

The Indian Unconscious

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There is yet another head on the political platter of the world's largest democracy. This head is not metaphorical. It does not signify a disgraced leader or a government that has fallen. It is a literal head dripping with literal blood – battered with bricks that supported a leg-less bed. The bed belonged to one Muhammad Akhlaq who lived in a village called Basehara in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, not too far from the national capital of India. The head too belonged to him.

It has been only a few days but this latest episode in the long-running Indian serial is already well-known to the world. On a late September night it was announced over the loudspeakers of the village temple that there was going to be beef on Akhlaq's dinner plate. A mob hundreds-strong – some say thousands – gathered within no time. It attacked the family killing Akhlaq on the spot and badly injuring his son, Danish.

In the meantime, meat-loafs confiscated from the family fridge have been sent for forensic examination. The system of justice must check whether it actually was beef, although, as one commentator points out, "...mere possession of beef isn't illegal in Uttar Pradesh."¹ Shedding helpful light on feebly lit corners of the Hindu moral universe, a prominent Hindutva ideologue wrote in a national daily, "Lynching a person merely on suspicion is absolutely wrong, the antithesis of all that India stands for and all that Hinduism preaches."² The lynch-mob should have waited till the forensic reports came.

A few suspects have been apprehended for the murder. This has made the village livid with anger. There are protestations that those arrested are innocent. Journalists have been attacked for making such a big thing out of a small matter and bringing a bad name to the village. Cameras have been broken and OB vans damaged. There is a pertinacious wall of angry women guarding the village against any further intrusion by outsiders who can neither understand the village mind nor the Indian culture.

It is not easy to understand the collective mind of an Indian village. Even learned anthropologists are of little help. Their ethnographic techniques of studying a form of life from its internal standpoint are particularly susceptible to the rationalizations of a complex cultural species. If anyone has a chance, it would, perhaps, be a villager who has stepped out – an *Archimedean Point* created out of the same cultural universe. Ravish Kumar, by now a near iconic journalist and anchor of a prominent Hindi news channel, stood out for this very reason.³ His eyes could see the natural rhythm and the instinctual response of an Indian village in the immediate aftermath of a collective crime. Nearly everyone had disappeared from the village. Whoever could be found claimed that he was miles away at the time of the incident. The lynch-mob had materialized instantaneously out of thin air. It had as quickly melted away after the job was done. Everyone has now returned to defend the honor of the village and strategize about how to deal with the unwarranted intrusions of modernity including that of the law.

Predictably, the lynching has been linked to politics, and rightly so. I would not have described the platter as political if Akhlaq's head on it was not an offering to a new goddess called Indian democracy. Contemporary India, much like its new Prime Minister, is always high on elections. At any given time there is an election around the corner – elections to one state assembly or another, or else, local elections to the village Panchayats and urban local bodies. There is nothing local, however, about these local elections. All these battles feed into the perpetual war for Delhi. And, in an increasingly vigorous democracy in a society such as India's, nothing is more efficacious in winning elections than inciting a lynch mob or fomenting a riot. Commentators have seen links between Dadri lynching and Bihar elections, and it may not be far-fetched. As everyone knows, it is not just Bihar that is at stake in the Bihar elections. At such times the nation may keenly watch what is on Akhlaq's dinner plate.

I will not dwell further on the details of Dadri lynching. My concern, primarily, is with what lies underneath. I intend to deal with a phenomenon that, borrowing from the term *Depth Psychology*, I call *Depth Politics*. It arises when a modern political and economic system arrives in a land and a civilization that has existed for centuries and millennia without much help from or engagement with modernity. Invariably it is a tumultuous affair and requires wide-ranging adjustments on both sides of the modern-ancient divide. By the time things begin to settle down, neither the actually existing modernity nor the still living antiquity are recognizable to an eye accustomed to their canonical forms.

All this occasions a great deal of controversy. There are worries about modernity not taking roots in the society in question, or getting mutated into something spurious or disagreeable. There are complaints from the other side about a pristine culture being disfigured and an indigenous form of life being colonized. I will not join the controversy here, although I will not make any special effort to conceal my dispositions. My objective is to make some sense of the phenomenon itself, and my premise is that existing explanations are not satisfactory. In particular, my concern is with that set which attempts to understand the intricacies and the vicissitudes of Indian politics through concepts such as *false consciousness*, *ideology*, *hegemony* or *superstructure-lagging-the-base*. I do not entirely reject any of these explanations, but, in my reckoning, they do not seem to suffice.

