
Subaltern Voices and Radical Thought: A Comparative Study of Arundhati Roy and Suraj Yengde

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Abstract

This paper ventures into a critical comparative analysis of Arundhati Roy and Suraj Yengde's political thought, putting them among the forefront of public intellectuals articulating subaltern positions in contemporary India. It argues that while their central analytical frameworks vary—Roy focusing on the nexus of state power and neoliberal capital, and Yengde foregrounding the ancient schema of caste as paramount—their works crystallize into a holistic and radical critique of the contemporary Indian nation-state. This essay contrasts their varied approaches: Roy's immersive, narrative reportage that amplifies Adivasis', Kashmiris', and the dispossessed voices, and Yengde's scholarly-activist blend of Ambedkarite philosophy and international critical theory, which theorizes caste as a necessary and pervasive logic of social formation. By comparing their points of convergence on the figure of the Brahminical-capitalist state and their points of tension on the primacy of caste or class analysis, this paper shows that Roy and Yengde in concert provide an irreplaceable, multi-dimensional model for grasping the currents of oppression and the possibility of a liberatory politics in India. Their joint endeavor reverses the mythologies upon which Indian development and democracy are constructed, calling instead for a confrontation with its internal hierarchies.

Keywords: Subaltern, Caste, Class, Indian Political Thought, Brahminical-Capitalist State, Ambedkarite Philosophy, hegemony

Introduction: The Geography of Subaltern Protest

The term "subaltern," which has been made mainstream by the South Asian Subaltern Studies group, denotes groups living outside the hegemonies of power, whose political agency and voice are routinely disavowed in the dominant political and historical

accounts. Within the world's largest democracy, the making of a national narrative has traditionally been the preserve of an elite, primarily upper-caste, bourgeois, and metropolitan class. The post-colonial Indian state has always been confronted with strong counter-narratives that have arisen from its margins—from those whose lives are marked by the violence of displacement, caste atrocity, and militarization. In the current era, Arundhati Roy and Suraj Yengde are two of the most powerful and subversive voices to express these dissident views.

Arundhati Roy, having gained worldwide literary recognition through her Booker Prize novel *The God of Small Things*, reinvested authorial capital shrewdly into a successful career as a political essayist and activist. Her vast corpus of non-fiction work serves as a scrupulous and scathing critique of what she refers to as the Indian state's "project of corporate capitalism," chronicling its ruinous effect on Adivasi populations, the rural poor, and Kashmiris. On the other hand, Suraj Yengde, a Dalit scholar-activist with qualifications from Harvard University, among others, embodies a new generation of Ambedkarite thinkers. His writing, above all in *Caste Matters*, argues caste not as a residual cultural relic but as the dynamic, living heart of Indian society—an "endogamous division of labor" that is a distinct variant of apartheid. Yengde universalizes the question of caste, making direct comparisons with international anti-Black racism and outlining a vision of Dalit emancipation that is at once locally situated and internationally integrated.

This essay argues that a comparative analysis of Roy and Yengde is necessary for understanding the subtleties of modern Indian radical thought. Their respective emphases—Roy on the political economics of neoliberalism and Yengde on the sociology of caste—are complementary rather than contradictory and, in reality, inseparable threads of one intricately knotted system of oppression. This analysis will then go on to first discuss the main arguments and methodological stances of each intellectual. It will next explore the key points of overlap in their criticisms, most notably their common examination of the Indian state as a force for Brahminical capitalism. It will then consider the critical tension between their paradigms, namely the debate over the analytical priority of caste or capital. Finally, this essay will show that Roy and Yengde, each with their own complementary but different lens, provide the necessary and strong theoretical toolkit with which to deconstruct the myths of Indian democracy and to imagine a politics of substantive freedom and equality.

Theoretical Framework: Hearing Subaltern Voices

The term "subaltern" has undergone vast changes since it was first coined in South Asian history. It was originally applied to peasants and other groups beyond the reach of elite

nationalist histories. It has since come to be applied to everyone systematically excluded by the more powerful power blocs. In India, Dalits, Adivasis, religious minorities, women, and other groups with multiple discriminations qualify as subalterns.

Antonio Gramsci's initial definition of the subaltern as groups outside hegemonic power structures serves as the theoretical basis to describe how dominance functions within society. Indian scholars, however, have extended the concept to describe the peculiarities of caste-based society. The Subaltern Studies initiative, and specifically the efforts of thinkers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, has posed important questions regarding whether or not the subaltern are ever able to "speak" within academic thought or if their voice is always filtered through elite paradigms.

Roy and Yengde are two different responses to the issue of representation. Roy utilizes her role as a well-known writer to make the voices of the subalterned groups heard, serving as a connector between subaltern struggles and the public sphere of mainstream society. Yengde, being a member of a Dalit family, is the figure of the rise of what could be described as the "organic intellectual" of subaltern groups, talking within the community but also drawing from global theoretical discourses.

