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A Western Answer to a Western Question: PROUT and Post-Capitalism through an Alternative Hindu Lens

Advik Tyagi[1], William Westerman[2]

Abstract

Contemporary debates over post-capitalism remain largely trapped between two Western frameworks: capitalism and Marxism. This paper examines Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT), the political economy developed by Bengali philosopher P.R. Sarkar, as an alternative rooted in the, often-marginalized, Hindu tradition of Tantra. By tracing PROUT's philosophical foundations through Sarkar's conception of Cosmic Consciousness, I argue that its economic principles cannot be understood separately from its spiritual framework. In particular, PROUT derives its guarantees of minimum necessities, restrictions on excessive wealth accumulation, and redefinition of economic progress from the belief that material resources ultimately belong to a shared cosmic inheritance and should serve human development. Using interpretive textual analysis and comparative conceptual analysis, the paper situates PROUT within existing scholarship and further considers contemporary attempts to move beyond GDP-centered measures of progress, particularly New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget. Ultimately, rather than presenting PROUT as a ready-made economic system, I argue that its significance lies in challenging the Western assumptions underlying what an economy is meant to achieve. "Human society is one and indivisible. Don't try to divide it. Each and every individual should be looked upon as the manifestation of the Cosmic Entity." - Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar

Keywords: Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT), Tantra, Cosmic Consciousness, Post-Capitalism, Spiritual Economics, Economic Justice, Sustainable Development, Wellbeing Economy,

1 Introduction

A foundational belief of P.R Sarkar's—and his political economy, Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT)—is that all individuals are manifestations of the Cosmic Entity. Amidst a world struck by massive wealth inequality, a growing distrust of our current economic metrics of progress, and an overall declining belief in the power of complete capitalism and complete socialism, the necessity to go beyond the "two 19th-century Europeanisms" is more crucial than ever. A Bengali philosopher and spiritual teacher, Sarkar founded the socio-spiritual organization Ananda Marga in 1955 and theorized PROUT shortly after, proposing a political economy positioned between complete capitalism and complete Marxism. PROUT envisions guaranteed necessities for all, ceilings on private wealth accumulation, decentralized economic planning through cooperatives, and an overall "rational" distribution of material resources. Despite drawing on two widely studied political economies, PROUT has received little scholarly or political attention. Much of this can be attributed to the fact that it has never been implemented at a national scale, and Sarkar was also subject to fierce opposition from Hindus. Hindu organizations often labeled him as an iconoclast for his rejection of the caste

system andhis criticism of the more common, Vedantic Hindu philosophies. Because instead of basing PROUT on Vedanta, he based his beliefs on Tantra, an ancient form of Hinduism that had been systematically written out of modern conceptions of the religion, labeled as esoteric, or conveniently reformed for Western consumption, from yoga to mantra and more. Yet despite these challenges, PROUT remains a powerful framework for bringing together two seemingly disparate economies and, more crucially, for reimagining the foundation on which these economic systems are built. By grounding this political economy neither on a Western foundation nor on Vedanta, Sarkar was able to utilize the idea of Cosmic Consciousness inherent in Tantra to derive his main principles of guaranteed necessities, wealth ceilings, and an overall redefinition of economic progress towards human development and wellbeing, one that deepens post-capitalist debates by offering a non-Western alternative to prevailing conceptions of what an economy should exist to achieve.

2 Literature Review

This literature review situates PROUT (Progressive Utilization Theory) across four bodies of scholarship that are rarely read together. The first is post-capitalist thought: Mason, Piketty, Hickel, and Raworth offer influential alternatives to market capitalism, but they share a European and North American genealogy and seldom ask whether non-Western traditions might reframe the underlying question itself. The second is PROUT literature, including Sarkar's own writings, Inayatullah's macrohistorical reading, and Batra's popularization. It is rich in exposition but mostly written from within the movement, so it lacks critical distance and has neglected how PROUT's economic principles derive from its Tantric metaphysics. The third is Tantra scholarship. Urban shows that "Tantrism" was constructed through Orientalist and reformist lenses, explaining its marginalization, yet this work has not extended Tantric ideas of consciousness and materiality to economic organization. The fourth is the "beyond GDP" literature (Sen, Stiglitz, Costanza, New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget), which is largely secular and instrumental. It argues wellbeing matters but not why the economically powerful should accept limits. PROUT's metaphysical foundation purportedly fills this gap, which the paper examines.