Another disclaimer may be in order. I will proceed with my argument in a largely hand-waving manner, making use of analogies, metaphors and conceptual borrowings, and often relying on that ever popular criterion of plausibility. A rigorous mode of presenting the case may require a different kind of writing which will be attempted elsewhere.

Walzer's Paradox

Two prominent philosopher-theorists have, very recently, written two little books that are remarkable for their depth and sweep. India figures in both of them, although their concerns are not confined to it. One is a book called *The Indian Ideology* by Perry Anderson which is basically a collection of three articles on India published in the London Review of Books.⁴ I will come to it a little later. The other is a book by Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation – Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*, which contains the text

of his Henry L. Stimson Lectures at Yale.⁵ I start with Walzer because he poses the problem through an insightful observation and in a manner that is particularly helpful to the purpose behind my own argument.

Walzer takes three countries – Algeria, India and Israel – which, in his opinion, were all liberated from “foreign rule”⁶ and started out on a secular and emancipatory course, but all three succumbed to religious counterrevolution following a remarkably similar timetable. He unveils the paradox as follows,

“Initially, at least, this is a success story: the three nations were indeed liberated from foreign rule. At the same time, however, the states that now exist are not the states envisioned by the original leaders and intellectuals of the national liberation movements, and the moral/political culture of these states, their inner life, so to speak, is not at all what their founders expected. One difference is central to my analysis, and I will keep coming back to it: all three movements were secular, committed, indeed, to an explicitly secular project, and yet in the states that they created a politics rooted in what we can loosely call fundamentalist religion is today very powerful. In three different countries, with three different religions, the timetable was remarkably similar: roughly twenty to thirty years after independence, the secular state was challenged by a militant religious movement. This unexpected outcome is a central feature of the paradox of national liberation.”⁷

Walzer is also aware that not everyone acknowledges the existence of this paradox. He takes two prominent exemplars of “paradox denied” – the Marxist perspectives and the postcolonial theories. As a left-leaning liberal philosopher “sympathetic to both socialism and liberalism” he finds the Marxist approach “the more appealing, the more challenging, and the more usefully wrong of the two.” Describing the Marxist denial he says,

“The Marxist account holds that religious beliefs and the fiercely defended identities that these beliefs produce are examples of false consciousness, that they are not usefully engaged with the “real world” of contending social classes and don’t serve the needs of oppressed men and women. The liberationists fail to overcome these beliefs and identities because their own nationalism is similar in form: it is also an example of false consciousness, it draws on the same primordial ideas and emotions, and it fails, like religion, to serve the needs of the oppressed. Whatever the pretended opposition of nationalism and religious revival, these two reinforce each other, and they make for a narrow, parochial, and chauvinist politics.”⁸

Walzer takes Perry Anderson as a representative example of the Marxist perspective, who, in his opinion, “has developed the most subtle version of this argument”. He also finds it helpful that Anderson too selects for analysis countries and movements – India, Israel and Ireland – that are “only a little different” from his own selection. But he is not convinced by the Marxist argument and sums up his disagreement as follows,

“The Marxist project failed or, at least, has not yet succeeded. The liberationists have not been pushed aside by the emergence of the masses as a mature political force. Nor have they been replaced, in the absence of the masses, by the revolutionary vanguard of the global proletariat. And even if that replacement had occurred, the vanguard militants would have encountered the same problem that the liberationists did: they would have found themselves at war with the very people whose interests they claimed to advance. Indeed, their war might have been more intense since it wasn’t only the religious feelings but also the national-cultural commitments of ordinary men and women that the vanguard militants could not or would not acknowledge.”⁹

As far as postcolonial writers are concerned, Walzer is wary of engaging with them at any great length. He finds himself in agreement with Amartya Sen who says that some of the postcolonial arguments “involve elaborate conceptual compositions and estimable intricacy of language and are not breathtakingly easy to penetrate (even armed with a dictionary of neologisms, on the one hand, and courage, on the other.)”¹⁰ The substance of the postcolonial argument is, in any case, not very helpful in figuring out an alternative course that the national liberation movements could have taken. It puts the entire blame on modernity’s door that came riding the colonial ships and despoiled the pre-modern paradise. It is best to quote Walzer once again,

“Postcolonial writers, by contrast, see the two [nationalism and religious revival] as specifically modern creations. They stress, with a kind of romantic nostalgia, the “‘fuzzy,’ syncretistic, reciprocal, and overlapping character of pre-modern religious identities” and argue that the monolithic and exclusive religions that foster zealotry are the products of colonial rule—which the liberationists do not challenge so much as perpetuate. Indian nationalists appropriate “characteristically Western forms of disciplinary power.” That Hindu militants compete with them to exercise this power can’t be surprising.”¹¹

