



A Comparative Analysis of the Idea of India and India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond

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Abstract:

Every country, from time to time, needs to reassess its past, take stock of its moral, political, social, economic and other resources, analyze its changing circumstances, and form a view of it. The people of India are now at such a stage their history. During the first fifty-odd years of independence, Indians have had two competing visions of India, the civic and the ethno-cultural. Both were born during the colonial era, the first being dominant during the early decades of independence and the second gaining ascendancy since 1980s. The idea of India, variously called Jambudvipa, Aryavarta and more frequently Bharat, has exercised the Indian imagination for several millennia. Different writers asked what defined and distinguished their land and its people and what their central civilization values were. The context of the debate began to change in the second half of the 19th century when India, as a clearly demarcated territorial unit subject to a single jurisdiction and entertaining the prospect of governing its own affairs, became a political reality for more or less the first time in history.

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The debates between the Hindu, pluralist and modernist views of India have gone on for decades. For reasons too complex to analyze, the pluralist view of India continued to influence Indian thinking receded into the background. The modernist conception of India has the following features. First, India is above all a political not a cultural or a civilization, community. It did, of course, have an old civilization, but it was neither the basis of its identity nor the source of its values. Second, India is a secular democracy. As the preamble to the constitution puts it, the people of India have given the constitution to themselves. The constitution derives its authority from the people, not from God or a transcendental source and so defines democracy that secularism is inherent in it. Third, India's political identity consists in its uncompromising commitment to certain fundamental principles, such as justice, which is started first in the preamble, liberty, equality, fraternity and the dignity of the individual. All of these were new to the country and at odd with those lying at the basis of the Indian civilization.

The modernist conception of India lacks a coherent notion of the place of religion in political life. Traumatized by the partition of India, it is deeply suspicious of religion, especially that of the majority whose backlash it feared, and takes a narrow, austere and impractical view of

secularism. It alienated large masses of Indians, and found itself in constant tension with them. When religion is a living social force as it is in India, it can't be squeezed out of political life.

In *The Hindutva* view, India stands for a civilization that was created and nurtured on the Indian soil. Hindi civilization lies at its core, and was enriched by such Hindu-derived currents of thought as Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Foreign born religions and civilizations such as Islam and Christianity are not an integral part of it. *The Hindutva* conception of India wants the country to be respected and feared in the world. The modernist view presents India's claim to international respect on the grounds that led the greatest anti-colonial movement in history, taught the world language of non-violence, and brought to world affairs a voice of peace, sanity and moderation. *The Hindutva* image of India takes a very different view. For it, power is the currency of the world, and India suffered for centuries because of its lack of it. It must now learn the lessons of its history and acquire power in its military, economic and political forms. India should possess nuclear weapons, become a major economic power, dominate its region, and become a strong and united country. *The Hindutva* view of India has its attractions, which explain its appeal even to those who are not communally minded. And it is wrong to dismiss all its supporters as misguided communalists. It appreciated the importance of Indian culture but has no coherent view of its content. It understands the significance of power but misunderstands its nature and sources. Political power does not come from the nuclear weapons, whose value is at best defensive. *The Hindutva* view of India embodies no attractive vision that can appeal to the rest of the world or even to most Indians. Nehru's India was heard in the world; today's nuclear India counts for little, not even during the build-up to the recent wholly misguided war on Iraq. Both the modernist and *The Hindutva* images of India are flawed, the latter far more so than the former. Since politics abhors a vacuum, Indians need to work out an alternative image of India and rally Indian people behind it.

India has over the centuries been a home to many different peoples and cultures and has evolved a synthetic, composite, or what one might call a multicultural constituted common culture. The Hindu culture itself is a work of many hands and contains with it a large range of unhomogenisable diversity. This is even truer of the Indian culture. It includes and is daily nourished by the creative interplay between its Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Muslim, Christian, secular western and many other strands of thought. Being a work of many hands, a nation's culture is a daily plebiscite, and its legitimacy is derived from the daily discourse and practices of its people. An average Indian can hardly speak for five minutes without resorting to his Sanskritized local language, Urdu, and bits of English. Not only is his language plural, his ways of thinking to switch from one traditional idiom to another.