3 Methodology

This methodology section describes a qualitative, interpretive study aimed at theory-building rather than statistical testing. It asks three questions: how PROUT derives its core economic principles (guaranteed minimum necessities, wealth ceilings, and a redefinition of progress) from the Tantric idea of Cosmic Consciousness; how that derivation differs from Vedantic and Western foundations; and what New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget suggests about the feasibility of redefining progress nationally. The method is close reading of primary texts (Sarkar's Ananda Sutram and Discourses on Tantra) alongside academic scholarship, guided by intellectual history and interpretive social science. Analysis has two steps: tracing a conceptual chain from Cosmic Consciousness to Cosmic Inheritance, usufruct, and PROUT's principles, then comparing it with Advaita Vedanta, capitalism, and Marxism. New Zealand serves as an illustrative case, not a test. Limitations include no fieldwork, reliance on English sources, movement-produced literature, Sarkar's particular reading of Tantra, and inferences that are plausible rather than causal.

4 Results

4.1 Orientation

Prior to understanding PROUT, it is crucial to understand the Hindu foundation it is built upon, and more specifically, the difference between the Tantra Sarkar embraced, and the Vedanta, Sarkar denied. The Hinduism most commonly known today, and most prevalent in the West, is in large part Vedanta. The term itself refers to the Upanishads, the teachings that stand at the "end of the Veda", and the term is also viewed in different ways by different schools of Hindu philosophy, called darshanas. One of the most influential darshanas is Advaita, whose most famous advocate and follower was Sankara, writing around the eighth century. Classical Advaita believes that Brahman, pure and indivisible consciousness, is the only thing that is actually real. Rather than a God who created or governs the world, Brahman is the foundational reality underlying everything, and a human's true self, or atman, is not a piece of Brahman but an identical version of it; humans are a reflection of this infinite consciousness. So while the world often appears full of a diversity of separate things, not as one indivisible consciousness, Advaita attributes this to the concept of avidya, or ignorance, understood as an active misperception that projects multiplicity onto what is undivided. Liberation, or moksha, therefore consists of being able to see through the illusion, through this avidya, or ignorance, that blocks us from seeing this ultimate truth of Brahman. And because liberation comes from a recognition of what always exists in us and in the world, there is no finite action you can do to seek liberation; instead you must seek jnana, or knowledge, in hopes of liberating your atman from the chains of the material world. Vedanta, thus, cannot serve as a viable foundation for a political economy striving for greater equity; for if the goal is detachment from the material world, how can it impose upon society any responsibility to lift up one another?

Tantra differs in the sense that it treats the material world, and the body above all else, as the place where liberation occurs, rather than from it. Defining Tantra, however, is quite difficult, as tantric traditions are so diverse that they often resist reduction to any single quality shared by them all. Even the word Tantrism is a Western term reflecting no understanding of the tradition itself, since India has traditionally known only texts called Tantras. One of the most workable definitions of Tantra, to utilize for our sake, is by Teun Goudriann, who describes it as "the systematic quest for salvation or for spiritual excellence by realizing and fostering the bipolar, bisexual divinity within one's own body.

Such a quest can be pursued through a set of different techniques or practices called sadhanas, which describes the usage of mantras and mandalas, the visualization and worship of deities, and yogic practice. What unites Vedic and Tantric traditions across their sectarian differences is really the idea that liberation must come from oneself, but the means to do that differs. The Tantric, Saiva schools of thought of Kashmir believe that the world, and everything in it, is part of this single universal consciousness. In other words, the material world is not an "illusion" hiding this consciousness like in Vedanta, but rather one with it.10 With this Tantric foundation, it is clear that the body and the material world must work in harmony, and that a society can only seek spiritual transcendence through the deliberate use of what was given, through, in Sarkarian terms, the rational distribution of scarce resources.

4.2 PROUTISM

To say that these scarce resources were given to society, and that it is society's duty to rationally distribute them, begs the question of who gave them and on what terms. This fundamental question underlies all of PROUT, and to answer it, Sarkar pulled upon Tantra's belief in Cosmic Consciousness. Since each individual is a reflection of one Cosmic Consciousness, Sarkar believed that ownership of the world's resources then lies with this singular,

