

Book Review:

Gramsci and South Asia: Common Sense, Religion and Political Society

Deepa Sreenivas*

*Professor, Centre for Women's Studies, School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad

*Corresponding Author Email: deepa.sreenivas@uohyd.ac.in

Book Under Review: *Arun Kumar Patnaik, Gramsci and South Asia: Common Sense, Religion, and Political Society*. London and New York: Routledge, 2025. 250 pp. ISBN 978-1-032-26489-9.

Arun Kumar Patnaik, Gramsci and South Asia: Common Sense, Religion, and Political Society. London and New York: Routledge, 2025. 250 pp. ISBN 978-1-032-26489-9.

In Gramsci and South Asia, Arun Kumar Patnaik undertakes an ambitious methodological and sociological project: the decolonisation of Antonio Gramsci's theoretical framework to analyse the specific historical and cultural contours of postcolonial India. By navigating between what he terms "empty concepts" (universal boundaries) and "filled concepts" (historical specificities), Patnaik attempts to bridge the gap between Western Marxist theory and the South Asian social imaginary. While the book offers a sophisticated defence of "dialogic" secularism, it is difficult to reconcile the pursuit of an assimilationist route with the need to be attentive to the radical specificity of subaltern claims and deep-seated structural asymmetries of power.

HISTORICIZING THE GURU: THE METHODOLOGY OF SWARAJ-IN-IDEAS

Patnaik draws on K. C. Bhattacharya's "Swaraj-in-Ideas" to explore an "assimilation route" that treats Gramsci as a "real guru" whose ideas are accepted only after critical scrutiny finds an affinity with "our native genius" (Bhattacharya, as cited in Patnaik, 2025, pp. 3–4, 8). He positions his project in contrast to Aditya Nigam's strategy of "epistemic delinking", which advocates for "thinking across traditions" by treating Western sources as one among many rather than the universal yardstick of the modern world. Instead, Patnaik argues that decolonisation need not be anti-Western if it involves a dialectical engagement with the "life and mind of the masses", as envisioned by Bhattacharya.

However, while Patnaik sees a sovereign intellectual exercising the agency to choose which foreign ideals to adopt, a Fanonian reading (Fanon, 1952/2008) suggests that the very act of seeking validation from a Western "guru" risk re-inscribing a colonised psyche. Furthermore, as Gopal Guru (2013) suggests, the metaphor of the "guru" stands in tension with the subaltern project. In the Indian context, the guru often represents a traditional Brahminical hierarchy of specialised knowledge that maintains a social distance. In contrast, the organic intellectual acts as a figure of radical immanence one who does not assimilate theory from above but generates it by actively connecting intellectual knowledge with the spontaneous feelings of the masses.

This task is inherently "tricky" for the progressive intellectual, who cannot simply borrow from the existing stock of common sense. Unlike the conservative reliance on inherited "prejudices," the organic intellectual must perform the arduous work of building a bridge from the subaltern's double consciousness toward a transformative "good sense."

COMMON SENSE AND THE "TRENCHES" OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The book's core sociological contribution is its focus on "common sense" as a fragmented but foundational social imaginary. Patnaik argues that the subaltern possesses a "double consciousness" one verbal and passive, the other practical and active and that the task of the intellectual is to synthesize the subaltern's "feeling" with "knowing." While this argument focuses on large-scale political resistance and the transformation of the social imaginary through dialogue, a Foucauldian lens suggests that power is most stable where it is most "spontaneous" and decentralised operating within the minute, domestic details of the kitchen, family, and caste-based socialites.

In emphasising the “good sense” found in folk traditions, one must also remain alert to how dominant patriarchal and Brahminical elites selectively rearticulate specific elements from the sedimented “inventory” of common sense (drawing on Gramsci, via Hall, 1979). Through this discursive realignment, micro-spaces of power may effectively domesticate subaltern resistance long before it reaches the level of a “national-popular” movement, suggesting that a purely pedagogical intervention may leave the underlying capillary structures of domination untouched.

SECULARISM, AYODHYA, AND THE CUNNING OF RECOGNITION

A pivotal moment in this analysis was the legal trajectory culminating in the 2019 Supreme Court verdict. Patnaik distinguishes between the 2010 High Court judgment, which he lauds as a model of mutual sacrifice and shared sovereignty, and the final 2019 verdict, which he interprets as an act of “remedial justice.” By prioritising the evidence of faith found in the religious common sense of devotees over strict property titles, Patnaik argues that the Supreme Court moved toward a form of pragmatic closure—one that sought to heal historical wounds by validating the “intrinsic faith” of the Hindu majority while reinstating the institutional rights of Muslims through land allocation. While Patnaik sees this as a necessary engagement with the “native genius” of popular consciousness, a counter-perspective such as Kapur’s (2024) analysis points to a dynamic akin to what Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) calls the “cunning of recognition.” Kapur suggests that the Court’s claim to procedural neutrality may inadvertently function as a mask for a majoritarian project, one that disciplines religious identity to serve a modernist nationalist script and risks marginalizing the very subaltern imaginaries the dialogue seeks to protect.

THE BAULS AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

In the search for a “positive” secularism that transcends the sterile boundaries of the state, Patnaik turns to the syncretic religious world of the Bauls of Bengal. As several scholars have highlighted (Roy, 1983; Bhaumik, 2019), Bengal has a centuries-old history in which popular religions practiced by the Bauls, Kartabhajas, and Fakirs emerged to interrogate Brahmanical and Islamic orthodoxy. Patnaik identifies in this “little tradition” a profound religious humanism that historically facilitated social and spatial mobility across hardened communal boundaries. He views the Baul’s philosophy of *Bartamanpanthi* (presentism) and the “impersonal God” as a site of “spiritual democracy”—a space where the subaltern rejects birth-based pride in favour of an inclusive, heart-to-heart contact with *Amar Maner Manush* (the man of my heart).

