
Review essay. India's songs: the politics of recasting the nation

The inheritance of loss by K Desai; Grove Press, New York, 2006, 384 pages, US \$14.00 paper (£7.99) ISBN 9780802142818

Cinema at the end of empire: a politics of transition in Britain and India by P Jaikumar; Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2006, 336 pages, US \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper (£66.00, £16.99) ISBN 9780822337805, 9780822337935

Spaces of colonialism: Delhi's urban governmentalities by S Legg; Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2007, 272 pages £55.00 cloth, £24.99 paper (US \$89.95, \$39.95) ISBN 9781405156332, 9781405156325

Colonial and post-colonial geographies of India edited by S Raju, M S Kumar, S Corbridge; Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2006, 356 pages, US \$60.00 cloth (£37.00) ISBN 9780761934363

Beyond belief: India and the politics of postcolonial nationalism by S Roy; Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2007, 264 pages, US \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper (£62.00, £16.99) ISBN 9780822339847, 9780822340010

Narrating the nation—any nation—is a political and imaginative act, equal parts storytelling and science, passion and propaganda, mythmaking and memorializing. The process of drawing the contours of the nation, filling in its spaces and venerating a particular sense of lineage and evolution are important constitutive elements of constructing a national identity—of a state, of a people, and of a place. For India, as with so many other places in the world, the stories that describe it and the stories that as a nation it tells about itself are many. Orientalist depictions often begin and end with tales of a land and people mysterious, ancient, and exotic, though in some views fallen far from that glory in the present day, as described by the title of AL Basham's influential *The Wonder That Was India* (1954). Other representations similarly fix India at various points in the past, whether the glory of Asoka or the Gupta Empire, the transcendental wisdom of Hindu sages and Buddhist monks, the chivalric valour of the Rajputs, the pageantry and splendour of the Mughals, the romance of the British Raj, or the righteousness of nationalist struggles. Tourist travel to India remains entranced by many of these visions—of romantic ruins and monuments, of exotic cuisines and customs, of unfamiliar peoples and places.

Much of the postcolonial period has, however, been dominated by images of a nation in disarray, struggling with poverty, disease, religious and ethnic strife, illiteracy, pollution, overpopulation, as well as political corruption and economic stagnation. Today we still see echoes of these varied accounts in a range of cultural products and political projects within and beyond the subcontinent, from tourist brochures to Hollywood and Bollywood films, from diasporic literature to state festivals and pageants, from election manifestos to real estate development in contemporary Indian cities. Joining them is a newer set of discourses that celebrate the apparent triumphs of 21st-century India; in particular, the development of a consumerist middle class and the consolidation of the international stature and power of the nation through its integration within global circuits of capital, labour, and culture. This shifting view of India from past glory to recent decay to potential prosperity is reflected in the words of people such as media tycoon and free market champion Rupert Murdoch, who has in recent years heaped praise upon India and its neighbour China for what he describes as their metamorphosis, from “historic backwaters” (Associated Press, 2008) to emerging

economic powers. The arrogance and ignorance of such sentiments would be laughable if they did not retain some resonance in the world today. To many, India is indeed an awakening giant, a new superpower, a rising geopolitical force for the rest of the world to reckon with, and perhaps even a beacon of hope for Western political leaders who seem so often obsessed with spreading particular notions of liberal democracy across the rest of the planet.

A strange mixture of self-congratulation, paternalism, curiosity, and apprehension lies behind the words of Murdoch and others. India, for much of the past century of little interest to many in the Western world, is applauded for finally 'awakening' from its slumber, while at the same time its neighbours—often pointedly noted as Islamic in character—are admonished for not following the same evolutionary trajectory into national maturity. This newly laudatory view of India is stubbornly myopic; many of the challenges, past and present, which have gone into producing contemporary India are obscured by the focus on its shimmering new achievements: the cyber-cities, the burgeoning economy, and the cosmopolitan middle class. The voices that cheer healthy foreign exchange reserves and a burgeoning information-technology and business process outsourcing sector often drown out those that point out the concomitant epidemic of suicides by rural farmers, or the alarming and ceaseless growth of urban slums, or of the continuing marginalization of landless and indigenous populations. As the novelist Arundhati Roy (2002) puts it:

"It's as though the people of India have been rounded up and loaded onto two convoys of trucks (a huge big one and a tiny little one) that have set off resolutely in opposite directions. The tiny convoy is on its way to a glittering destination somewhere near the top of the world. The other convoy just melts into the darkness and disappears. A cursory survey that would make a good Lazy Person's Concise Guide to the History of India. For some of us, life in India is like being suspended between two of the trucks, one in each convoy, and being neatly dismembered as they move apart, not bodily, but emotionally and intellectually" (pages 2–3).