broader Cosmic Consciousness, and the effective and ethical stewardship of these resources is a duty on mankind. From this core idea comes the doctrine Sarkar called "Cosmic Inheritance." "The universe is our common patrimony", Sarkar describes to further this idea of "Cosmic Inheritance," and explains how society is all a part of one universal joint "family" in which the Cosmic Consciousness is the Supreme authority, and in which the "exploited and unexploited potentialities of the world do not belong to any particular person, nation, or state." Together, this gives PROUT its second guiding principle, usufruct, or the right to use and benefit from something without directly owning it. Human rights to the material world are usufructuary rather than proprietary, which means that the universe is the collective property of all, and that while every person may use it, no one has the right to misuse what society all holds in common patrimony. Unlike Western conceptions of ownership in which there is minimal transfer, PROUT seems to pre-conceive post-capitalist theory with an idea similar to today's phenomena of a "shared economy," and understands that a well-functioning economy must not have progressive ownership, but rather the progressive utilization of resources and property. These two ideas, of common patrimony and usufruct, help provide the foundation for the three core principles of PROUT to be developed through the lens of Hinduism: that the minimum requirements of life must be granted to everyone, that no individual may accumulate wealth without the approval of the collective, and that economic progress must be measured by something other than what an economy produces, measured by its contribution to human flourishing.

If the wealth of the universe belongs to everyone, common patrimony according to Cosmic, then every person holds claim to the minimum necessities required to live, and the economy, thus, holds responsibility over securing that portion for all. PROUT advocates that everyone's minimum necessities are guaranteed, from food, clothing, housing, medical care, education, and more. However, the way in which PROUT's view of minimum necessities differs from traditional socialist views of minimum necessities is that he does not believe the state should directly hand out food or build houses directly. Sarkar argues that such actions would produce a lethargic society that halts innovation, and in replacement, society should guarantee everyone the purchasing capacity, most likely through government regulation on corporations, to buy their own necessities. With this idea of purchasing power, he also believes that such minimum necessities will change over time; for example, a bike might be a minimum at one age, but 10 years later, inadequate, where the standard might then be a car. Sarkar's view of minimum necessities is, at a first glance, deeply inspired by Karl Marx, but Sarkar also rejected the way in which Marxism reduces human beings to material entities. For Sarkar, the guarantee of necessities was never the goal of an economic system, a way in which you can continue on a path towards class abolition and collective ownership, but rather a necessary precondition to free people from the anxieties of survival, so they can begin the actual work of intellectual and spiritual development.

With a guarantee of necessities, essentially setting a more equal foundation, PROUT tackles the question of how to set a more equal ceiling. The first of PROUT's five fundamental principles states that no individual should accumulate so much material wealth without the clear permission or approval of the collective society. Since physical resources are finite, and ownership is collective, hoarding or misusing wealth essentially takes opportunities from everyone else, against PROUT's usufruct beliefs. Oftentimes, Sarkar also believed those who surpassed this "wealth ceiling," would often use their wealth in irresponsible ways, from gambling to irrational investments only focused on personal gain; and by doing this, Sarkar believes they are not only increasing their wealth, but reducing the opportunities for others to utilize and grow those resources in a more equitable way. Through the idea of wealth ceilings, then, Sarkar is able to pull upon an ancient religious concept core to Tantra, apigraha. Apigraha, or non-possessiveness, is often used in the terms of classical yoga today, and is

the practice of not grasping or accumulating beyond one's need, on the understanding that hoarding restricts the mind to the material world. Through PROUT, the concept of apigraha was able to become institutionalized and provide a spiritual backing to systems aimed at improving wealth inequality. Equally crucial, however, is understanding that Sarkar believes, to a degree, wealth inequality is necessary. He understands that diversity is ingrained in the law of nature, and that material incentives, in line with meritocratic practices, encourage people to contribute more to society; a fundamental throughline of capitalism. PROUT is therefore not anti-capitalist, but actually works to preserve private enterprise, and an incentive to excel in its spiritually-guided economic systems. It does not believe, though, in wealth accumulation without limit. As long as wealth stops serving a productive purpose and begins to harm society, that wealth is no longer beneficial to the spiritual and intellectual development of mankind, and instead should be used to uplift others rather than uplift oneself.

4.3 A Reformed View of the Economy

With guaranteed necessities and wealth ceilings, two of many PROUT principles, Sarkar begins chipping away at traditional, material conceptions of economic progress as a whole. In Sanskrit, the word for progress is pragrati, which Sarkar defines as prakrsta gati, or the motion toward the transcendence, or movement in the direction of Brahma. In English, or the Latin stem, on the other hand, pro means "forward" where the verb gradi means to "step or walk." Sarkar utilized the notion of progress from Sanskrit and in Tantra over the Western connotation, a more spiritually-guided definition, to go towards a reframing of the economy in the direction of transcendence. With this new definition of progress, the economy is redefined towards the means and conditions by which peveryone can pursue spiritual and intellectual development, capacities inherent in every individual given they are reflections of a singular, infinite, Cosmic Consciousness.