Crucially, however, this recovery must also account for the ways in which popular traditions are appropriated, sanitised, or drawn into dominant articulations of the culture. As Patnaik sharply observes, there is a telling “ideological void” in Tagore’s appreciation of the Bauls: while he celebrated their abstract God and “spiritual freedom,” he remained conspicuously silent on the parallel Namasudra movement demanding “political freedom” through temple entry. This omission reveals the Bhadrakol

preference for safe, aestheticised dissent over the confrontational politics of Dalit assertion. While the Bauls practiced a lower-class religious radicalism that mocked the “pedantry” of the elite, such “virile, socially critical urban folk culture” faced a process of silencing as the elite middle class, influenced by Victorian moral values, marginalised these popular forms (Banerjee 1989, p. 15). As wandering mendicants who renounced the formal observance of caste and granted women equal status, the Bauls offered a lived reform that went far beyond the nineteenth-century bhadrakol’s intellectual debates. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, the earthy social protest associated with the Bauls was often distorted or appropriated by elite nationalist and reformist projects, illustrating the tension between the subaltern’s radical “good sense” and the dominant society’s tendency to sanitise the very traditions it purports to celebrate (Urban, 1999).

KANDHAMAL AND THE ASYMMETRY OF RECONCILIATION

The analysis of the 2007–08 Kandhamal riots present a “social dialogue” model where public confessions function as a Gandhian “broom” to sweep away communal hatred, allowing Adivasis and Dalit Christians to forge a new “historic bloc” based on mutual sacrifice. However, a counter-perspective indicates that the violence was rooted less in a crisis of consciousness and more in deep-seated socioeconomic competition over Scheduled Tribe (ST) status and land rights. Within this context, confessions associated with reconciliation are problematised by documented reports of coercive reconversion rituals—Christians were tonsured, forced to burn Bibles, and required to undergo *shuddhikaran* ceremonies to be allowed to return to their villages (USCIRF, 2009; Nainar & Uma, 2011). Indeed, the chapter’s own evidence of Christians reconverting to Hinduism under threat of life converges with these reports, suggesting that what appears as reconciliation can also carry the dimensions of a tactical surrender necessitated by majoritarian pressure. While the dialogic model offers an ethically profound pathway for peace, there is an inherent risk in underestimating how the dominant social imaginary can be weaponized to pacify rather than liberate subaltern radicalism.

Despite these structural risks, Patnaik’s work forces a necessary rethinking of the secular-religious divide in South Asia. By choosing an “assimilation route” that prioritizes the “pedagogical” transformation of consciousness, the book offers a powerful vision of how theory might finally breathe through the “life and mind of the masses.” Ultimately, the book’s enduring value lies in its courageous and honest admission of the “voids” in secular imaginary. By proposing a path toward spiritual democracy, it opens a site for productive contestation where the hope for a more inclusive social imaginary can finally challenge the historical reality of the majoritarian disciplining. *Gramsci and South Asia* offer a compelling, if optimistic, roadmap for the organic intellectual: to sift through the “contradictory common sense” of the masses and recover the “good sense” necessary for a new hegemony. However, as the Ayodhya and Kandhamal case studies reveal, the boundary between “recovering” subaltern agency and “appropriating” it for a majoritarian project is perilously thin. Patnaik’s “dialogue” is ethically necessary,

but without a structural safeguard against the “cunning of recognition”, it risks becoming a mechanism for pacification rather than for liberation.

REFERENCES

1. Banerjee, S. (1989). *The parlour and the streets: Elite and popular culture in nineteenth century Calcutta*. Seagull Books.
2. Bhaumik, S. (2019). Understanding the Religious Worlds of the Subalterns: An Analysis of Syncretic Culture in Bengal. *Summerhill ILAS Review*, 25(2), 38–44.
3. Fanon, F. (2008). *Black Skin, White Masks* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1952)
4. Guru, G. (2013). Limits of the organic intellectual: A Gramscian reading of Ambedkar. In C. Zene (Ed.) *The political philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B. R. Ambedkar: Itineraries of Dalits and subalterns*. Routledge.
5. Hall, S. (1979). The Great Moving Right Show. *Marxism Today*, 23(1): 14–20.
6. Kapur, R. (2024). The Ayodhya case, freedom of religion, and the making of modernist “Hinduism”. *Contemporary South Asia*, 32(1), 10–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2023.2227127>
7. Nainar, V., & Uma, S. (2011). *Waiting for justice: A report of National People's Tribunal on Kandhamal*. National Solidarity Forum.
8. Patnaik, A. K. (2025). *Gramsci and South Asia: Common sense, religion, and political society*. Routledge.
9. Povinelli, E. A. (2002). *The cunning of recognition: Indigenous alterities and the making of Australian multiculturalism*. Duke University Press.
10. Roy, A. (1983). *The Islamic syncretistic tradition in Bengal*. Princeton University Press.
11. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2009). *Annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*. <https://www.uscifr.gov>
12. Urban, H. B. (1999). The politics of madness: The construction and manipulation of the ‘Baul’ image in modern Bengal. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 22(1), 13–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/008564099008723358>