The question of what India is and how it fits into the world continues to confuse and vex not only outsiders but also those within the subcontinent; there has long been a crucial struggle over constitution and meaning that has dominated much of the history and shaping of India. The sheer diversity of the physical landscape, cultural politics, and multiple histories renders simple characterizations difficult, and yet attempts to do so proliferate. The very *idea* of India continues to exert a strong hold on the imagination of many, while simultaneously remaining unstable, incoherent, contested, and controversial.

This review essay therefore takes as its starting point the notion that there are many diverse India stories—written, read, and interpreted in multiple ways—that help to construct the nation as an everyday lived social and political space. The key concern is not merely to catalogue these differences but rather to ask what is at stake in these varied and often competing visions of the Indian nation. In other words, the point is not simply to uncover and address alternative, contradictory, and contested portraits of India, but rather to examine the material and ideological effects of particular sets of representations, narratives, and discourses. To do so, we must unpack the complex and multifaceted ways in which the nation is narrated.

The approach taken in this essay is therefore an essentially interdisciplinary one, drawing upon a range of perspectives, fields, and traditions in presenting a review and critique of selected contemporary literature on India and the nation. All the texts under review explore questions of space, power, and identity that are crucial in any examination of national narratives, though they come to their examination in differing, if sometimes overlapping, ways. The five titles in question include monographs on film

theory, urban planning and governance, nationalist identity, an edited collection of essays on geographic thought pertaining to India, and a novel on the subject of belonging, home, and transnational lives.

Stephen Legg, in *Spaces of Colonialism*, uses the Foucaultian lens of governmentality to interrogate relationships of colonialism and urbanism, power and planning, politics and resistance, in the context of both new and old Delhi. In doing so, he blurs many accepted boundaries between colonial and postcolonial readings of urban space and development in India. Similarly, in *Cinema at the End of Empire*, Priya Jaikumar asks us to rethink the distinctions between imperial and postcolonial epochs. Also drawing on the frame of governmentality, she examines the shifting terrain between a retreating empire and a nascent nation as seen not only on the screen but equally through the systems of power that regulated film production of the era—national and colonial film policies, censorship rules, and initiatives of the state. Srirupa Roy's *Beyond Belief* also takes film as one of its main subjects in deconstructing the formation of the Indian nation, but rather than commercial films during the transitional period of late empire, her focus is on government films of the first two decades following independence. Her attention is on the state and its attempts to produce the modern nation of India—and in particular an attachment to this notion amongst the masses—through newsreels and commentaries, commemorative marches and parades, and an emphasis on modernist development, seen here through a privileging of scientific discourse and the building of centrally planned industrial townships.

A diverse array of subjects and an interdisciplinary set of approaches are also demonstrated by the contributors to Saraswati Raju, M Satish Kumar, and Stuart Corbridge's edited collection, *Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies of India*. The volume highlights the work of contemporary geographers from India, Western Europe, and the United States in a series of essays that explore a variety of perspectives on India, from geopolitics to Hindu nationalism, from labour markets and gender to the global knowledge economy, from political participation to neocolonialism and environmentalism, and many others beside. The final text under review is Kiran Desai's Man Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, a lyrical and sensuous tale of love, belonging, identity, memory, and transformation across several different landscapes and times. It has two main storylines, one focused on the inhabitants of a decaying colonial-era mansion in the hills of Kalimpong in northeastern India, the other set in New York City around the travails of an undocumented worker in local restaurants, the son of one of the main characters from Kalimpong. It is a work of fiction, but, like the other titles under review, it asks us fundamental questions regarding our understanding of India: What is this nation? How long has it existed? What are its boundaries? How is it reified and reproduced? How are such dominant narratives resisted and reconfigured?