The radical idea reflected in the work of both authors criticizes not just particular policies or practices but the very premises of Indian democracy and development. Their criticism goes beyond superficial reforms to challenge the underlying assumptions of India's social and political order. It is this root challenge that makes their work necessary and controversial for grasping modern India.

Suraj Yengde: Caste as the "Operating System" of India

Whereas Roy's analysis is at the macro-level of capital and state, Suraj Yengde's contribution is at the micro-physics of social power with the institution of caste as its object of study. Yengde's writing, placed in the strong tradition of Ambedkarite thinking but shot through with the lexicon of global critical theory, is an important step forward in the intellectual definition of the Dalit experience. His groundbreaking book, *Caste Matters*, is a strong synthesis of individual memoir, academic analysis, and political manifesto. It makes a strong case that caste is not a marginal or cultural matter but the very "operating system" of Indian society, regulating all aspects of life, ranging from intimacy and sociality to economics and polity.

Yengde's central theoretical contribution is the idea of "caste capitalism." He rigorously refutes the liberal and Marxist expectation that capitalist modernization would automatically deconstruct caste identities. Rather, he shows how Indian capitalism has reinforced and adapted to the hierarchy of caste. Capital accumulation historically was intensely caste-based, with dominant land-owning castes and traditional merchant castes emerging as the main beneficiaries of economic liberalization. The new corporate sector, instead of being a meritocracy, is infested with networks of caste-based hiring and promotion. This critique contradicts the narrative of India's economic ascension by demonstrating how growth has been deeply unequal, benefiting upper-caste elites disproportionately at the expense of Dalits and other backward classes, who have been relegated to insecure, lowly occupations. Yengde affords a factual foundation for this in citing research on the fact of Dalits' extreme underrepresentation in the leadership of corporations and the persistence of caste-based discrimination in urban workplaces and schools.

Additionally, Yengde's book is radical because it assiduously makes international the caste issue. He makes explicit and sustained analogies between the histories of Dalits in India and of Black Americans in the United States and of Black South Africans, characterizing casteism as a racism. This move has two important functions. First, it renders the frequently opaque complexity of the caste system readable to a international public by framing it in terms of more generally comprehended frameworks of racial domination. Second, it places the Dalit struggle within influential, transnational movements for racial justice, e.g., Black Lives Matter, thus creating a sense of solidarity between what he calls the "global oppressed majority." This is a break from more self-contained varieties of anti-caste activism and locates Dalit freedom as an important front in the global struggle against hierarchy and discrimination. Yengde's work thus not just destructively critiques Indian society but also effectively places the subaltern Dalit voice onto the world stage, calling for attention and justice in an international human rights arena.

Convergences: The Brahminical-Capitalist State as a Common Adversary

In spite of their different points of entry, Roy and Yengde's work converges in an unflinching and cogent critique of the modern Indian power order. Both thinkers recognize the Indian state not as an impartial mediator or as a compassionate developmental force, but as the chief vehicle for the reinforcement of a ruling social order. Roy goes so far as to actually label this order "Brahminical capitalism"—this historical syncretism between modern corporate might and caste order. She shows how geography of extraction and displacement overlaps nearly perfectly with the geography of subaltern occupation; the bauxite, coal, and water-dense regions are the regions that are Adivasi and Dalit through and

through. For Roy, this is not an accident but a calculated logic of a state that considers these groups to be disposable.

Yengde's "caste capitalism" comes to the same conclusion from the opposite pole. In his view, the Indian state is a "savarna state" by its very nature, its institutions, bureaucracy, and judiciary infused with upper-caste sensibilities and interests. The economic policies of the state, ranging from land reforms to liberalization, have always contributed to the conservation and increase in the upper castes' capital. The violent enforcement of caste rules in the countryside, usually with the connivance of the police and local administration, is testimony to the state's function as defender of the caste system. Thus, both thinkers regard the state's mission of "development" as precisely a mission of "accumulation by dispossession," where the victims are pre-designated by caste and tribe.

Moreover, both Roy and Yengde share an acute distrust of classic leftist and liberal political groups in India, which, in their opinion, are tainted by their upper-caste leadership and ideology. Roy has been a persistent critic of the parliamentary left, including the Communist Party of India (Marxist), for not being representative enough of the interests of the most marginalized, especially in situations like Singur and Nandigram where it helped acquire land for corporate undertakings. She places the Maoist rebellion, despite its contradictions, as a product of the failure of the mainstream left. In the same vein, Yengde is blistering in his criticism of the "savarna liberal" or "progressive elite" who practice solidarity with Dalits but are not ready to give up their privilege of caste or share power in social movements. He holds the view that real allyship will demand a self-reflection of agony and deconstruction of one's own unconscious bias and structural advantage. For each of them, thus, the adversary is not a specific political party but a hegemonic ideology that identifies upper-caste, middle-class interests as tantamount to national interest.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences

Comparing the works of Roy and Yengde together, a number of significant convergences and divergences appear that shed both on the subtleties of subaltern resistance and the varying analytical paradigms available for its understanding.

