

Book Review: *India Today*

Stuart Corbridge, John Harriss, and Craig Jeffrey, *India Today: Economy, Politics, and Society*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013). ISBN 978-0-74566112-4.

Despite the unimaginative title, Corbridge, Harriss, and Jeffrey's *India Today* provides the reader with a robust literature review of social science research on India over the last decade. The book's chapters are organized as a series of questions grouped into three parts examining the economy, politics, and society of contemporary India. While some of the questions are amorphous (e.g. "How Much Have Things Changed for Indian Women?" or "Has India's Democracy Been a Success?") the chapters do generally provide useful topical overviews.

Although the book offers few fresh insights that will not already be known to experts on the country, the overviews may be useful to comparativists who wish to incorporate India as part of a large set of case studies. The text sets out to balance the tasks of presenting the reader with an in-depth, single-country case study and situating India within a broader comparative framework. Despite this promise, however, the book mainly delivers an in-depth case study with occasional nods to comparable cases in large, emerging market countries.

In the economy section, the authors do deserve credit for holding the line against the dominant economic periodization, which privileges the "triumph of liberalization" narrative in popular explanations of contemporary Indian economy. However, the discussion of growth, inequality, and poverty, which relies heavily on an income or consumption-based conception of poverty, will be dissatisfying to many scholars. The 2014 recalibration of purchasing power parity for the rupee indicates far less extreme poverty (approximately "only" 100 million citizens) than previously estimated (approximately 400 million citizens), casting doubt on the discourse of underperformance presented by the authors. This recalibration of purchasing power parity comes at the same time that the World Bank is also recalibrating its own absolute poverty line and thus generating further uncertainty about the number of absolute poor. Of course, as many other biopolitical indicators (e.g. infant mortality, malnutrition rates, access to clean water, etc.) have remained relatively constant, the reliance on aggregate poverty statistics based on income or consumption data should be regarded skeptically. The authors' discussion of poverty and inequality would have been more resilient had the authors defended a non-income-based approach (e.g. Amartya Sen's capabilities enhancement approach) to understanding and addressing poverty and structural violence. The authors discuss non-income-based metrics in later chapters, but in the first part of their book they seem merely to rehash the Great Indian Poverty Debate of the late 1990s that relied on income or consumption-based conceptualizations of poverty.

The authors' tendency to revisit old debates grounded upon flawed conceptualizations or questionable empirical data results in fruitless subsections of the book. For example, the authors wage a trenchant critique of the quality of survey data used to calculate India's

poverty headcount. Official poverty surveys are ordered annually by India's Planning Commission and collected by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO). The authors illustrate that the data collected: 1) measures consumption poverty instead of caloric deficiency as it is charged to do; 2) is prone to annual agricultural output fluctuations which can dramatically impact who is defined as living below the relative poverty line; 3) may rely on diachronically incompatible data collection methods (e.g. interchangeably using a weekly, monthly, or annual reporting period on consumption patterns); 4) is incompatible with national accounts data; 5) results in a definition of poverty which is even harsher than the World Bank's; and 6) suffers from a general lack of ethnographic scrutiny (52-54). Ironically, after showing that the data may be wildly inaccurate, the authors continue working with it, and rationalize their decision by saying, "So long as estimates of poverty are produced consistently and effectively over time we can say something useful about trends. Hopefully, we can then explain these trends with reference to various causal factors: that is, we can aim to tell a plausible story about why the incidence of poverty is declining (or, on the other hand, getting worse)" (55). It is apparent that the authors lack the courage to discard contaminated survey data even when their own critical analysis informs them that the data is not collected consistently, may be wildly inaccurate (on the order of several hundred million people defined as poor or not poor), and lacks sufficient transparency to indicate that it was collected effectively. Instead, the authors move forward by reviewing various proposed corrections to the contaminated data and an examination of general trends across different estimates. The authors ultimately decide to create a causal narrative about poverty trends using India's official poverty estimates prior to 2011 on the basis of "convenience" (56).

The sections on politics and society are stronger than the discussion of the economy. In fact, given the primacy of politics over economics implied by the authors, the politics section should have preceded the (rather speculative) economic discussion. Overall, the authors present the Indian state in a balanced manner which lauds its achievements while discussing corruption, weak capacity, and elite capture. The authors exhibit appropriate skepticism about the supposedly interlinked demand for liberal economics and liberal politics by India's business elites. The ideological and pragmatic factions of the contemporary Hindutva movement are portrayed with nuance and distinguished from banal Hindu nationalism and general hooliganism. The chapter on Maoism explains the tenacity of the movement as well as the internal tensions which have emerged as it has spread throughout the "red corridor." The chapter on civil society chips away at Partha Chatterjee's thesis on "political society." However, it fails to discuss the ways in which civil society is used by the Indian state to depoliticize educated elites (e.g. in Jammu and Kashmir) thereby implicitly accepting a key tenet of the Lockean/Hegelian concept they seek to reconfigure.

In conclusion, *India Today* might be useful as a supplementary overview or recommended reference text for undergraduate classes on the contemporary political economy of India. However, the book is unlikely to fully engage undergraduate students or incite deeper inquiry, and it would most likely need to be heavily supplemented with ethnographic studies and newsmagazine articles.

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