Walzer is brilliant at elucidating the paradox of liberation. But he stops short of offering a resolution. At the end of the book he asks for patience and persistence, because national liberation, “like any other form of liberation, is a very long process”.¹² One gets a feeling that he could have done much more. Hints towards a resolution lie within his text. It hasn’t escaped him, for example, that the main vehicle of religious counterrevolution is modern democracy created by the liberators. The traditionalists successfully challenge the modernists using as weapon that very instrument which is forged by the latter to serve the emancipatory goals of modernity. One could notice the irony and move on. But one could also pause and notice something that has the potential to explain the paradox.

Modern democracy in a largely pre-modern society sets the stage for a curious play of Depth Politics. But before we come to that, let us spend some time with Perry Anderson.

The Indian Ideology

Anderson’s *The Indian Ideology* is a combative book, which has drawn wide attention and generated a great deal of controversy. It has angered many among the Indian scholars who have reacted sharply. Three such responses have now been collected into a small but aggressive volume.¹³ Another prominent Indian scholar has reviewed the book in a well-known journal in a relatively polite manner but equally unfavourably.¹⁴

If one manages to get past the fireworks, one may find Anderson still standing. One would still have issues with him. His is not a carefully crafted book and it is easy to find fault with him. Many of his claims can be challenged and he may be shown to be rehearsing some of the well-known follies of the Indian Marxist Left (see, for example, Sudipta Kaviraj in the volume cited above). He may be shown to harbour class reductionism worthy of a run-of-the-mill Marxist, and, simultaneously, he can be accused of suffering from the history-as-the-doing-of-great-men syndrome (as Partha Chatterjee and Nivedita Menon have done in the same volume). Ironically, he may be accused, at the same time, to miss the elephant in the

room – especially unworthy of a Marxist because the elephant in question is capitalism (see Prabhat Patnaik’s review cited above).

Beyond donning the mantle of the irreverent iconoclast who would like to break many of the tallest idols of recent Indian history, Anderson has raised issues that refuse to go away. He has brought three grand features of Indian history under the question mark – India as a nation and the basis of nationhood in the supposedly ancient unity of its civilisation, its secularity and the causes behind the Partition, and its conduct as a democratic republic after Independence.

My intention here is not to write another review of the book. Instead I would like to distil from Anderson’s observations certain conclusions relevant for my own argument. Despite the support I am drawing from him, he may not share my opinion and may not draw the same conclusions.

Anderson may be on firm ground in asserting that the advent of Indian nationhood is a relatively recent phenomenon and the British colonial rule may claim most of the credit for putting India together. But, in support of his assertion, he did not need to dispute the existence of an ancient and, despite its diversity, a distinct civilization on the subcontinent. Nationalism may be an *ideology* that a Marxist feels compelled to deconstruct, but that did not require Anderson to get into a wrangle with Nehru and mock his grandstanding about India’s civilizational continuity “for five or six thousand years or more”. The fact remains that a member of the cultural species found on the subcontinent could be distinctly recognized long before appearance anywhere of the idea of India.

A vigorous engagement between political rule and social life is a phenomenon of recent vintage as far as India is concerned. Historians and other scholars have noted a remarkable separation between the two domains – a disjunction that survived for millennia on the subcontinent. The social order was too stable and entrenched for politics to stir or unsettle it. The rulers, on the other hand, chose in their own wisdom to respect this separation as far as possible. Even the most powerful empires that existed intermittently on this land were marginal to everyday life. The greatest emperors could not tamper with the social order on ground. They could not even upgrade their own caste status if, in rare instances, they happened to come from relatively lower castes. Muslim rulers too acquired this political wisdom. It is noteworthy that even after six centuries of Muslim rule the subcontinent remained predominantly Hindu. Sudipta Kaviraj has summarized this peculiarity of the subcontinent as follows,

“The Islamic state saw itself as limited and socially distant as the Hindu state. Crucially, because of this, neither the Hindu nor the Islamic state employed a conception of what domination entailed that was strictly similar to modern European notions of sovereignty. In terms of their external relations with other kingdoms or empires, these states were certainly 'sovereign' over their territories; but we cannot simply assume that in their internal relation with their subjects these states exercised the familiar rights of sovereignty. It is essential to understand the difference between actual weakness of a state and its marginality in principle. The relative autonomy of the social constitution from the state did not arise because the state was weak, and would have invaded social rules if it could muster the necessary strength.