Taken together, these five texts suggest that the basis for the idea(s) of India extends far beyond the physical space of the subcontinent and dominant narrative of continuous invasions and adaptations. The idea of the nation is instead equally reliant upon multiple and often contradictory attempts to 'imagine community', as in Benedict Anderson's influential formulation. Each text explores particular facets of such attempts to dream the nation into being. Rather than analyzing each title in turn, in this essay I draw out three recurrent themes through which the Indian nation has often been narrated, three common tropes that are taken up and examined from diverse perspectives by the authors. These themes are: (1) historical legacies, continuities, and ruptures; (2) communalism, caste, and the clash of difference; (3) unity through diversity, subregional nationalism, and fragments. By focusing on these three key ideas, several common themes emerge that draw together 'regional' expertise and scholarship on the Indian nation despite some differences in approach and intellectual traditions.

One may question, of course, whether there remains today any value in undertaking a nation-specific or region-specific examination of this kind. The once dominant perspective of 'area studies' on nation-states and world regions has for some time been roundly criticized in disciplines such as anthropology and geography for—among other shortcomings—equating bounded territory with immutable characteristics. Such echoes of environmental determinism remain popular in many quarters; in this view it is the rivers of Punjab and the swamps of Bengal, the arid deserts of Rajasthan, and the tangled hills of the Northeast that produce the multiple cultures of India. Brushing aside the banality of observations that people and landscapes produce one another, it is important, as Arjun Appadurai (2000) argues, to focus on “process geographies” rather than “trait geographies” (pages 6–7). Or as Ananya Roy (2008) has suggested in her call to “dislocate” the EuroAmerican hegemony of urban theory, we must move away from a “territorial” reading of sites and spaces to one “that is focused on a variety of dynamic topologies and deep relationalities” (page 129). The value in analyzing specific regions and their particularities thus becomes a process based on an examination of “the forms of movement, encounter and exchange [that] makes possible an understanding of the area-based production of knowledge—how and why particular concepts are produced in particular world-areas” (page 129). In exploring the idea of the nation in the context of India, the following questions must be considered: how is this formulation constituted? how is it maintained? how is it reified? how is it contested and reshaped? how have its boundaries stretched and stayed static, and what has the model of Indian nationhood meant for others across the world?

Historical legacies, continuities, and ruptures

A narrative of continuous invasions and adaptations has long dominated the story of India. Such a perspective was particularly encouraged by the imperial histories produced by the British Raj. A central belief propagated by many imperialists and their later apologists is the insistence that the subcontinent was riven by the fractiousness of its inhabitants, and that the very existence of India today is due to the enlightened stewardship of European colonial masters in the past. From James Tod's (1839) cataloguing of feudal relations and Rajput tribes in the 19th century to Niall Ferguson's (2003) broad-based defence of the British Empire,⁽¹⁾ the notion of the British as a civilizing influence and as neutral arbiters between warring factions has remained strong.

In the postcolonial period, other narratives emerged and took centre stage: India as a young, emergent, anticolonial nation, building on an ancient legacy and fresh from throwing off the yoke of imperialist domination. This history sees India standing purposefully apart from the geopolitical machinations of the primary Cold War opponents and carving out an independent and separate identity through such initiatives as its founding role in the Non-Aligned Movement and its development of a mixed and command economy for the new nation-state. Another popular version of the Indian postcolonial story is one that is underwritten by a sense of success, especially in comparison with the apparent 'failures' of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Unlike its former territorial partners under the Raj, India's national narrative is commonly one of stability and—in recent years—of accelerated economic growth and modern, postliberalization development. New cars, new industries, new housing, new forms of consumption—in short, a host of emerging practices and sensibilities that apparently characterize the

⁽¹⁾ A defence mounted in the service of justifying neoconservative ideologies and the contemporary foreign policy misadventures of both the UK and the US. See also Ferguson's (2004) *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* and Max Boot's (2008) *Savage Wars of Peace* for more from this perspective.

New India. But such triumphal tales ignore and obscure the contradictions and complexities of India's development as a nation, in both the historic and the contemporary context. The trauma of not only Partition but also of post-Independence communal riots, the dissolution of state governments by the centre, conflicts both internal and with neighbours, the lurch towards authoritarian rule during the Emergency crisis, the upsurge in religious politics, and pogroms against Sikhs and Muslims in 1984 and 2002, respectively, give pause to celebrations of India's stability and a view of its deepening democracy.