Although this might seem a bit abstract, to define economic progress by anything else than material factors, there have been attempts in recent years towards it. In 2019, New Zealand became the first country to structure its entire national budget around wellbeing, not just economic output, but rather measuring success against child poverty, environmental health, and a multitude of other social factors instead of just GDP. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said that the purpose of government spending is the health and life satisfaction of its citizens, and that, not wealth or growth, can be a "true" metric of a country's progress.21 Though material conceptions of economic progress remain crucial to holding global power, and barely any nations with a GDP-ranked economy can afford to abandon the metric easily, Ardern's brief experiment, which slowly died year after year, shows how Sarkar and his non-Western, marginalized branch of Hinduism, and conceptions of economic progress are making their way into mainstream post-capitalist debates. New Zealand's wellbeing budget failing, in my opinion, is not necessarily a reflection of failure in this new conception of economic progress, but rather the fact that New Zealand did not rebuild the entire economy around this new conception.

Later developments reinforce this reading. The Public Finance (Wellbeing) Amendment Act 2020 wrote wellbeing objectives and a Treasury wellbeing report into statute (New Zealand Treasury, n.d.). Yet the Public Finance Amendment Bill, which the Finance and Expenditure Committee recommended for passage in 2025, removed these requirements, and the Treasury now notes that the obligation to produce a wellbeing report was removed in 2026. The government's regulatory impact statement argued that the wellbeing report addressed issues beyond the Treasury's fiscal role and that broader outcomes could be reported through other documents (New Zealand Government, 2025), while WEAll Aotearoa (n.d.) described removing the wellbeing framework as a significant step backward for inclusive governance. For this paper's purposes, the point is structural: because wellbeing sat on top of the exist-

ing fiscal machinery rather than reshaping it, it could be taken off again without altering how the economy actually worked. When Sarkar shifted the term progress to prakrsta gati, he made it clear that for economic progress to be around spiritual and intellectual development, society must not only change the way they view economic progress, but actually change the systems that determine it, from introducing guaranteed necessities, systems to expand purchasing power, and constructing wealth ceilings to restrict non-productive accumulation of wealth, as a few examples of how it might coalesce. New Zealand, unfortunately, changed the definition of progress to prakrsta gati, but did not make enough of a conscious effort to instill prakrsta gati in its corporations, people, and society as a whole, resulting in an incomplete dream and what turned out to be a catastrophic failure. That failure begs the question of whether the values and ideas of PROUT are even feasible to instill within our economies today, or whether mankind is simply too far gone, too built around accumulation and endless growth that society is unable to reimagine and rebuild what an economy is truly meant for.

4.4 PROUT in Comparative Perspective

Placing PROUT beside the two Western frameworks it claims to move beyond clarifies what is distinctive about it. Marx's Critique of the Gotha Programme (1875) imagined a society in which distribution follows need once productive abundance has been achieved, and in which class distinctions and private ownership of the means of production have been abolished. PROUT's guarantee of minimum necessities shares the concern with need, but as shown above it is a floor and not a destination: it does not seek to abolish private enterprise, and it rejects the reduction of human beings to material entities. Against classical capitalism, PROUT accepts that inequality of reward can motivate effort, yet denies that accumulation without limit is a natural right. In an era when Piketty (2014) shows wealth concentrating faster than economies grow, the idea of a collectively psanctioned ceiling responds to a problem that neither framework has resolved on its own terms.

PROUT's institutional picture is also more specific than its critics often assume. It envisions an economy of mixed ownership in which key industries are publicly managed, most production and services are organized through cooperatives, and small-scale private enterprise continues to operate, with planning decentralized to local socio-economic units. Two empirical parallels suggest that such arrangements are not purely speculative. The Mondragón cooperatives in the Basque Country demonstrate that worker-owned enterprises can operate at considerable scale within a market economy (Whyte & Whyte, 1988). Ostrom (1990) showed that communities can govern shared resources durably without either privatization or state ownership. Neither case rests on Cosmic Consciousness, but both give practical substance to the intuition behind usufruct: that the right to use a resource need not be the right to own it outright.

The comparison with beyond-GDP frameworks is the most instructive. Raworth's (2017) doughnut places a social foundation beneath the economy and an ecological ceiling above it, a structure that resembles PROUT's floor of guaranteed necessities and ceiling on accumulation, and Sen's (1999) capability approach shares PROUT's view that the economy exists to expand human flourishing. Where PROUT differs is in its justification. The doughnut's ceiling is ecological, and the capability approach is grounded in a philosophical account of freedom. PROUT's limits flow from a metaphysical claim that resources are a shared inheritance of a single consciousness. This gives it an answer to the question of why the wealthy should accept restraint, which secular frameworks tend to address through persuasion or regulation alone. It also raises the question, taken up next, of whether such an answer can travel.