Rather, it accepted a marginality that was a consequence of its own normative principles. The marginality of the pre-modern state was a social fact precisely because it followed from a moral principle which guided the relation between rulers and subjects.”¹⁵

It is not surprising that the East India Company took hold of the subcontinent almost unnoticed by its people. This was the case despite occasional battles including the famed ones such as Plassey in 1757. People of this ancient civilization were not accustomed to paying too close an attention to the comings and goings of their rulers. The colonial rule too, by and large, respected this customary relationship between the rulers and the subjects. Even in the case of the *Sati* practice (burning of the widow on the pyre of the deceased husband) they intervened largely under pressure from indigenous reformers. Claims of the postcolonial writers about the Indian social structure having been reshaped by the colonial state – such as conferring a supposedly new and hardened identity upon caste and accomplishing a significant rewiring of the caste-mind – are highly exaggerated. Importing the Foucauldian concept of *governmentality* to explain the conduct of the colonial state may be required less by historical facts and more by demands of intellectual virtuosity.

The interaction between the society and the colonial state became vigorous mainly after the emergence of the nationalist challenge. The status of people’s engagement with politics went through a qualitative transformation after Gandhi’s appearance on the political scene. He managed to call upon a people who had seldom answered a political call in their entire history. He could manage this feat because he could call up the “archaic religious emotions” of this civilization. Walzer has a rather censorious quote from V. S. Naipaul,

“The drama that is being played out in India today is the drama that [Gandhi] set up sixty years ago . . . Gandhi gave India its politics; he called up its archaic religious emotions. He made them serve one another, and brought about an awakening. But in independent India the elements of that awakening negate one another. No government can survive on Gandhian fantasy; and . . . spirituality, the solace of a conquered people, which Gandhi turned into a form of national assertion, has soured more obviously into the nihilism that it always was.”¹⁶

Coming from the other end of the political spectrum, Anderson is far more critical of Gandhi than Naipaul is. He castigates the Mahatma far more sternly for crassly mixing religion with politics and for being an unreformed Hindu despite his pretensions of reforming Hinduism and his avowed respect for all religions. He holds Gandhi’s brand of religious politics responsible for turning Congress into nearly exclusively a Hindu party, for alienating Muslims from the political discourse, for sowing the seeds of Partition and for pushing Ambedkar, a consistent modernist and a relentless critic of Hinduism, to the wall. Anderson finds Gandhi more disagreeable than many of the religious politicians of twentieth century. While acknowledging his great achievements he adds,

“But Gandhi’s achievements also came at a huge cost to the cause which he served. The twentieth century saw quite a few leaders of national movements who were men of religion – the Grand Mufti and the Abbé Youlou, Archbishop Makarios and Ayatollah Khomeini, among others. For most, their faith was subordinate to their politics, an instrument or adornment of essentially earthly ends. In a few cases, like that of Khomeini, there was no significant distinction between the two – religious and political goals were one, and there could be no conflict between them. Within this gallery, Gandhi hangs apart. For him alone, religion

mattered more than politics, which did not coincide with, but subjoined it. There was a further difference. Not only did he hold no religious office, but his religion was to a peculiar extent home-made, unlike any existing belief-system at the time. Quite how strange a pot-pourri this was, will not be found in the industry of glozing commentary that has grown up around his ideas, adjusting them for contemporary usage in much the same way as the Pentateuch becomes a blue-print for universalism and the Quran all but a trailer for feminism.”¹⁷

Someone has to call a spade a spade, and it is reassuring if a Marxist does it. Indian Marxists have been endlessly ridiculed for criticising the Mahatma who is the sole unchallengeable deity of Indian politics. Given their marginality in the Indian society and polity, especially in comparison to the Mahatma, they have by now lost all self-confidence and many of them have joined the bandwagon. Anderson is unencumbered by any such burden of realpolitik. But, this has its own pitfalls.

Even a diehard Gandhian does not swear by the actual truth content of all that Gandhi may have uncovered in his experiments with truth. His postmodernist admirers are, in any case, not inclined to look for substance or consistency anywhere, let alone in the Gandhian thoughts. All this is beside the point. Naipaul may have the audacity to say that “no government can survive on Gandhian fantasy” and he may be right in saying that, but that does not mean the world runs solely on truth or substance. Marxists are fond of saying that when ideas grip the masses they become a material force. How can this maxim, then, be denied to the Gandhian ideas? We cannot change the rules of the game in the middle of the play and add that the ideas have to be right too in addition to being gripped by the masses in order to become a material force. In any case, the left may also benefit from noticing that, at a given time, not every idea grips the masses no matter how skilfully we take it to them.