Both of these particular traditions—in many ways dependent on one another—have come under especial assault in recent decades. Postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and especially critical historiography have done much to deconstruct the once prevalent Orientalist edifices of the Indian national narrative. Drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci and Edward P Thompson, scholars, such as Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sumit Sarkar, Gyan Prakash, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, working in the subaltern studies group, have sought to turn the focus away from a view of India as nation-in-progress (following a linear, European model towards nationhood) and have instead focused on the “fragments” (Chatterjee, 1993) of the nation.⁽²⁾ The founding figure of the subaltern studies group, Ranajit Guha, began by pointing to the need for contesting not only colonial and imperial discourses on the idea of India, but equally nationalist interpretations. In his influential text *Dominance without Hegemony*, Guha (1997) argues that:

“Dominance in colonial India was doubly articulated. It stood, on the one hand, for Britain's power to rule over its South Asian subjects, and on the other, for the power exercised by the indigenous elite over the subaltern amongst the subject population itself. The alien moment of colonialist dominance was matched thus by an indigenous moment within the general configuration of power” (page 100).

The texts reviewed in this essay similarly force us to look at the Indian national narrative not as a linear set of historical developments punctuated by epochal events, but rather as a complex mixture of continuities and ruptures. In this light, ‘India’ is produced not through a series of dates (1757, 1857, 1947, 1971, 1991) or seminal events (Battle of Plassey, Sepoy Mutiny, Independence and Partition, wars against Pakistan, the embrace of the age of liberalization), but through a series of often contradictory, hesitant, and drawn-out processes. In Legg's analysis of the creation of New Delhi, he suggests some fascinating continuities not only between the old city of Shahjahanabad and the newer capital of imperial Delhi, but also with urban governmentality and developments in the postcolonial period.⁽³⁾ He draws our attention, for example, to the survival of “subzones of colonial privilege” and “heritage imperial zones that are zealously defended” (page 218). At the same time, Legg's focus on “the governmentalities that infused spaces of residence, policing and improvement” (page 2) shows us the shift between colonial and nationalist ideologies—an emphasis on sovereign power by the former and on development and democracy by the latter.

⁽²⁾ Considerable debate within the subaltern studies group concerning the cultural turn in much of the criticism contained within more recent publications has led to the departure of some influential figures, including most notably Sumit Sarkar. For an excellent overview of key debates and controversies within the Indian subaltern studies group, see Vinayak Chaturvedi's (2000) edited collection *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*.

⁽³⁾ Legg returns to this theme in much greater detail in his contribution to the Raju et al volume, in an article entitled “Post-colonial developmentalities: from the Delhi Improvement Trust to the Delhi Development Authority”.

A similar pattern of rupture and continuity is apparent when we look at Jaikumar's discussion of the protectionist film policy adopted by the British Empire when dealing with its periphery:

"The British State was hesitant to interfere directly in the legislative matters of its colonial and dominion governments, instead emphasizing diplomatic efforts and commercial trade initiatives to promote British films within the empire. The state's temporary acquiescence to mobilize its empire as a market for commercial British film producers through a combination of cooperation, diplomacy and combativeness towards the dominions and colonies was distinctive to this period of negotiations" (page 45).

What Jaikumar highlights here are forms and modes of power in transition and in flux, unsure in many ways of the boundaries between trade and territory, cosmopolitanism and colonialism, nation and empire. Roy is similarly concerned with moments of rupture and continuity in her discussion of state-produced newsreels and films created in the two decades following independence. She details the sheer volume and range of material that was screened in this period, with an overwhelming number of films in the categories of "development and planning" and "citizenship and reform" (page 42). As in the cases described by Legg and Jaikumar, the framework of governmentality helps us to deconstruct these processes of discourse and interpellation through which the modern nation is brought into being. The structures and forms of power did not necessarily represent a break with colonial habits—Roy's discussion, for example, echoes Jaikumar's descriptions of colonial film policies bleeding into postcolonial initiatives—but like Legg, shows a shift of state priorities. For Roy, one of the crucial aspects of the work of the Indian state's Films Division was that it "quite literally allowed national audiences to 'see the state' and the concrete activities that it was undertaking on behalf of the nation" (page 35).

