

# **India after Independence: A Marxist Political-Economy Perspective**

## **(Political Economy II, Spring 2025)**

This course aims to introduce students to select topics on the political economy of India since independence, *specifically* through a *Marxist* political economy lens. Though the course will contain readings from a diverse scholarship, a greater emphasis is paid to Marxist scholarship both because of their theoretical robustness, and the constant thread of *class* that animates the different modules. The distinctive feature of the course is *not* that it explores topics on the political economy of India, but that it does so specifically through the class lens— i.e., employs a Marxist political-economic perspective—and asks the political questions that confronted left political parties in India, in particular those that professed filiality to Marxism.

The course has no prerequisites. We begin by defining what specifically we mean by class, capitalism, state, and class struggle in Marxist political economy. Once we have a fair idea about a sociological class theoretic (Marxist) approach, we begin to ask the following questions, and seek answers to them—both theoretically and empirically for India.

(i) What was the *agrarian question*, or specifically the class character of agriculture in India in the 1960s and 1970s? To seek answer to this question, we will examine the landmark ‘mode of production debate’ carried out by economists in the pages of *EPW* in the 1970s and 1980s. The stakes in understanding the class character of India, and the Indian state—whether India is semi-feudal and/or semi-colonial or capitalist—is enormous because that determines the political strategy of the communist parties. How does it determine political strategy and why? We fast forward to the 2010s, and investigate the approaches taken by the mainstream parliamentary left parties on this question, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM), as well Maoists (or those who have been historically so) such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) (CPIML) and Communist Party of India (Maoist) (CPI(Maoist)). We find that the approaches to political struggle undertaken by the various parties on the Marxist left are informed by the theoretical considerations that we take up in this module.

(ii) What was the general strategy for development of *industry* in India after independence? Specifically, why is it that state-led development did not work for India, even though it worked for some countries who were at similar levels of industrial development as India in the 1950s, for instance South Korea? Through our readings of the empirical literature on the topic we will conclude that there are some misconceptions associated with industrial development in India as well as in general. Chief among them are that state involvement is typically minimal for industrial growth, or that industrial growth in India accelerated in the aftermath of the 1991 liberalisation of the economy. We trace the role of the Congress party in undertaking a state-led development and highlight key strategies that led to the failed industrial growth, when compared with South Korea.

(iii) Next, we turn our attention to the theory and practice of the Marxist left in India. First, we encounter the parliamentary left in India—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM). We first consider the theoretical question about what social democracy is, and what could possibly be the limits of social democracy, theoretically. We also consider the influence of Stalin on communists internationally. We then find out that the policies and practices of the CPI and CPM have been historically a curious combination of Stalinism and social democracy, which over time has transformed into degenerated social democratic formations. We examine CPM's record in state power in West Bengal and Kerala to substantiate some of the general points. The Maoists too are broadly faithful to certain Stalinist notions of Marxism and politics. We explore the evidence offered by critical scholarship on Maoism in India to assess the history and viability of Maoist politics, both at the level of theory and practice.

(iv) We plan to investigate the question of the rise of the right in India i.e., the emergence and popularity of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP). We look at two competing explanations.

(v) With the remaining time we will specifically try to understand the meaning of neoliberalism, and its impact on India from empirical data, especially since 1991.

The course is designed as a reading course and will not follow the conventional lecture style after the first module. Students will be expected to come to class having read the assigned materials and the classroom time will be devoted to discussions of the readings. Class participation will be a huge component of learning as well as course outcome. Though on occasions the instructor may take more time at the beginning of each module to lay the ground for fruitful future discussions.

Because the scope of this course is too vast to cover in one semester, invariably many topics will be and has been omitted—both due to constraints of time and space as well as the fact that one person cannot have expertise on such diverse topics. Students are encouraged to raise uncomfortable questions, answers to many of whom may not be found in the course. Hopefully, they will start by picking one of them to be the research paper project for the course.

The reading burden for students will be around 50 - 60 pages per week. The reading list is too demanding for some topics and tentative for others. The readings will be rearranged at the beginning of the course so that the required readings do not exceed 60 pages for a week (30 pages per class). The rest of the readings will be recommended and will only be useful for students in case they want to pursue reading a particular topic in future.