There is not much point, therefore, in exposing Gandhian ideas as romantic, flawed or inconsistent. The questions, which Anderson or anyone else following the political career of Indian ideology must answer, lie along a different track. What made Gandhi indispensable to the mass edition of Indian nationalism? Why did the people on the subcontinent, who had seldom answered a political call over the millennia, answer Gandhi’s call? Could Gandhi have called differently and still people would have answered? Was it an avoidable failure of rational and modernist leaders who could have shone the light of reason through the mist of Gandhian irrationality but chose not to do so?

Anderson seems to allude at times that people did not really answer Gandhi’s call in the manner it is often imagined. He claims that none of the three or four major mass movements Gandhi launched were successful in achieving in what he set out to achieve. Each one of them ended in failure – having been suppressed, or withdrawn, or just fizzling out. The British were bound to depart from the subcontinent in any case. The nationalists are credited for the Independence far more than they deserve.

It is not possible, however, to take the credit away from Gandhi and, at the same time, blame him for all that Anderson blames him for. One can pin the blames on Gandhi only if one acknowledges that he was effective. One must also look at the reasons behind his effectiveness. Anderson, in the end, seems to have a rather simplistic account of what went

wrong and why, and how things could have been steered along a different course. He delivers his judgement in an unequivocal tone,

“There cannot be a genuinely secular party or state unless it is willing to confront religious superstition and bigotry, rather than truckle to them. Neither party nor state has ever contemplated doing that, because both have rested, sociologically speaking, on Hindu caste society.”¹⁸

The principle implicit in this judgement is unexceptionable. There is also a hint of recognition that the barriers to implementing the principle may lie, at least partly, in the make-up of the society itself. And yet, Anderson fails to give necessary weight to this factor. He puts all the blame on the “subjective factors” and ignores the constraints of the “objective conditions”. In this respect he appears to adhere to the orthodox Marxist doctrine that people can always and in every instance be saved from their “false consciousness”, or rescued from the “hegemony” of the ruling classes, if the “revolutionary agents” tried hard enough and did not themselves succumb to the ruling ideology.

The roots of the problems that Anderson attributes to the Indian ideology go far deeper than mere ideology. It is not very relevant to figure out whether Gandhi was truly and authentically the experimenter with truth he claimed he was, or he was just an astute politician – whether his own inner make-up was of the same cloth as the Indian mind or he fashioned a deliberate religious-political vocabulary that resonated with the Indian masses. The relevant part is that he could successfully stir the depths of this ancient civilization and extract a political response. He had access to the Indian mind – not only to its conscious part but also to its unconscious layers, so to speak. This did not mean that he could have called them in any other way and they would have responded. Even a Gandhi could not have outweighed what I would call the *Indian Unconscious*. This object is far weightier than the theories of *ideology*, *false consciousness*, or *hegemony* reckon.

The Indian Unconscious

Irrespective of the therapeutic success or scientific soundness of psychoanalysis, the Freudian concept of *Unconscious* has been used productively across a wide range of social theories. “Traumatic” memories, according to Freud, are “repressed” into the unconscious mind and the “patient” cannot recall them. When the “therapist” tries to reach them and make them accessible to the “patient”, the latter’s mind “resists” such attempts. And yet, the *unconscious* affects the conscious thought and behaviour of the individual. It is a one-way street. The *conscious* cannot reach the *unconscious*, but the latter is an ever-present background to conscious mental life.

Invariably, there are risks involved in borrowing concepts and metaphors across disciplines. One has to be vigilant that Freud can lead one to back to the long-forgotten behaviourism or to a claustrophobic determinism. Alasdair MacIntyre who succinctly describes the Freudian discovery also warns against this danger,

“The Unconscious is an omnipresent background to conscious and overt mental life and to behaviour. It exerts a continual causal influence upon conscious thought and behaviour. The

form of Freud's concept of the Unconscious here derives partly from Freud's assumption of total determinism. Freud was to assert later that whenever a choice seems underived from sufficient, determining causes, this is only because we are unconscious of the factors determining our choice. The Unconscious is the place in which behaviour is determined."¹⁹

Another aspect of the Freudian conceptualization that may have to be generalized beyond the original intent before it can be fruitfully exported to considerations other than psychoanalysis is about the origins of the Unconscious. Freud saw this origin in the repressed memories, especially the traumatic ones from the early childhood. But this may not be binding for all purposes. Freud himself sought help from neurophysiology to explain the background to conscious mental activity, but the science of his times wasn't developed enough to offer such an explanation (more than a hundred years later, it still isn't). MacIntyre, describes the situation as follows,

