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Srirupa Roy. *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. xiii + 248 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4001-0; \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3984-7.



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Srirupa Roy's *Beyond Belief* is a superb contribution to the study of postcolonial nationalism and the complex lives of the postcolonial Indian nation-state. The study of Indian nationalism, in its anticolonial and postcolonial variants, has arguably been dominated, if not monopolized, by historians of India and South Asia. Debates about the character of Indian nationalism and the Indian state have typically, if not exclusively, cleaved along certain axes: the abidingness of Indian state structures from precolonial times through colonialism and after independence versus the social and cultural ruptures effected through the agency of the colonial state; the collisions between local elites and colonial powers in influencing events in the Indian subcontinent versus the violent shaping of subjectivities by colonial and national power; the calculations of regional and local factions as the basis of agglomerated Indian identities versus the exclusionary nature of mainstream imaginings of the nation that seek to consolidate Indians under the sign of a religious or cultural majority.

Srirupa Roy refocuses discussion by reframing the problematic of Indian postcolonial nationalism in terms of the link between the nation and the state. Similarly, Roy's theoretical understanding of the categories of nation, state, and nation-state seeks to eschew the dichotomy between explanations that center on the func-

tioning of institutional state structures and theories that locate the appeal of nationalism in its emotive resonance. Instead, Roy centers her analysis on the practices of the postcolonial Indian state, that is, the concrete mechanisms by which the Indian state entrenches its own authority through expected as well as unexpected and seemingly counterintuitive strategies. She thus goes beyond dominant perspectives on Indian nationalism and competing theories of nation-state formation, even as she engages with these various frameworks in offering a highly original analysis of the modes in which the state in independent India could claim to speak for and about the Indian nation. Her focus is largely on the operations of the Indian state in the first two decades after independence, associated with the vision of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India, though her reading also traverses later decades. Roy's analysis displays a deep and wide knowledge about the field of Indian nationalism and, more broadly, nationalism, as well as theories of nationalism, the state, and the nation-state.

Roy takes as her object of inquiry four domains and distinct forms of "encounters with the nation-state in Nehruvian India" (p. 28): the form and content of state-produced documentaries, which reflected the vision and voice of the Indian state; the rituals of national celebrations, specifically, the annual state-managed event

of Republic Day, which is celebrated on January 26; institutional discourses of science and technology that were central to the post-independence developmentalist project in India; and the planned steel townships of post-colonial India as embodiments of an ideal and idealized national space. Roy approaches these sites, where the life of the state was (and is) manifest, as a political scientist but also as anthropologist, historian, and cultural critic. The research methods that she employs encompass archival and ethnographic research, interviews, and participant observation, as well as close reading and critical analysis of visual texts. Roy's engagement with each of the spheres of the life of the postcolonial state is generally structured around three related arguments, each of which warrants a brief description.

The first claim is that the emphasis on the diversity of the Indian nation is central to the project of the postcolonial Indian nation-state. Contrary to the assumption that national authority should produce a vision of the nation as monolithic or homogeneous, the postcolonial Indian state, in fact, strongly emphasized India's subnational diversity. The identification of India's natural diversity was accompanied by the attendant claim that the Indian state was the only authority that could manage this unruly diversity, at once India's strength and potential weakness. The "unity-in-diversity master code" (p. 19), as Roy terms it, was a reflection of state will and agency, not merely a preexisting condition that the state simply protected.

Secondly, Roy describes how the Nehruvian state along with its constant invocation of the deficient, lacking, and needy nation and national citizen—both of whom necessarily required the state—also often drew attention to its own failures. The reflexive Indian nation-state, if one may call it that, did not, however, call into question its own significance or authority. Rather, as with the paradox of a state vision that emphasized a highly differentiated rather than unified model of national belonging, the candid admission of failure further underscored the critical necessity of the Indian state for the good of the Indian nation and people. The contradictory pull of these respective logics meant that the Indian citizen was, in part, at least, defined as a creature made by the state rather than the source of its sovereignty. Inherent in the statist vision, then, was a tension between the imperatives of participatory and democratic citizenship and those of an obligation to fulfill the demands of the Indian state toward a project of nation-making.