## **Brief Course Outline and Tentative Reading List**

### **I. Introduction: Definitions and Theoretical Questions (Weeks 1—2)**

We visit some definitional issues of feudalism, capitalism, and the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

#### **Required reading:**

- Saad-Filho, Alfredo. "Value, Capital and Exploitation in Marx." In *Marx Matters*, pp. 67-84. Brill, 2022.
- Chibber, Vivek. "*The ABCs of Capitalism*." Jacobin Pamphlet Series (2018).
- Heideman, Paul, and Jonah Birch. "In Defense of Political Marxism." *International Socialist Review*, Issue 90 (2013).

#### **Recommended Readings:**

- Charlie Post, George Souvlis and. "Class, Race and Capital-centric Marxism: An Interview With Charlie Post - Salvage." *Salvage*, 19 Jan. 2018, salvage.zone/class-race-and-capital-centric-marxism-an-interview-with-charlie-post.
- Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *The origin of capitalism: A longer view*. Verso, 2002: Ch.5 pp 95—121.

### **II. Agriculture and the Mode of Production Debate (Weeks 3—5.5)**

#### **(A) The Mode of Production Debate in the 1970s (Weeks 3 — 4.5)**

##### **Required reading:**

- Thorner, Alice. "Semi-feudalism or capitalism? Contemporary debate on classes and modes of production in India." *Economic and political weekly* (1982a): 1961-1968.
- Thorner, Alice. "Semi-feudalism or capitalism? Contemporary debate on classes and modes of production in India." *Economic and political weekly* (1982b): 1993-1999.
- Thorner, Alice. "Semi-feudalism or capitalism? Contemporary debate on classes and modes of production in India." *Economic and political weekly* (1982c): 2061-1966.

#### **(B) The Mode of Production Debate in the 2000s (Weeks 4.5 — 5.5)**

##### **Required reading:**

- Lerche, Jens, Alpa Shah, and Barbara Harriss-White. "Introduction: Agrarian Questions and Left Politics in India." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 13.3 (2013): 337-350.
- Lerche, Jens. "The Agrarian Question in Neoliberal India: Agrarian Transition Bypassed?." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 13.3 (2013): 382-404.

#### **Recommended Readings:**

- Harriss, John. "Does 'Landlordism' Still Matter? Reflections on Agrarian Change in India." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 13.3 (2013): 351-364.
- Frankel, Francine R. "India's political economy: The gradual revolution (1947-2004)." *OUP Catalogue* (2006).
- Basole, Amit, and Deepankar Basu. "Relations of production and modes of surplus extraction in India: Part I-agriculture." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2011): 41-58.
- Rao, J. Mohan, and Servaas Storm. "Distribution and growth in Indian agriculture" in Byres (ed.) *The Indian Economy. Major Debates since Independence*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Byres, Terence J. "The new technology, class formation and class action in the Indian countryside." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 8.4 (1981): 405-454.

### III. **Growth and Industry (Weeks 6—7)**

#### Required reading:

- Basu, Deepankar. "From Nehru to Modi," *Catalyst*, Vol. 4, No. 3, January 2021, pp. 62–93.
- Kohli, Atul. "Politics of economic growth in India, 1980-2005: Part I: The 1980s." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2006): 1251-1259.
- Kohli, Atul. "Politics of economic growth in India, 1980-2005: Part II: The 1990s and beyond." *Economic and political weekly* (2006): 1361-1370.
- Chibber, Vivek. *Locked in Place*. Princeton University Press, 2011: Chs. 1 and 2, pp. 1—47.

#### Recommended Readings:

- Basole, Amit, and Deepankar Basu. "Relations of production and modes of surplus extraction in India: Part II- 'informal' industry." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2011): 63-79.
- Chaudhuri, Sudip. "Debates on industrialization" in Byres (ed.) *The Indian economy: Major debates since independence* (1998).
- Bardhan, Pranab. "The Political Economy of Development in India: Expanded edition with an epilogue on the political economy of reform in India." *OUP Catalogue* (1999).
- Rudolph, Lloyd I., and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph. *In pursuit of Lakshmi: The political economy of the Indian state*. University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Mitra, Ashok. *Terms of trade and class relations: An essay in political economy*. Routledge, 2005.