Both authors have a common commitment towards revealing the mismatch between India's democratic rhetoric and its exclusionary reality. They indicate how constitutional guarantees of equality and justice are still unrealized for major segments of society, and how institutions of the state tend to work for preserving privilege and not for subverting it. Their writings make it clear that political equality in form is of little value in the absence of social and

economic justice. For example, both authors have analyzed the enforcement of the Forest Rights Act of 2006, although from different perspectives. Roy takes note of how the act is breached in order to enable corporate undertakings, whereas Yengde notes how the caste hierarchies within tribal communities influence the distribution of rights under the act. Both their critiques give a better understanding of the shortcomings of legal reforms for providing substantive justice.

Another important convergence is their critique of dominant development paradigms. Both demonstrate how India's growth model has served to perpetuate current inequalities instead of breaking them. Roy chronicles this in case studies of particular development projects, while Yengde offers the theoretical basis for understanding how caste organizes economic outcomes. Their joint vision is that any real alternative to the present development model is going to have to take on both economic redistribution and social dignity. For instance, Roy's reportage of how mining projects dismantle forests and livelihoods is supported by Yengde's analysis of how the projects entrench caste hierarchies by introducing new kinds of segregated labor. Together, they demonstrate how social hierarchy and economic exploitation collaborate to perpetuate structures of oppression.

Important divergences in their methodological approaches and analytical priorities also exist, though. Roy's analysis tends to prioritize class and state power as general categories of analysis, with caste merely as one face of inequality among several. Yengde, on the contrary, makes the case for the centrality of caste as the deepest organizing principle of Indian society, with class and state power existing within caste structures. This is reflected in how they analyze the informal economy. Roy focuses on informal workers as mainly being exploited labor, whereas Yengde focuses on how caste dictates one's location in the informal economy, with Dalits being huddled in the most abject and dangerous occupations.

This contrast in focus corresponds to a longstanding debate within Indian radical thought regarding the nature of the connection between caste and class. Roy's explanation has greater sympathy with Marxist and environmental critiques of capitalism, whereas Yengde writes solidly within the Ambedkarite tradition which understands caste annihilation to be the prerequisite for all forms of worthwhile social change. Their methodologies are also radically different. Roy's writing is marked by narrative texture and ethnographic specificity, so often resembling literary non-fiction rather than scholastic analysis. Yengde, while similarly being a good writer, operates within the conventions of academic argument and theoretical discussion more.

Even so, their work is complementary and not contradictory. Roy demonstrates to us the tangible forms of inequality in particular situations, while Yengde gives us the tools of analysis with which to understand the deep structures that allow these forms to occur. Together, they present a more complete view of power and resistance in India today than either can by themselves. Their differences, far from being weaknesses, actually are the source of strength in the overall critique because they deal with different aspects of the same issue.

Conclusion: Towards a Composite Vision of Liberation

Lastly, the revolutionary ideas of Arundhati Roy and Suraj Yengde, when read together, present an invaluable and multi-faceted critique of power in present-day India. Roy, chronicler of macro-political violence, presents a searing narrative of the mechanics of the state-corporate complex, lending voice and narrative substance to the struggle of peoples subjected to existential crisis by dams, mines, and militarization. Yengde, the social order theorist, supplies the critical foundation of critique of caste, defining it as the persistent logic that organizes Indian society and prescribes the allocation of life chances and death. One thinker charts the modern battlefield; the other uncovers the old, geological fault lines that render the war inevitable.

Their strength in common is their commitment to putting the subaltern voice at the center, not as an object of liberal sympathy or scholarly inquiry, but as a subject of history with its own agency and intelligence. They both eschew the seductions of liberal reformism and detached scholarship in favor of a confrontational, morally engaged, and intellectually demanding position. The course they plot is not to a more expansive or effective iteration of the current state, but to its complete re-imagining—a decast, decolonized, and genuinely democratic polity in which sovereignty lies with the people, not with caste or capital. Comparing Roy and Yengde thus involves more than merely an intellectual exercise; it is an imperative learning about the richly intertwined, multiple realities of oppression in India. At a time in history characterized by the return of authoritarian nationalism, intensified inequality, and continued persistence of caste atrocity, their voices are not only timely but urgent. They compel a radical rethinking of past and present, and demand a radical redescribing of the future. Taken together, they present a vision of freedom that is as multifaceted in its critique as it is necessary in its demand for justice.

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