The third main argument that Roy presents is that the postcolonial Indian state sought to locate itself above and

beyond the chaotic, sordid, and unruly world of politics. The state was a transcendental entity that alone could set the rules and parameters—in short, manage—the maelstrom of problems that give rise to the messy negotiations of everyday political life. To continue with the metaphor, the state's self-description of its capacity for managerial rationality, however, was also a delegation of authority and a projection of responsibility onto the Indian citizen.

The complex interplay of these forces did not necessarily take shape in the social life of Indian inhabitants in any uniform manner. The exercise of state authority itself was profoundly contradictory and fractured. Contested in every domain, the consolidation of state authority was inseparable from historical contingencies and negotiated in each instance. Yet, as Roy shows, through their successes as much as their failures, these forms of state practice managed to reproduce and embed themselves in the matrix of Indian public and political existence. This is the story of Indian postcolonial nationalism and the postcolonial Indian state that Roy seeks to tell.

In chapter 1, Roy turns to the documentaries produced by the Films Division of India, a state agency created under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in 1948, which has, in half a century, produced a remarkable figure of "over eight thousand documentaries, short films, and newsreels, or an average of one new film every three days, making it the single largest producer of documentary films in the world" (p. 34). With independence, the political vectors of decolonization dictated the agenda, form, and content of the films. In both form and content, the films reproduced and authorized a state vision with all its inherent ambiguities. Culture, for instance, was equated with discretely defined communities, parceled out as an identifiable resource, with the state (in this case as the Films Division) tasked with the role of protecting it and bringing it to the entire nation. The Muslim minority was depicted as a special case, one whose difference had to be carefully framed so as not to destabilize the wider frame of national identity itself. Through standard images utilized repeatedly across films and the use of regionally and culturally unmarked and Anglicized "voice[s] from nowhere" (p. 57) for voice-overs, the state authorized a select vision of Indian identity even as it reiterated its position as the ultimate arbiter of that knowledge. The state did not hesitate to reflect on its failures in this endeavor. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting set up the Chanda committee in 1967 to evaluate the impact of the work of the Films Division. But, as Roy argues in her reading of the recommendations of the committee, the effect of drawing attention to

the failures of the state was a reinforcement of the need for more state intervention.

Chapter 2 deals with the Republic Day parades, held each year on January 26 in the national capital. Roy points out that “it is a day that celebrates the state as much as, or even more than, the national community.... And so, the premier national day of India is the day of the state’s birth” (p. 71). In the carefully orchestrated display of the nation as constituted of its many cultures, the state speaks to the necessity of its own role. Spectacular and powerful, the state presents its militaristic face as the guardian of Indian diversity. It reminds the people of its role as broker between culture and economy in leading India along on the path of progress. Demonstrating how the themes of corporate advertising replicate and take up the tropes of the Republic Day celebrations, Roy also emphasizes how the performance is a solemn reminder to the Indian populace about its obligations to the state. The need for the state is reinforced even as the state reminds the citizens that it needs them.

The state vision is also at work in the institutional discourses of science and technology, examined in chapter 3. Roy reads the import of Nehru’s decision to place science beyond the purview of politics as a function of the ambivalences of the postcolonial condition. Both the state and people/nation were defined, on the one hand, in terms of the needs or lack that science could fulfill. Toward this end, developing “scientific expertise” or scientific capital was the task of the hour. It was this goal that dictated the establishment of scientific institutes after independence. At the same time, the Indian population had to be made receptive to science through the inculcation of the “scientific temper.” Roy creatively reads the tension between these understandings of science fostered by the state. Even as the state painted a grim picture of the troubles that needed to be solved by science and, relatedly, pointed to the limits of its own problem-solving capacities, it “authorized new and different forms of state intervention” (pp. 131-132). As Roy also shows, the authorization of science (and of the state as science) beyond politics also meant an insulation of science from the masses and from the ambit of democratic politics. The discourses of science and technology or techno-science constructed the Indian citizen in two “suprapolitical” (p. 132) avatars, the scientific expert beyond politics and the docile peasant beneficiary of projects of scientific and technological development.