"Suppose, however, that we concede the right to look for a background to conscious mental activity, a background that exerts a causal influence on consciousness. It is still not the case that we need to postulate the unconscious to provide such a background. For we are well aware of the existence of just such a background in the brain and the central nervous system. The realm, at once obvious and legitimate, in which to seek for causal explanations of conscious mental activity is that of the neurologist. This is where Freud himself started to look for such explanations. It was indeed precisely on account of the weaknesses and failures of the neurological explanations provided by his teachers and his contemporaries that he proceeded to advance an alternative type of explanation."²⁰

Carl Jung's concept of the *Collective Unconscious* takes another step towards making the Freudian innovation serviceable to social theories. Jung's reputation may have taken a knock or two from his dabbling in *parapsychology*, from his extravagant hypotheses about *synchronicity* and *unus mundus* and, generally, from his subscribing to a brand of mysticism, but a certain degree of plausibility as well as usefulness of the concept of the *Collective Unconscious* is undeniable.²¹

Of course, there is no collective mind anywhere in this universe. There is only the embodied individual mind. *Collective Unconscious* denotes the deepest layers of the *Unconscious* in the individual mind and this layer is common to all humans. It comes to us all the way from the primitive man and it may be thought of as some sort of *species-mind* residing within the individual mind. It is to be distinguished from the personal layer that concerned Freud. The personal layer is unique to the individual and no other individual possesses the same personal *Unconscious*. Freud, by the way, never gave his assent to the concept of *Collective Unconscious*, although he had himself alluded to something similar when he referred to "archaic vestiges" as being a part of the *Unconscious*.

Jung deployed the term *archetype* to denote the elements which together constitute the *Collective Unconscious*. *Archetype-as-such* are unformed and abstract. They are "inherited" and common to all humanity. When actualized they express themselves in *archetypal figures* such as Mother, God, Devil or the Wise Old Man, in *archetypal events* such as birth and death, and in *archetypal motifs* such as the Creation or the Deluge.²² It may be worth quoting an often-quoted passage from Jung himself,

“My thesis then, is as follows: in addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents.”²³

The plausibility of the Jungian hypothesis is enhanced by its similarity or nearness to some of the most celebrated theoretical accomplishments of the twentieth century. Most such theorizations came about much after Jung had already made his contributions. If they did not refer to Jung, it may be because of the “Jungian extravagance” I have already referred to. Anthony Stevens puts the matter as follows,

“Many other disciplines have produced concepts similar to the archetypal hypothesis, but usually without reference to Jung. For example, the primary concern of Claude Levi-Strauss and the French school of structural anthropology is with the unconscious infrastructures which they hold responsible for all human customs and institutions; specialists in linguistics maintain that although grammars differ from one another, their basic forms - which Noam Chomsky calls their deep structures - are universal (i.e. at the deepest neuropsychic level, there exists a universal [or ‘archetypal’] grammar on which all individual grammars are based);... More recently still, ethologically oriented psychiatrists have begun to study what they call psychobiological response patterns and deeply homologous neural structures which they hold responsible for the achievement of healthy or unhealthy patterns of adjustment in individual patients in response to variations in their social environment. All these concepts are compatible with the archetypal hypothesis which Jung had proposed decades earlier to virtually universal indifference.”²⁴

One may add to this list the famous book, *The Political Unconscious*, by the well-known Marxist philosopher and literary critic Fredric Jameson. Jameson stays close to Freud and Jung does not even get a mention, except that an idea or two are referred to as “Jungian” once or twice in a fairly long and daunting book.²⁵ But the very idea of a *Political Unconscious*, howsoever defined, necessarily alludes to a layer that may fall somewhere in between the personal and the collective *Unconscious*.