The theme of blurred edges and uncertain transitions is also addressed by many of the contributors to *Colonial and Post-colonial Geographies of India*. In "Carbon colonies: from local use value to global exchange in climate forestry" (Raju et al, pages 279–297), Paul Robbins deconstructs the mechanism of carbon trading as an ecologically and economically sound response to the global climate change crisis. He views such attempts as essentially neocolonial, shifting a local resource to a global consumer through market logic. Rather than an innovation, Robbins shows such initiatives to be part of a longer history of colonial forestry and ecology. But the theme of rupture and continuity is not only present when we look at the colonial–postcolonial moment. In "Post-modernism, post-Fordism and flexibilized metropolis: dialectical images of Mumbai" (pages 205–222), Swapna Banerjee-Guha examines the construction of Mumbai as a global city and how this is in particular linked to the postliberalization era in India. The years following the Indian state's acceptance of an emergency IMF loan in 1991 and (necessarily) concomitant opening up of its command economy have generally been viewed in the popular imagination as a successful and much-needed break from the stagnation of the so-called 'Hindu rate of growth'.⁽⁴⁾ Banerjee-Guha, however, points to the growing intracity disparity during this period to question just who benefits and who loses from the increasing integration of Mumbai into global economic and cultural chains. She focuses on planning policies to show that while the current context is qualitatively different from the past, it is once more one of intensification rather than rupture:

⁽⁴⁾ A disparaging term used by economists and politicians to refer to the low economic growth rates and consistent balance-of-payments crises experienced by India in the postcolonial period.

“During the initial post-independence years, the gap between the declared planning objective and the obtained reality started showing up in the process of urban development in Mumbai... In the post-liberalization years in the 1990s till this date, this gap increased at an alarming rate” (pages 210–211).

What we see in all of these examples is a need to understand the production of India not as a series of moments or locations, but rather of processes. India, in this sense, is located not only on the space of the subcontinent, but is reflected and refracted through the transmission of its culture, its ideas, and its bodies across the globe. Migration *into* India has long been part of the national narrative, but travels out of the nation-space via trade, indenture, emigration, and through more recent processes of globalization have not; a return and interaction with putative homelands have also become increasingly important to the constitution of India's national identity. Diasporic elites are annually feted by an Indian government desperate for their investment dollars and pounds, while remittances sent by workers in West Asia to Kerala, Gujarat, and Punjab sustain local economies. The nonresident Indian, the person of Indian origin (PIO), and the overseas-born Indian have all become staples of Bollywood films and diaspora productions alike. Indian media is full of stories of the successes and misdeeds of the most famous of those bearing such acronyms.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai challenges what has become the dominant view of the Indian transnational experience by focusing not on elites but on lives that are on the surface more mundane and ordinary. Her critique is often a harsh one, depicting elites who live between worlds with a palpable measure of contempt for former homes. Desai's portrayals are a necessary deconstruction of the mythologized global Indians who dominate both the cultural industries' and the nation-state's interpellations of the diaspora. Desai exposes a very different history of migration and mobility than those we are accustomed to seeing, be it the newly minted NRI or the more traditional figure of the immigrant struggling to acculturate. She shows us a range of different experiences and shifting perspectives—on India, on being Indian, on home, and on belonging. One of the strengths of the novel is the lyrical way in which Desai weaves together these distant places and processes, simultaneously focusing on the connections and chasms in landscape, economy, history, and culture that construct them. She moves us back and forth between Kalimpong and New York—at once seamlessly, at once jarring us—between these two places and life-worlds. We end up feeling that there is much in common, and there is much absolutely alien between them. This is perhaps demonstrated most clearly by the central characters of Biju—a young cook from Kalimpong now in New York—and the Judge—a British-educated lawyer now retired to an aging colonial estate in Northeastern India. Desai paints two stories of challenge and loss. Biju's is one of a desperate struggle to gain legitimacy and a place in the underground of the service industry while being exploited by all around him. The Judge's story is one of a failing battle against the rising tides. He tries to maintain an air of civility and civilization in a world he sees spinning rapidly out of his own control. Desai shows through him an earlier journey of migration, education, and loss, as he travels away from his small village in Gujarat and goes to England to study law. Along the way he is never accepted in England, yet he is imprinted strongly by a certain bureaucratic ethic through the process. In many ways he is the example par excellence of Thomas Macaulay's 'brown Englishmen'—English in temperament and taste if not in skin. The contours and shapes of India are stretched in all sorts of ways by *The Inheritance of Loss*—in the Indian restaurants in which Biju works, the convent in which Sai learns not to be Indian, the English libraries in which the Judge hides away his foreign behaviour, the little old ladies from Kolkata and Delhi who inhabit the town, and the young boys and soldiers who shake up everyone's lives in Kalimpong.

Desai's novel is a beautiful and thought-provoking book about what space and landscape and distance mean: the distance between two lovers' touch, the distance between a father and son, and, in the context of this essay, the distance between a nation, a region, a people, and everyday lives.