In chapter 4, Roy examines the peculiar nowhereness of the steel townships of India as a function of the partic-

ular perspective and unique objectives of the Nehruvian nation-state. Her focus in the chapter is on the “political stakes of the narrative of the steel town as failed promise” (p. 135). The towns did not turn out to be the beacons of industrial modernity as was hoped and expected of them. Nor did they take root as embodiments of a pan-national identity that could coexist with and subsume Indian cultural identities in all their diversity. And the towns were not models of the civic life expected of new Indian citizens. Roy points out that the failure of the towns was attributed largely to the breakdown of planning and implementation. Such instrumentalist and rationalist explanations, as Roy shows, refused to take into account the complex causes of conflicts of social class, income disparities, social hierarchies, housing problems, and shortage of resources. Ironically, these problems, which the paradigm of the steel township was expected to solve, were engendered or reproduced by that very paradigm. The townships also conflated the role of the citizen with that of the worker, an assumption that persisted through proposed solutions to the townships’ problems. “[T]he critique of existing plans,” Roy argues, “was simultaneously an authorization of the planning enterprise and the rationalities, technologies, ideologies, and practices of nation-state building” (p. 149). Here, as in earlier chapters, Roy compellingly demonstrates how in the active and ongoing making of the nation and continuous inscription of its own authority, the Indian state had to work with the legacy of colonialism yet was able to refashion that legacy into a distinctly postcolonial authority. Even the challenges to its authority, for instance, by secessionist or disenfranchised groups spoke its vocabulary and employed its dominant tropes, consequently reinforcing its visibility and salience *as state* if not as an always *effective state*.

There are two minor grounds on which Roy’s analysis might be critiqued. The first pertains to the differential lives, half-lives, and afterlives of the practices of the Indian state in the lives of its inhabitants. Roy clarifies early in the text that her focus is “on the production rather than the reception of nation-statist discourses and practices” (p. 22), with due acknowledgment of the unevenness of state power as it makes its presence felt in various theaters of social life. Roy also points to the explanatory limits of the category of “belief” in accounting for the power or endurance of the sentiment of nationalism. Roy does at some points in the narrative reproduce and invoke citizens’ accounts of their perceptions of the exercise of statist practices. However, a somewhat more detailed examination of such accounts, how they

might vary according to configurations of social class, caste, gender, regional, or linguistic community, and how the Nehruvian state cognized these receptions in recalibrating its practices could further enrich this excellent work. A second suggestion pertains to further developing the innovative theoretical perspective offered in the work. In this regard, a brief comparative analysis of how Roy's theoretical framework differs from other perspectives on nationalism or statist identification that *also* seek to go beyond subjectivist and objectivist frames may be helpful.

In sum, the book is an excellent and invaluable addition to the literature on Indian nationalism and the Indian nation-state as well as an important contribution to theories of nationalism, the state, and nation-state, and postcolonial studies. Lucid and concise, the book is extremely well written. Different methodological and disciplinary perspectives are employed in the text with rigor and carefulness to enrich one another. The aesthetics of state-authored film documentaries, for instance, are brilliantly analyzed with reference to the political economy of decolonization and the anxieties of a newly minted postcoloniality. Similarly, Roy's incisive understanding of the assumptions underlying the paradigm of planning

illuminates how explanations about religious violence in the steel township of Rourkela in March 1964 could ignore the fact that the social structures *shaped by the plan of the town* might be a possible cause of religious conflict.

Finally, the book also opens up new areas of inquiry. The link between nation and state calls for detailed inquiry by scholars. As the Indian state has embraced a neoliberal vision of governance after pro-market reforms initiated in 1991, it has more avowedly marked its commitment to a style of managerial rationality. Yet, as Roy's astute interrogation of the Nehruvian state reveals, this managerial vision was inscribed as part of the founding moment of the postcolonial Indian state, even if it did not strictly exemplify the neoliberal virtues of productivity and efficiency in its operations. This might shed light about the ease with which the Indian state effects and justifies its transition from a socialist, mixed-economy model of governance to a pro-market framework. Roy also raises the politically urgent question of the complicated legacies of contemporary Hindu nationalism, which is at ease with many practices of the Nehruvian state despite its rejection of Nehruvian secularism. These, too, are questions for scholars and students to pursue along the lines of Roy's pathbreaking book.

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