Intermediate layers that fall in between the personal or the immediate *Unconscious* and the deeper *Collective Unconscious* can be hypothesized more generally than Jameson has alluded. Plausibility of such a hypothesis, once again, can be claimed on the basis of its proximity to other well-established ideas. Such a layer, which can be called, not very creatively, a *cultural* or *civilizational Unconscious*, can be imagined to be ‘deposited’ in the mind over centuries or millennia of ‘socialization’ carried over from one generation to the next. The idea may also bear similarity to Bourdieu’s concept of the *habitus* denoting the system of dispositions or the personality structure that gets formed through continuous efforts of the individual to cope with the objective social *field* – the external social reality that confronts the individual and forces her to orient herself appropriately to the world.²⁶

It is in this sense – admittedly hand-waving and also carrying the risk of sounding pretentious – that I use the term, *Indian Unconscious*, and place on it the burden of explaining some of the most perplexing phenomena of Indian politics. It has the potential to offer a resolution to

“Walzer’s Paradox” if it is realized that the time-lag between liberation and religious counter-revolution noticed by Walzer is the time needed for competitive electoral politics to take roots in a newly liberated postcolonial society. The *Cultural Unconscious* does not come into political play unless stirred by politics. The kind of politics that is capable of stirring this intermediate layer of the *Unconscious* is what I have called *Depth Politics*.

Depth Politics

General notions of politics invariably emphasise the active element. Politics is, first and foremost, an intervention by a political agency into the political and the economic system and more generally into the structure and the mind of the entire society. The famous Bismarckian aphorism that defines *realpolitik* (“politics is the art of the possible”) does allude to the role of conditions in determining what is possible, but the emphasis still is on agency. While such an emphasis is necessary and appropriate, it also runs the risk of underrating the weight of “objective conditions”.

The problem does not stop at this underrating. It is further compounded by how the “objective conditions” are defined. In the understanding prevalent in the Marxist left, and more generally in much of the progressive movements, the *Cultural Unconscious* does not figure the way it should. Among other things, this results in overvaluing the role of the active element in politics. It is like holding a belief that anything is possible provided the revolutionaries were ready for it. The masses by definition are always ready for revolution. If they appear to be holding on to ideas and practices that are harmful to their own interests and inimical to their own emancipation, the blame is to be put on *false consciousness*, *hegemony* of the ruling classes, or on succumbing to the enchantments of *ideology*.

It is disconcerting that even a Perry Anderson can fall prey to such a misreading of the situation. He would have, otherwise, given more weight to the conditions under which the subjective forces of national liberation were acting in the anti-colonial struggle and in the immediate aftermath of Independence. More importantly, he would have realized why Gandhi had the upper hand in the national movement and why he was the ‘chosen one’ when it came to harnessing this ancient and passive civilization into the modern chariot of nationalism. Both by design as well as by his own inner make-up he, unlike every other competitor for leadership of the national movement, had a privileged access to the *Indian Unconscious*. He was the *analyst* as well as the *plumber* of the depths of the Indian mind.

What is disconcerting in the case of Perry Anderson is plain tragic as well as comical in the case of the Indian left. There are continuing debates about how and why the leftist revolutionaries missed the chance to lead the Indian masses and turn a mere national liberation into a full-fledged deep-plough revolution. The self-flagellation goes on because of the underlying assumption that mistakes by the “subjective forces” were the only reason why the leftist revolutionaries failed in the task assigned to them by history.

Gandhi’s was the first and the classic example of *Depth Politics* on the subcontinent. By calling up the “archaic religious emotions” he stirred the depths of the *Indian Unconscious* and mobilized the Indian masses in the service of a modernist cause without demanding of

them that they should themselves become modernised. This route was not available to the Marxist left, or for that matter to Nehru, Ambedkar or Subhash Chandra Bose.

The Nehru era lasting a decade and half in the immediate aftermath of Independence was an interlude for *Depth Politics*. A modern state was crafted by a modernist leadership that did not need to seek fresh approval from the Indian people. Elections to the parliament and the state assemblies were held regularly, but the time had not yet come for a vigorous and competitive electoral democracy. Riding on the prestige of the national movement, Nehru and his Congress party easily won the elections without any need to dip their hands into the *Indian Unconscious*. Politics was largely confined to the domain of the political and the economic system. This kind of politics is significantly different from *Depth Politics*.

With a gradual decline of the Congress hegemony and erosion of its monopoly over political power, electoral democracy, during the post-Nehru era and more so in the post-Indira decades, became increasingly vigorous and competitive. This has given rise to forces that can call up once again the “archaic religious emotions”, with the difference that the new callers lack Gandhi’s authenticity or the lofty purpose of a national liberation. Hands must be dipped once again into the *Indian Unconscious* in order to defeat the competitors to state power and to deploy the state into the service of neoliberal capitalism and naked corporate interests. A vigorous electoral democracy has become a vehicle for what Walzer has called religious counter-revolution.

