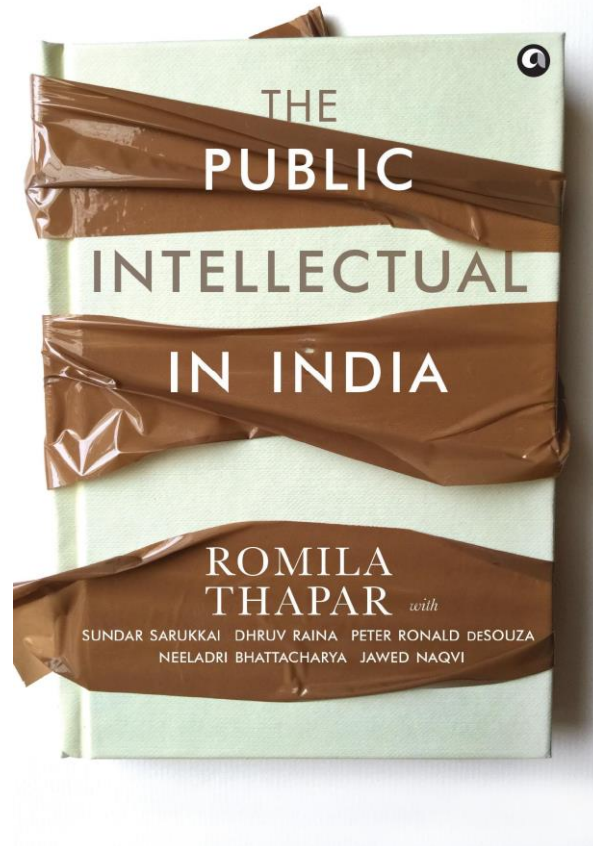


*The Public Intellectual in India –  
A Review*

**Binu George**

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**Abstract**

A review of Professor Romila Thapar's book *The Public Intellectual in India* (2015) is presented. The book is a collection of essays by five well known writers (Sundar Sarukkai, Dhruv Raina, Peter Ronald deSouza, Neeladri Bhattacharya, and Jawed Naqvi) and Thapar herself. The book is based mainly on certain developments in India and the role of the contemporary public intellectuals.

**Keywords:** Public individuals, colonialism, politics, religious affiliation

## **Romila Thapar**

Renowned Indian historian Romila Thapar started her career at Kurukshetra University as a reader in Ancient Indian History and is known as the author of a number of books, essays, articles, and as editor of a handful of books. She is awarded with honorary doctorate from both regional and foreign universities and the prestigious Kluge Prize. Her recent book, published in 2015, *The Public Intellectual in India*, a collection of essays by five well known writers excluding Thapar is based mainly on developments in India and the role of the contemporary public intellectuals here. *The Public Intellectual in India* consists of six essays besides a long introduction and conclusion by Thapar. The contributors are Sundar Sarukkai, Dhruv Raina, Peter Ronald deSouza, Neeladri Bhattacharya, Jawed Naqvi, and Thapar herself. In the note about the book, Thapar tells about how she was invited to deliver the third Nikhil Chakravartty Memorial Lecture by the Book Review Literary Trust and the lecture titled “To Question or Not to Question, That is the Question” is expanded in the form of a book including the responding essays by five other people who were invited to do so.



Romila Thapar

Courtesy: <http://www.loc.gov/loc/kluge/prize/thapar.html>

## **The Introduction in the Book**

The introduction by Thapar analyses the role played by Chakravartty as a fearless and committed journalist and thinker who was concerned about happenings around him and the disappearance of such voices in the contemporary society that unquestionably demands such

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people. She warns against the shrinking of the individual spaces of the intellectuals in Indian society at large, leaning of the critical mass, disappearance of public debates and discussions, and the withdrawal and deviating symptoms, something undesirable, given away by the public intellectuals. Thapar has given a historical glimpse of colonialism that started divisions based on caste and religion among Indians and the continuation of the same even after decades by reception of histories written by colonialists and neglecting any call for reassessment of the social, political, and religious systems and which in turn nurture intolerance, violence, religious and political extremism. She hopes that these essays will necessarily expose the inevitability of public intellectuals and their active involvement in the Indian society.