### IV. **The Left (Weeks 8—11)**

Discussing the general theoretical orientation of reformism and electoral politics on the left, because the CPIM, the largest group on the Indian left, started out as a left social democratic force in the 1960s, and gradually veered rightward to embracing

neoliberalism when in power. Then we will be concretely situating the rise of CPIM in West Bengal and Kerala, the rule of the left and possible reasons of their decline.

A: The Parliamentary Left—CPI and CPM (Weeks 8—9.5)

Required reading:

- Brenner, Robert. “The Problem of Reformism.” *Against the Current*, 1993, [www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/atc/4958.html](http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/atc/4958.html).
- Ali, Tariq. “Introduction to Damodaran.” *New Left Review* 93 (1975): 31.
- Damodaran, K., and Tariq Ali. “Memoir of an Indian Communist.” *New Left Review* 93 (1975): 38-39.
- Bidwai, Praful. *The phoenix moment: Challenges confronting the Indian left*. Harper Collins, 2015: Chs. 4, 5, 6 and 7.

- Recommended Readings:

The following are **theoretically essential** to understanding the politics of reformism:

- Brenner, Robert. “The Paradox of Social Democracy: The American Case.” *Verso*, 2016.  
Part I: <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2508-the-paradox-of-social-democracy-the-american-case-part-one>  
PartII:<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2517-the-paradox-of-social-democracy-the-american-case-part-two>  
PartIII:<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2522-the-paradox-of-social-democracy-the-american-case-part-three>
- “The Dynamics of Retreat: An Interview With Robert Brenner.” *Versobooks.com*, 3 May 2016, [www.versobooks.com/blogs/2625-the-dynamics-of-retreat-an-interview-with-robert-brenner](http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2625-the-dynamics-of-retreat-an-interview-with-robert-brenner).
- Post, Charles. “The New Deal and the Popular Front Models for Contemporary Socialists?” *International Socialist Review*, no. 108, Mar. 2018, <https://isreview.org/issue/108/new-deal-and-popular-front/index.html>
- Post, Charles. “The Popular Front: Rethinking CPUSA History.” *Against the Current*, 1996, [againstthecurrent.org/atc063/p2363](http://againstthecurrent.org/atc063/p2363).
- Post, Charles. “The Popular Front Didn’t Work.” *Jacobin*, 2017, [jacobin.com/2017/10/popular-front-communist-party-democrats](http://jacobin.com/2017/10/popular-front-communist-party-democrats).

For a **concise history** of CPI/CPM till the late 1980s

- Vanaik, Achin. *The painful transition: Bourgeois democracy in India*. Verso Books, 1990: Ch. 5.

For a **mainstream sociological** summing up:

- Kohli, Atul. “Democracy and development in India: From socialism to pro-business.” *OUP Catalogue* (2010): Chs. 12 and 13.

For **electoral strategy analysis** of CPM, check the following

- Chattopadhyay, Kunal, and Soma Marik. “The Left Front and the United Progressive Alliance.” *Socialist Democracy*, Sept. 2004, [socialistdemocracy.org/News&AnalysisInternational/News&AnalysisIntTheLeftFrontAndTheUnitedProgressiveAlliance.html](http://socialistdemocracy.org/News&AnalysisInternational/News&AnalysisIntTheLeftFrontAndTheUnitedProgressiveAlliance.html).
- Chattopadhyay, Kunal, and Soma Marik. “Elections and the Left in India.” *International Socialist Review*, no. 66, July 2009, [isreview.org/issue/66/elections-and-left-india/index.html](http://isreview.org/issue/66/elections-and-left-india/index.html).
- Datta Gupta, Sobhanlal. “The Left’s Exit: Notes for Consideration of All Concerned.” *Mainstream Weekly*, May 2009, [www.mainstreamweekly.net/article1374.html](http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article1374.html).

For CPI(M) on **questions of gender**, check the following

- Sarkar, Tanika. “Reflections on Birati Rape Cases: Gender Ideology in Bengal.” *Economic and Political Weekly* (1991): 215-218.
- Marik, Soma. “BARASAT RAPE, MURDER AND THE CULTURE OF RAPE IN WEST BENGAL.” *Kafila*, 2013, [kafila.online/2013/06/17/barasat-rape-murder-and-the-culture-of-rape-in-west-bengal-soma-marik](http://kafila.online/2013/06/17/barasat-rape-murder-and-the-culture-of-rape-in-west-bengal-soma-marik).