Communalism, caste, and the clash of difference

British colonialism in the subcontinent has often been rationalized by portraying the extant cultures as implacable foes engaged in—as the imperial gaze sees it—barbaric, irrational, and often petty squabbles. In such a view, great monuments, architecture, and arts may have come from past rules, but not good government and certainly not the makings of a just society. To achieve the latter, unlettered Others need guidance and the patient hand of a benevolent imperial master. Take up “The White Man's Burden”, urges Rudyard Kipling (1988), and teach civilization to “new-caught, sullen peoples/Half-devil and half-child” (page 321). Lest this paternalism be thought a thing of its time, one need only recall the words of Tony Blair (2003) to the US Congress:

“As Britain knows, all predominant power seems for a time invincible; but in fact it is transient. The question is what do you leave behind? What you can bequeath to this anxious world is the light of liberty.”

An important element of imperial self-understanding, then, is predicated upon its assumption of the role as parent, judge, and rational actor amongst immature, wayward, and uncontrolled antagonists. We continue to see this formulation in the modern world as a way of simultaneously explaining the conflicts of others while justifying the actions of dominant geopolitical actors. The violence between Serb and Croat, Hutu and Tutsi, Sunni and Shia, Muslim and Hindu are thereby reduced to inherent base hatreds and essential irresolvable difference. This is not to diminish the fact that disputes and deep-seated tensions exist. The British Raj did not create communalism, the episodic spasms of violence that beset Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh groups throughout India. But a key facet of British governance was the well-worn imperial habit of divide-and-conquer. One cannot decry the inability of others to get along while at the same time exacerbating such differences. Indeed, the notion that the British imposed order upon chaos is called into question when we consider that communal violence in India became more frequent and grew in scale towards the end of the Raj, rather than at its onset (Chapman, 2003). Legg, in his discussion of the policing of communalism by British authorities in the two Delhis, demonstrates the dilemma for colonial power in this understanding of India (and Indians) as irredeemably fractious. On the one hand, divisions between Hindus and Muslims served the Raj by undermining the solidarities built through anticolonial nationalism. On the other hand, Legg argues that:

“Even if this was part of the Government's strategy, it was also well aware that excessive communal conflict in its domain would undermine not only its prestige but also its power to rule. Trade and administration suffered, but so did the image of the government as a presence that kept India in ‘order’ and ‘civilized’” (page 121).

The imperial government, therefore, developed intricate plans for surveilling, policing, and in numerous other ways regulating points of possible conflict, especially mass gatherings such as political rallies and religious festivals. These schemes often resulted in the brutalization of members of both communities by the state apparatus, which based its actions upon the belief that “the use of violence was justified in terms of the necessary restoration of order amongst a population that only understood the language of force” (page 148).

While the Raj used particular forms of governance to structure the city as both the catalyst for and response to communalism, elements of such a strategy remain influential in the reshaping both of urban and of national space in the present day. In Stuart Corbridge and Edward Simpson's "Militant cartographies and traumatic spaces: Ayodha, Bhuj and the contested geographies of Hindutva" (Raju et al, pages 70–84), the authors show the many ways in which an understanding of difference is being used to redefine the very space of India. Hindutva, an aggressive brand of political Hinduism, seeks to oust bodies it considers 'unwelcome' from the motherland— Muslims, Christians, and non-Hindus in general. Marches and processions, as Corbridge and Simpson demonstrate, are a visible announcement and manifestation of the power and presence of the movement. There are also many attempts to simply eliminate evidence of Others, such as attacks upon shrines and mosques and assaults upon non-Hindus, with the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the Gujarat pogroms amongst the most infamous of these events. Religious difference may be the self-contained logic that is used to explain these situations, but as Corbridge and Simpson suggest, the events themselves are often part of a much larger and more nuanced context. The reordering of space is not simply an accompaniment and consequence of eternal violence; as the rebuilding of the earthquake-stricken Gujarati town of Bhuj shows in the segregation of survivors by religious affiliation, it is an often carefully planned and coordinated scheme of particular political interests, aided and abetted by a compliant state.