It is not the case that only evil can come out of the play of *Depth Politics*. Rise of religious sectarianism and fundamentalism and fomenting of riots and mob violence are not the only fruits to be harvested. Robustly competitive electoral politics can also react back on the social structure and the cultural mind with more positive results. Oppressive social structures, customs and ideas have been challenged, diluted and destabilized by the processes of electoral democracy. It is in this sense that some scholars have talked about India’s *Silent Revolution*.²⁷ If it is possible to dip hands into the *Indian Unconscious*, it should also be possible to begin rewiring it.

The Indian left is yet to acknowledge the existence and the political weight of the *Indian Unconscious*. Obviously, it is far from devising *technologies* for rewiring it. This is not the place to work out the details of *depth political strategies* that the left must forge. But the first step would be to acknowledge the problem. It is not simply a matter of new terms and nomenclature. The point is that there has been an elephant in the political room and the left has refused to take notice. This elephant cannot be described by limbs such as false consciousness, hegemony or ideology. That would at best be a superficial description.

The problem cannot be solved by parody-like solutions. One should not simply rush to unleash new cultural movements or to put all efforts into the social movements in order to begin rewiring the civilizational mind. Such a rewiring can be best accomplished through *Depth Politics* itself. Of course, the left will have to handle this politics very differently from the way Gandhi did and obviously very differently from the diabolical forces that have used this politics to reach the seats of power.

Shallow optimism walks on the false legs of dogmatism and populism. Deeper optimism comes from facing realities as they are and finding ways to deal with them. Left must get off its false legs and grow real ones. Knowing the pathways within the *Indian Unconscious* will be of immense help in accomplishing that.

¹ Ajaz Ashraf, <http://scroll.in/article/759539/rss-leader-tarun-vijays-response-to-dadri-murder-marks-the-death-of-the-moral-indian>, October 03, 2015

² Tarun Vijay, “Why Death in Dadri Affects the National Project under PM Narendra Modi”, The Indian Express, October 02, 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/death-in-dadri/>

³ Ravish Kumar, <http://khabar.ndtv.com/news/blogs/are-you-apart-from-that-mob-in-dadri-or-part-of-it-by-ravish-kumar-1224760>, September 30, 2015; see also his blog at <http://www.ndtv.com/blog/basehara-village-carries-no-shame-1225235>, October 01, 2015

⁴ Perry Anderson, *The Indian Ideology*, Three Essays Collective, Gurgaon, Delhi, 2012

⁵ Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation – Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2015

⁶ The case of Israel would require heavy qualifications if it were to be taken as an example of liberation from foreign rule. Walzer is aware of the problem, but this issue is not relevant for our purpose.

⁷ Michael Walzer, *ibid.*, pp. xi-xii

⁸ Michael Walzer, *ibid.*, pp.70-71

⁹ Michael Walzer, *ibid.*, p. 85

¹⁰ Amartya Sen, as quoted in Walzer, *ibid.* p. 72

¹¹ Michael Walzer, *ibid.*, p. 71; the quotes within the quote are from an article by Chandra Mallampalli, “Evaluating Marxist and Post-Modernist Responses to Hindu Nationalism during the Eighties and Nineties,” *South Asia Research* 19:2 (1999)

¹² Michael Walzer, *ibid.*, p. 133

¹³ Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj, Nivedita Menon, *The Indian Ideology: Three Responses to Perry Anderson*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2015

¹⁴ Prabhat Patnaik, *Modern India sans the Impact of Capitalism*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XLVIII, No. 36, September 7, 2013

¹⁵ Sudipta Kaviraj, “On the Enchantment of the State: Indian Thought on the Role of the State in the Narrative of Modernity”, *The Trajectories of the Indian State: Politics and Ideas*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2011, p. 50

¹⁶ V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, Vintage, New York, 1973, p. 159, as quoted in Michael Walzer, *ibid.*, p. 21

¹⁷ Perry Anderson, *ibid.*, pp. 19-20

¹⁸ Perry Anderson, *ibid.*, p. 121

¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Unconscious – A Conceptual Analysis*, Revised Edition, Routledge, New York and London, 1958, 2004

²⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *ibid.*, p. 48

²¹ See, for example, Walter A. Shelburne, *Mythos and Logos in the Thought of Carl Jung: The Theory of Collective Unconscious in Scientific Perspective*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1988

²² For an easy but authoritative introduction to Jung, see also, Anthony Stevens, *Jung: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1994

²³ Carl Jung, “The Concept of the Collective Unconscious” – a lecture delivered in 1936, p. 43, *Collected Works, Vol. 9*, Routledge, London, 1959

²⁴ Anthony Stevens, *ibid.*, Chapter 2, “Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious”

²⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1981

²⁶ See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 120-22

²⁷ Christophe Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2003

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