### **First Essay “To Question or Not to Question? That is the Question”**

The first essay of the book titled “To Question or Not to Question? That is the Question” by Thapar gives ample evidence for the existence of predecessors of public intellectuals – the term, of course, is a nineteenth century development with Dreyfus Affair where Emile Zola played the key role – in ancient times, in Greek, Roman, western, and Indian civilization like Socrates, Cicero, Enlightenment thinkers, and Buddha who questioned the authority (political, social, and religious) when they went away from the desired path. She refers to Patanjali, Aryabhata, Nagarjuna, Amir Khusrau, Ekanath, Bulleh Shah, and women teachers like Andal, Akka Mahadevi, and Mirabai, and contemporaries like Ram Mohun Roy, Serfoji II, Jyotiba Phule, and Periyar, Nonetheless they are public intellectuals in the modern sense. Thapar speaks about emergence of the public intellectuals in the anti-colonial and nationalist movements in India and later people like Chakravarty stood for alternative voices in the land when such voices were muted and imposed censorship. References to Right and Left Liberals are available in the essay and she sees how intellectuals who turned as professionals and academics prefer to remain silent on various reasons even at most challenging developments in the country. Instead of a secular society, according to her, ours is becoming more and more political and religious where equality, justice, peace and truths are violated, infringed, and edged out, and bureaucracy wields power in education, science, and public sphere while the intellectuals remain aloof from the citizenry and restrain themselves to the comfort zones.

## **Second Essay, ‘To Question and Not to Question: That is the Answer’**

In the second essay, ‘To Question and Not to Question: That is the Answer’, Sarukkai, a Philosopher and Director of Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities responds to Thapar’s essay mainly from a philosophical perspective. He takes up the very term “question” and explicates it in order to come to his argument on the functionality of intellectuals in the society and seeks the help of different Asian philosophical branches like Nyaya and Jaina. He treats “doubt” as the starting point of questioning and asserts the fact that attitude plays a major role in “questioning” more than cognitive skill. Again Sarukkai has gone through points such as ideology, skepticism, and habits (intellectual habits) in developing the very idea of questioning. According to him, ignorance often renders a barrier to meaningful questioning and it is also used by authority. He emphasizes that the public intellectuals must primarily be members of the public and that will lead to intellectual honesty which is a prerequisite. He refers also to “ethical dimension of critical questioning” and distinguishes between questioning and engaging the “other” and sees how important it is to go beyond the normal perceptions. According to him, intellectual must reduce his task in the society gradually by enabling the public itself to ask questions.

## **“Science and Democracy”**

In the essay, “Science and Democracy” Raina points out institutionalization of science, a historical transformation in which the entire system is changed into “instrumentalized commoditized production” due to many political reasons which keep science away from its societal commitments. He foregrounds political involvement in science that compelled it to be agents of authority and naturally left behind many of its original, purported interests such as welfare and growth of humanity. This shift, combined with professionalism and lack of internal autonomy led to the “prostitution of science” and admits science’s alienation from public and how silent it is on some basic social questions pertaining to humanity.

## **“Living between Thought and Action”**

De Souza distinguishes between autonomous thinker and advocate of social justice while dealing with the public intellectual. He divides his essay titled “Living between Thought and Action” into three. First part covers the life of three public intellectuals, viz. Priya Pillai,

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Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and Avijit Roy who fearlessly let their voices be heard by questioning and speaking truth to power. The second part deals with various kinds of censorship that pervade the public sphere such as public authority, social groups, one's peer community, and the self and each of which prevents the public intellectuals to involve actively in public affairs. In the last part De Souza analyses the Indian scenario where these factors prevail with the help of two landscapes – knowledge production and Hindu Rashtra. He also briefs six vantage points from which the public intellectuals speak in the changing domestic and global situations.

### **“Framing A Question: Questioning a Frame”**

“Framing A Question: Questioning a Frame” by Bhattacharya sounds more like a critique of essay by Thapar. He brings forth the other side of history and specially Enlightenment which Thapar has referred mostly to substantiate her argument. Bhattacharya criticizes Thapar for depending more on past and depicting the current situation as dismal. He even provides various faces of silence which is seen as offending when it is from the public intellectuals.

### **“The Indian Intellectual and the Hindu-Muslim Trap”**

Naqvi, as an experienced journalist and column writer, in his essay “The Indian Intellectual and the Hindu-Muslim Trap” points out the communal and religious bigotry against the Dalits and other downtrodden. He criticizes media which according to him lacks social commitment. Naqvi points out the misuse of power by ministers to contaminate people's mind with various kinds of emotion. He acknowledges the assistance of different Muslim individuals to build up fraternity among Hindus and Muslims and their contributions to translate Hindu religious texts into English. However he sees the preponderance of elitism among Indian intellectuals irrespective of their religion. He points out why the Dalits support Ambedkar more than Gandhi and he points out the tendency among sections of the Indian elite intellectuals to be supporters of the Hindutva.

### **Thapar's Conclusion**

In the conclusion, Thapar answers many of the questions brought forth by the essayists and clarifies their doubts. She, however, declares the necessity of public intellectuals in India in

the changing political and religious scenario and urges them to speak up mainly by means of questioning.

*The Public Intellectual in India* is informative, imaginative, provocative, and demands action from the public intellectuals and even from the readers. It doubtlessly deserves a special attention in the social, political, religious, and anthropological arena of contemporary India.

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