4.5 Critiques and Limitations

A responsible reading of PROUT must acknowledge several difficulties. The first is operational ambiguity. The principle that wealth may not be accumulated without the collective's approval leaves open who constitutes the collective, how a ceiling is set, and who enforces it. Friedman's (2011) search for an "optimal" level of inequality shows that even sympathetic scholars have not reached consensus on the number. Enforcement raises further problems, since a small open economy that capped accumulation unilaterally would face capital flight and competition from jurisdictions that did not. Sarkar's preference for guaranteeing purchasing capacity over direct provision is similarly underspecified, and it invites comparison, though not equivalence, with contemporary debates over basic income.

The second difficulty concerns the spiritual foundation itself. Grounding economic policy in Cosmic Consciousness may be coherent within a Tantric framework, but modern states are pluralistic, and citizens who are secular or who belong to other traditions may reasonably ask why a particular metaphysics should govern their economy. Proponents could respond that usufruct and wealth ceilings can be defended on secular grounds, yet this paper's argument is that detaching them from their source severs the reasoning that makes them coherent. That tension is not resolved here. It is better understood as one of the central questions PROUT leaves for its readers.

The third difficulty is the contrast with Vedanta on which this paper partly depends. The characterization of Advaita as world-denying is a defensible reading of Sankara, but Vedanta is not monolithic. Other schools, such as Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita, affirm the reality of the world, and modern figures such as Swami Vivekananda developed a "practical Vedanta" that made service to the poor a religious duty. Sarkar's critique is therefore best read as aimed at a specific, influential strand of Vedanta and not at the whole tradition. Likewise, as Urban (2003) cautions, "Tantra" is a contested category, and any account that holds it up as a unified alternative risks repeating the very simplifications that scholarship has worked to undo.

4.6 Implications and Directions for Further Research

The argument developed here suggests that PROUT's significance lies less in a ready-made blueprint than in what it reveals about the structure of the post-capitalist question. Its core contribution is a different answer to why an economy should be organized around sufficiency, limits, and flourishing: because resources are held in common and the human capacity for development is shared. The New Zealand case adds a practical lesson. Wellbeing was added to the existing apparatus of public finance and was not made its foundation, and so it could be removed by an ordinary legislative majority. Redefining progress appears to require embedding that definition in institutions, incentives, and law deeply enough that it cannot be quietly reversed, which is the work Sarkar's principles were meant to do.

Several lines of further research follow. Comparative studies could examine other non-Western or heterodox attempts to redefine economic progress, such as Bhutan's Gross National Happiness framework (Ura et al., 2012) and the Buddhist economics proposed by Schumacher (1973), and ask how far their metaphysical foundations shape their policy outcomes. Fieldwork with PROUT-inspired cooperatives and study centers could test claims about decentralized planning and cooperative ownership against practice. Modeling work could assess how wealth ceilings and purchasing-capacity guarantees would interact with open economies. Finally, dialogue between PROUT scholars and critical scholars of Tantra and Vedanta could strengthen the movement's textual claims and give the broader post-capitalist debate a fuller account of the traditions it has so far overlooked.

5 Conclusion

PROUT is by almost any practical measure, unfinished. It has never been implemented at a national scale, and its exact systems and ideas remain somewhat vague, though that is changing with the growth of PROUT centers and PROUT study across the globe. The New Zealand experiment has also contributed to this mass speculation, for if a stable, wealthy, and often considered progressive democracy could not instil some PROUTist ideas, the prospect of an entire economy rebuilt around guaranteed necessities, wealth ceilings, and other similar ideals remains consequently utopian. But to dismiss PROUT on the grounds of utopia dismisses the opportunity to learn from the unique vocabulary and foundation that it offers. Post-capitalist debates have too long exhausted themselves with arguing the same terms, growth against degrowth, private ownership vs state ownership, etc. And what unites them all is the fact that it is always a Western answer to a Western question. Society has too long been caught in "two nineteenth-century Europeanisms," and Sarkar's PROUT is crucial because it offers an alternative. Drawn from Tantra, a marginalized and long-suppressed part of a non-Western religion, PROUT begins by questioning the root of the problem that these Western solutions have failed to, if an economy is no longer benefiting the masses spiritually, intellectually, and physically, is the economy doing its job? Whether or not PROUT is ever built, the questions it brings up and ideas of what is possible when an economy is no longer constrained to mere numbers, nor the Western frameworks that have dominated society, demand a much-needed fundamental rethinking of our present-day systems.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this article.

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