The idea of India as encapsulating a set of 'eternal' antagonisms is not confined to religious difference alone, however. Another important part of the mysterious otherness and barbarism of the subcontinent, as projected by Orientalist thought, lies in the vicious institution of caste. This four-fold division of Hindu culture has often been used as an explanatory framework to understand structural inequalities and oppressions in India. But, as with communalism, we see that such a reading is both reductive and often misguided. Caste is a much more nuanced—if still highly oppressive and iniquitous—set of social relations that speak as much of kinship ties, territorial traditions, and occupational disciplines as they do of religious scripture. And, as with communalism, we see that caste emerges not from primordial or innate sentiment, but through the interaction of a host of factors, including state structure, community tradition, and individual aspiration. In M Satish Kumar's "Idioms, symbolism and divisions: beyond the black and white towns in Madras, 1652–1850" (Raju et al, pages 23–48), we see the growing inter-caste conflicts that developed through the establishment of the colonial enterprise in southern India. Once again, the British do not bring peace to a long-simmering dispute, nor are they the architects of it. But in detailing the historical struggle over the use of particular symbols and the production of caste-segregated neighbourhoods, Kumar shows us ways in which colonial authorities and local caste associations help to reshape both identity and urban form.

Srirupa Roy gives us a similar example from a later period. She points to the steel towns built in the decades following Independence—planned industrial cities such as Rourkella, Bokaro, Durgapur, and Bhilai—that were symbols of the new, developmentalist India. Not only were they to be linked to the 'heavy industry' side of the command economy of the nascent state, but in their own urban design and ordering they were to be beacons of hope for a new, disciplined, and civilized population, a place where "the harmonious coexistence of diverse ethnic and religious groups would be realized" (page 135). Within fifteen years a series of communal riots, labour unrest, corruption, and decay had rendered the steel towns spaces of fear, rather than ones of promise. The dominant explanation harkened back to the theme of cultures in eternal conflict, yet, as Roy shows us, the failure of the steel towns had as much to do with state policies—allocating housing according to workplace hierarchies, residential

segregation that reinforced existing differences of class, caste, religion, and ethnicity, an absence of public services, and an emphasis on cultural diversity that often resulted in the ossification of an aggressive parochialism.⁽⁵⁾ The failure of the steel townships undermines one of the other key arguments that has been central to the idea of India, the notion of unity through diversity, which we turn to in the final section of this review.

Unity through diversity, subregional nationalism, and fragments

The trope of unity through diversity has been a long-standing theme (and an oft-repeated slogan) in understandings of India and nation. In one sense it is a way of incorporating the substantial differences across regions and traditions within the framework of a coherent, modern nation-state. What, after all, draws any nation together? How are communities to be imagined as one? There are multiple histories, languages, ethnicities, and cultural pasts within all modern nation-states. Yet India places particular emphasis on this representation of itself; as Srirupa Roy points out, unity through diversity is “a central state idiom” (pages 24–25). Indeed, India has often been described as more of a federation of states (linguistic, ethnonational, cultural, religious) than as a coherent national entity in the European sense. Some have gone so far as to describe modern India as what the Holy Roman Empire would have looked like had it survived into the present day. Such characterizations do little justice to either India or the diversity extant within all modern nation-states and substitutes jingoism and national propaganda for rigorous analysis. However, the ‘success’ of India at remaining an unbroken (besides Partition) national entity in the postcolonial period remains the wonder of many onlookers. As Roy states, despite the vigour of multiple secessionist and subnationalist movements

“[The] territorial–national integrity of India still survives. Moreover, the Indian polity continues to exist as an active and functioning democracy, held together by mechanisms other than force or authoritarian dominance. From this perspective, India represents a success story of diversity management. The complex mosaic of subnational identities constituted along a multiplicity of axes—region, religion, language, caste—has been granted constitutional and ideational recognition without compromising the authority and effectiveness of the centralized state system, and without abrogating democratic rules and practices” (page 3).

Central to this story of apparent success is the view of India as harmonious and accepting of difference, as a place where tolerance can overcome division. Roy analyzes the myriad ways in which the state affirmed its belief in the ideology of unity through diversity, through newsreels and the building of mixed-population steel townships, as mentioned above. One of the most interesting ways in which she describes India performing this particular idiom is in the Republic Day parades staged by the state. Her close reading of these events show the nation in its fragments, reduced to caricatures and stereotypes of regional costume, cuisine, and cultural performance, yet all subsumed to the greater whole of a unified Indian nation. But what are we to make of the effect of this particular formulation of India? How do we understand the failure of the townships, the tuning out of audiences to the newsreels, the shifting and complex interpretation of Republic Day rituals, and, perhaps most importantly, the continuing separatist struggles in the Northeast and in Punjab during the 1980s for a Khalistan? For Roy, the problem lies in part with “the hollowness of the unity-in-diversity formula of nationhood” (page 3).