India needs to recommit itself to the ideas of equality, social justice, fraternity, human dignity and individual liberty that are so well set out in the Preamble to our Constitution and form the core of Indian national identity. Social justice and equality are not just about removing poverty as Indira Gandhi's 'Garibi Hatao' slogan suggested, Indians need to appreciate that there is no single model of a good Indian. Each of Indians has a different personal and political biography, and appreciates India in his or her own different way. Indians are also embedded in their regional cultures and identities, which deeply matter to Indians and mediate their relations with their Indian identity.

Indians need to take a just view of the place of minorities in their collective life. In recent years Indians seem to be regressing, especially in relation to the Muslims. Although their leaders have sometimes spoken and behaved insensitively and failed to join the national mainstream as well as they could and should have, they have been loyal to India and have taken great pride in the

country. No self-image of India can be complete without a reference to its Diaspora. Contrary to the myth that Indians have been reluctant to travel abroad, a good part of their history is enacted outside India. The role of the Indian Diaspora in meditating between India and the world and in shaping each other's perception of the other needs to be more fully appreciated than is the case at present. The *Karmabhumi* of Indians is as much at home as outside it; there are many little and large Indians outside India, and part of India lies outside its territorial boundaries.

India has a long and inspiring tradition of *Raj Dharma*, which has in recent years suffered a lamentable decline. Whether Indians turn to their epics, to their great Hindu, Muslim and even some British rulers, or to their great classical literature, political power has always been understood as a trust, a means to public service, and requiring such great virtues as selflessness, self-sacrifice, a strong sense of justice, and refusal to arouse base passions for short term gains.

Should Indians speak of the idea of a nation in the singular or the plural? In America, the people have the liberal and the conservative visions and also those of the techies and of various religious and ideological groups. The rules of the civic discourse allow the votaries of these visions to sway the uncommitted. It is not any particular vision that defines America but rather the ceaseless competition amongst them. It helps that there is much overlapping amongst the various visions. Nevertheless, what is unchanging is the basic fabric of laws.

In earlier generations, there is no doubt that nascent national states followed a deliberate policy of imposing uniformity of religious belief and common language. Sometimes racial segregation was imposed. The natives in America were herded into reservations; French speakers were not allowed to use their mother tongue in schools in Louisiana. But as the political systems matured it was found that the centrifugal forces of language and ethnic identity could be counterbalanced by the force of shared history and the promise of economic advancement. One would imagine that India's situation is similar to that of America. If anything the multiplicity of visions must be greater in India given that the collective memories of the various communities run deep. One can speak of the idea of the Bharatvarsha of the Puranic imagination, the Hindustan of the Mughal Empire, and more recent India's of the Marxists, the congressmen, the socialists, the Muslim League, the Shiva Sena, the BJP, and so on.

In the past half-century, India has slipped below most other nations in indices of progress. It is astonishing then that experts like Khilnani refuse to look where the fault lies. If one controls the discourse and opponents are painted as worse than the rulers, what choice does an open-minded person have in taking sides! This is the reason why most Western observers still believe that the Congress Party is still the best for India's progress. Khilnani's book is an engagingly written 'political correct' essay on recent India. It does not capture the real complexities of the events. For that one should turn to the infinitely better *No Full Stops in India* by Mark Tully or *India: A Million Mutinies Now* by V.S. Naipaul. Nevertheless, after reading *The Idea of India* one would appreciate the book in the following manner: Khilnani's book is an eloquent, persuasive argument for Nehru's improvised, permeable sense of nationhood. If India loses this identity, it will be a much less attractive place to the outsider and, more importantly, to many of the people who live in it. Khilnani is dispassionate, scholarly, and never sentimental. There is a crisp wit to his sentences and he is frank about his country's failings²

References

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