On **Singur-Nandigram**:

- Sarkar, Tanika, and Sumit Chowdhury. “The Meaning of Nandigram.” *Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, no. 54, 2009.
- Mitra, Ashok. “You Are Not What You Were.” *Sanhati*, 2007, [sanhati.com/articles/446](http://sanhati.com/articles/446).
- Bandyopadhyay, D. “Documenting Nandigram.” *Mainstream Weekly*, Apr. 2008, [www.mainstreamweekly.net/article638.html](http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article638.html).
- Nigam, Aditya. “BUT PRABHAT PATNAIK IS AN HONOURABLE MAN.” *Kafila*, 2007, [kafila.online/2007/12/13/but-prabhat-patnaik-is-an-honourable-man/#more-218](http://kafila.online/2007/12/13/but-prabhat-patnaik-is-an-honourable-man/#more-218).
- Sen, Sukla. “ON NANDIGRAM: A REJOINDER TO THE CALUMNY OF JAYATI GHOSH – SUKLA SEN.” *Kafila*, 2007, [kafila.online/2007/11/23/on-nandigram-a-rejoinder-to-the-calumny-of-jayati-ghosh-sukla-sen](http://kafila.online/2007/11/23/on-nandigram-a-rejoinder-to-the-calumny-of-jayati-ghosh-sukla-sen).
- Krishnan, Kavita. “Nandigram: Fact and CPI(M)’s Fiction.” *CPIML*, 2007, [publications.cpiml.net/book/corporate-land-grab-issues-of-development-and-democracy/nandigram-fact-and-cpim%E2%80%99s-fiction](http://publications.cpiml.net/book/corporate-land-grab-issues-of-development-and-democracy/nandigram-fact-and-cpim%E2%80%99s-fiction).

**B: Extra-parliamentary / Maoist Left—CPI(Maoist) (Week 9.5—11)**

**Required reading:**

- Vanaik, Anish. “Indian Maoism’s Dead End” *Catalyst*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2019.
- Basu, Deepankar, and Debarshi Das. “The Maoist Movement in India: Some Political Economy Considerations.” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 13.3 (2013): 365-381.

**Recommended Readings:**

- Banaji, Jairus. “The Ironies of Indian Maoism.” *International Socialism Journal* 128 (2010): 129-148.
- Chattopadhyay, Kunal. “The Path of Naxalbari.” *Radical Socialist*, Sept. 2010, [www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/marxist-theory/246-the-path-of-naxalbari](http://www.radicalsocialist.in/articles/marxist-theory/246-the-path-of-naxalbari).
- Chapters 7, 8 and 9 from Das, Raju J. *Critical reflections on economy and politics in India: A class theory perspective*. Brill, 2020.

## V. The Rise of the Right (Week 12)

### Required reading:

- Chapter 5 from Vanaik, Achin. *The painful transition: Bourgeois democracy in India*. Verso Books, 1990.
- Chapters 10, 11 and 12 from Das, Raju J. *Critical reflections on economy and politics in India: A class theory perspective*. Brill, 2020.

### Recommended Readings:

- Corbridge, Stuart, and John Harriss. *Reinventing India: Liberalization, Hindu nationalism and popular democracy*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013.
- Anderson, Perry. *The Indian Ideology*. Verso Books, 2021.
- Vanaik, Achin. “India’s Two Hegemonies.” *New Left Review*, no. 112 (2018).
- Vanaik, Achin. “The New Indian Right.” *New Left Review*, no. 9 (2001).

## VI. New Economic Policy and Reforms (Week 13)

### Required reading:

- Chapters 8 from Kohli, Atul. “Democracy and development in India: From socialism to pro-business.” *OUP Catalogue* (2010).
- Patnaik, Prabhat, and C.P. Chandrasekhar “The Indian Economy under ‘Structural Adjustment’” in Mukherji, Rahul (ed.) *India's Economic Transition: The Politics of Reforms*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

### Recommended Readings:

- Ghosh, Jayati. “Liberalization debates.” in Byres (ed.) *The Indian Economy. Major Debates Since Independence*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Chapter 4 from Das, Raju J. *Critical reflections on economy and politics in India: A class theory perspective*. Brill, 2020.
- Chandrasekhar, C. P., and Jayati Ghosh. *The market that failed: Neoliberal economic reforms in India*. Leftword, 2004.

## VII. Last Week –Spill overs and revision