⁽⁵⁾ This practice of assigning housing according to pay grade was not restricted to the planned steel townships and had a colonial history. Legg describes a similar process in both Delhis in the allocation of housing to civil servants, a tradition continued by the new Indian state following Independence.

In Desai's work, we see the power of subnationalism expressed by the separatist Gorkhas, angry with decades of neglect and mistreatment both by the British and later by the Indian state. They sweep one of the main characters—Gyan, employed as a tutor to the young woman Sai who lives in the decaying mansion—up with their words of revolution and justice denied:

"In our own country, the country we fight for, we are treated like slaves. Every day the lorries leave bearing away our forests, sold by foreigners to fill the pockets of foreigners. Every day our stones are carried from the riverbed of the Teesta to build their houses and cities. We are labourers working barefoot in all weather, thin as sticks, as they sit fat in managers' houses with their fat wives, with their fat bank accounts and their fat children going abroad. Even their chairs are fat. We must fight, brothers and sisters, to manage our own affairs. We must unite under the banner of the GNLF, Gorkha National Liberation Front. We will build hospitals and schools. We will provide jobs for our sons. We will give dignity to our daughters carrying heavy loads, breaking stone on the roads. We will defend our homeland. This is where we were born, where our parents were born, where our grandparents were born. We will run our own affairs in our own language. If necessary, we will wash our blood kukris in the mother waters of the Teesta. Jai Gorkha" (pages 175–176).

But difference within the nation is not only about ethnicity or language. For many of the characters that populate Desai's novel, it is as much about a culture and a life imagined in a manner wholly different than that of dominant national narratives. The unity that the Indian national narrative in the postcolonial period has traded upon is in large part that of developmentalism, building a strong new nation. For the nation, villagers are asked to sacrifice their homes for dams, farmers their fields for factories, soldiers their lives in wars. As Srirupa Roy puts it, "[in] the first few decades after independence, the vocabulary of 'nation building' dominated both policy debates and political discourse in India" (page 105), and she shows a fledgling country determined to invest in and celebrate scientific expertise as a means to improvement. Yet for someone like Gyan, educated yet underemployed and ashamed to show Sai the poverty of his daily life, the Gorkha cause only highlights the lie of development in India, at least for him. The much-mistreated wife of the Judge, another central figure in *The Inheritance of Loss*, leads a solitary and much-abused life in large part because the Judge cannot bear the connections she provides with a life both prior to and alternative to his British education and discipline. She is driven to her death because the Judge cannot accept either her or the new India of which he is scarcely a part. The nuns who raise his granddaughter Sai for much of her early life also seem out of step with the new nation, the education they provide for her a bricolage of languages and customs from the last gasps of empire, which leave her ill equipped for a postcolonial life.

All of these characters speak of the fragments of the nation, fragments that the idea of India purports to hold together through the virtue of its very existence. Yet what violence is done to actual lives by the fiction of the nation? What trajectories and outcomes are obscured by proclamations that 'we are all Indians'? It is important, however, as Glyn Williams and Emma Mawdsley argue in "India's evolving political ecologies" (Raju et al, pages 261–278), not to reduce these differences to problematic dichotomies. They point, for example, to the categories of 'omnivores' and 'ecosystem people' created by some scholars to identify villains and heroes in contemporary ecological struggles in India. This, in their view, is an essentializing and limiting strategy. It is more useful, they argue, "to widen the empirical frame... [since struggles] for ecology and equity are not solely concerned with the rural poor and land-based struggles; they need to explicitly embrace both urban inequalities and conflicts over more diffuse resources" (page 273).

Widening our frames, in a broader sense, remains the challenge in understanding India, as nation and region, people and place. As the authors reviewed in this essay persuasively suggest, we need to look at India not merely as a collection of fragments, nor as difference that coheres around the shape and purpose of the nation, but as multiple trajectories and histories that continue to shift and reconfigure despite the best efforts of the state and its apparatus to weld them into particular forms and to wield them for particular purposes. Our goal, therefore, should not be to replace 'false' narratives with ones that are more 'genuine' or 'authentic', but rather to explore the stories that call the Indian nation into being so that we may understand and engage with their material consequences and political effects.

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