person in respect of anything done or purported to be done in exercise of the powers of this regulation', unless the central government so consented."

Naturally, Anderson omits the detail that the AFSPA was a modification of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Ordinance issued by the British in 1942.

That Indian nationalism and the Indian state derived many of their central characteristics from the brutalities of British rule does not absolve postcolonial Indians of their responsibility in refining their

version of internal colonialism for over sixty years. But for Anderson to dismiss the depredations of famines, the British responsibility in the Partition, or the sheer scale of misery for the majority of people on the subcontinent is like working backward from criticism of the contemporary Israeli state to conclude that the Nazis were not so bad, after all.

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Perhaps Anderson's intention is nothing other than to be polemical and to attack the defining pieties about India. But how popular and deeply held – as opposed to dominant – are those ideas, anyway? Apart from a passing reference to Arundhati Roy and “dalit writers” (the latter unnamed) as among the few iconoclastic thinkers in contemporary India, Anderson's references remain the same eminent Indians that he critiques in the beginning for aligning their ideas too closely with the rhetoric of the state. For him, as with Sen, one needs a good Oxbridge or Ivy League degree to enter the debating arena – which is why, in his book, there are none of the contending ideas of India that have emerged from the country's northeast, the Naxalites, or the people's movements and trade unions that take on those claustrophobic conventions every day. The forces of colonialism, capitalism or imperialism simply do not exist in his account.

It is possible, of course, to argue that in writing *The Indian Ideology*, Anderson is critiquing a dominant ideology, one that is nurtured and furthered by the country's elites. Yet it is never entirely clear whether this ideology is a clever con game played on the people by a long line of leaders from Gandhi on (in the more orthodox Marxist sense of the word ‘ideology’), or if it is, as Anderson argues at many points, something with genuine mass appeal, expressing qualities innate and inherent to the Indian personality and to India. And here, for Anderson, as with the elites, the quintessential Indian personality is that of an upper-caste Hindu male. After critiquing Gandhi and Nehru, therefore, for their soft Hindu confessionalism, Anderson writes that in contemporary India, it is the BJP that ‘is a real party, with cadres, programme, and a social base.’ And while the BJP may be dangerous, when it comes to the Congress Party, Anderson has this to say: ‘Its exit from the scene would be the best single gift Indian democracy could give itself.’

It isn't entirely clear if this is just a throwaway line delivered from Los Angeles, where Anderson teaches, but since the publication of his book, that gift has been delivered – and so perfectly wrapped that news of it led to stock-market gains of \$1.5 billion in a single day for two of the biggest industrialists supporting Modi and the BJP. But even if one takes Anderson's point to be that a BJP victory will demand a confrontation with the false idea of India promulgated by the Congress Party and its affiliated elites, it is not apparent how this will lead to “any radical reconstruction of the state.” Given the credulity of the masses in Anderson's account, why would they be interested in a self-reckoning of any kind? As for the Nehruvian elites that Anderson both admires and excoriates for their propagation of the idea of India, many of them have already begun making peace with the new dispensation, their idea of India requiring not radical reconstruction under the BJP but only minor adjustments.

But such a self-reckoning has long been under way, sometimes beneath the surface and sometimes visibly, taking on a range of forms and accents that Anderson does not seem to see or hear from his Olympian perch. This self-reckoning has little to do with the social base of the BJP; it involves both local struggles, such as agitations against mining companies, dams and nuclear plants, and more fundamental questions: Why reconstruct the state at all, even radically? Who says that India is a preordained nation of some kind, as opposed to a prison house? Because for all its claims of uniqueness – whether of Nehruvian antiquity-continuity or Modi-fied massivity-majoritarianity – India has never been an exception to the contemporary world at all, except in the particular inflections it brings to its self-delusion and the flattering attention it is able to attract from Western business and political leaders.

In a recent essay about Italy in the *London Review of Books* – one which has the same obsession with personalities, but not the same distaste for the culture from which the personalities spring – Anderson writes that Italy should not be taken as an anomaly within Europe, as some are wont to do, but rather as something “?closer to a concentrate of it.” The same could be said of India and the illusions that have brought it to its present state of disaster. India has never been an exception, whether in its visions of past success or in its prognosis for future glories. Rather, it has simply had the misfortune to go from the Harrovian Nehru to the Reaganite Modi in its relatively brief span as a modern nation. In all these things, India is the clearest, most toxic concentrate of the Anglo-American world that exists today.

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P.S.

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