

# The Idea of India

**Sunil Khilnani**

**1997, 2003; 263PP**

## **Introduction to 2003 Edition**

Broadly there have been two descriptions of Indian history. One sees India as the victim of recurring invasions, its history a series of rude interruptions that violate the purity of a 'sacred land'. The other views India as an arena of civilizational encounters between unequal protagonists, and celebrates the mongrel character of India's peoples and histories. Instead of hankering for purity, it sees the moments of mixture as the most creative and imaginative ones. It insists that what was distinctive about India's past was its ability to transform invasion into accommodation, rupture into continuity, division into diversity. (Pg xi-xii)

The founding idea of India was never simply a commitment to abstract ideas of plurality and democracy; rather it was rooted in a practical understanding of the compulsions and constraints of Indian politics. Indians are a self-interested lot, whose self-interest allows them to make compromises and accommodations, and democracy is well-suited for the same. Large republics with diverse and conflicting interests can be a better home for liberty, a safer haven for tyranny, than homogenous and exclusive ones. Within them, factions and differences can check one another, moderating ideological fervour and softening power. (Pg xiii)

Of the many ideas of India, this one makes the case for one in particular, because it is the only one that can enable other ideas to emerge, and allow them to learn to love alongside one another. (Pg xv)

## **Introduction: Ideas of India**

The history of independent India can be visualized in terms of three perspectives. One, as the history of a state - a poor, large, extremely diverse creation, and the shifting of authority from several local heads to a single sovereign agency. Two, as the adventure of a political idea: democracy, and the grand experiment of providing half-a-billion poor, illiterate people access to the same electoral powers as their richer, educated counterparts. Third, as the confrontation of an ancient civilization, somewhat intricately designed with the specific purpose of perpetuating itself as a society, with modernity.  
(Pg 3-5)

The possibility that India could be united, and the idea of India itself, was the wager of a modern, urban elite who had no single clear definition of this idea, and often entertained diverse contenting visions of India (Pg 5-6).

In the years post independence, the nationalist vision was dominated by the vision most closely associated with Nehru. Nehru, who wished to modernize India, found that the process of modernity did not always keep to the script. The garb of modernity, as he termed it, has not proved uniform, and Indians have found many ingenious ways of wearing it. (Pg 8-9)

The thread that runs through the book, and the four chapters that constitute it, is a concern with

politics, manifested through democracy. Politics is at the heart of India's passage to and experience with modernity. India does not merely have politics but is actually constituted by it. Once a society structured by stable caste hierarchies where politics had zero function, India is today the most intensely political society in the world, with politics at once dividing it and constituting it as a single, shared, crowded space. This is above all due to the presence of democracy. (Pg 9)

Remarkable how democracy taken root in India despite so much stacked against it - poverty, huge diversity, a society rooted in inequality and the lack of a strong concept of a nation state? While democracy has wildly succeeded in India, it also risks becoming majoritarianism of the Hindu majority. (Pg 10)

Nehru's idea of India sought to coordinate within the form of a modern state, a variety of values: democracy, religious tolerance, economic development and cultural pluralism. The unexpected historical trajectories of these components has changed the original idea of India itself, since how it was defined by Nehru and his peers. Now several competing visions for India propagate - these struggles are essentially the idea of India's history since 1947. And in its ability to constantly encompass diverse ideas of what India is, this history is itself expressive of the Indian idea. (Pg 12-13)

### **Essay One: Democracy**

In pre-colonial India, power was not embodied in the concept of a state, whether republican or absolute but in the concept of social order manifested through the caste system (*jati*) (Pg 17-18).

The caste system did not concentrate status, wealth and power exclusively in one social group but distributed them to different parts of the social order, with the result that no one social group could impose its will on the whole society. (Pg 19).

The prevalence of common religious motifs, beliefs, myths arose not due to any political authority but due to the monopoly of literacy vested in Brahmins. It made itself powerful by renouncing power and by allowing a variety of diverse religious beliefs and observances to emerge, and by emerging as interpreters of rituals and laws for the community. (Pg 19).

Such a society was easy to rule, but difficult to change: a new ruler had merely to capture the symbolic seat of power and go on ruling as those before him had done. India could be defeated easily, but the society itself remained unconquered and unchanged. (Pg 20)

The foreign rulers, especially the British brought with them a concept of the state, that drastically changed ideas about power in India. They gradually but decisively defined power in political terms and located it in a sovereign central state. They also intervened in social practices such as banning Sati, and created a local elite ('a class of persons Indian in colour and blood but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' - Thomas Macaulay) (Page 22-23).

Over time, British rule, by widening the state's interventions into Indian society and by encouraging representative politics, created space for a strong state and democratic politics to take root.

The Indian constitution, promulgated in 1950 implanted two fundamental lines of tension in India's politics - the first between powers of the centre and that of the states (a key trend at play since independence has been the centre gradually usurping more and more decision-making power away from the states), and the second being the push for universal rights vs the need for social redressal to historically marginalized communities (backward castes, tribes) (Pg 37-39)

The true historical success of Nehru's role lay in its establishment of the state at the core of India's society - one transformed from an alien object to one that aspires to infiltrate everyday lives of Indians. The state etched itself into the imagination of India that no previous political agency had done. (Pg 41)

After Nehru's death, the long-term historical centralization of power accelerated under Indira Gandhi. Through these years elections gained in importance, and the level of turnouts rose. And as democratic politics led to identity-creation and interest peddling primarily through the emergence of new caste and regional blocs, conflicts and thus violence too began to increase. (Pg 50)

The continuing absorption of powers by the state, and non-accommodation of grievances of regions - in fact there is no way for their voice to be heard in federal, representative politics - has led to conflicts between Indian regions and state (Kashmir, Punjab and Nagaland etc) (Pg 52)

In any modern democracy elections are part of a larger set of rules and practices designed to authorize the state, but in India they are carrying the entire burden. The meaning of democracy in India has been narrowed to signify only elections. (Pg 58)

The past 50 years have trenchantly displayed the powers of the state, and of the idea of democracy to reconstitute the antique social identities of India - caste and religion - and force them to face and to enter politics. But the identities of caste and religion have also bent the democratic idea to their own purpose. (Pg 59)

The new identities of OBC, SC etc make no sense in the tradition language of caste or religion but bear the heavy burden of modern politics and law. The conflicts in India today are the conflicts of modern politics; they concern the state, access to it and to whom it ultimately belongs. Within a short time, Indian has moved from being a society where the state had for most people a distant profile and limited responsibilities, and where only a few had access to it, to one where state responsibilities have swollen and everyone can imagine exercising some influence upon it. (Pg 59-60).

## **Essay Two: Temples of the Future**

Indian nationalists had rarely concerned themselves with thoughts on economic management. Most believed that with the end of colonial rule, economic deprivation would cease. Another strand of belief was that industrialization had delivered prosperity to the west and this would happen in India too. (Pg 64-65)

Lord Canning - "I would rather govern India with 40,000 British troops without an income tax than govern it with 100,000 troops with such a tax." (this was said just after 1857 uprising). Revenues from direct taxation was always low during the British Raj. Wealth was primarily accumulated by currency manipulation and balance of payments. Very little productive investment happened into India. (Pg 67)

Dadabhai Naoroji's drain theory had a powerful influence on the economic philosophy that developed later, engraining a fear about the fragility of India's economic interests in an open international economy. (Pg 68-69)

3 contrasting visions for economic development in 1930s and '40s.

- Bombay Plan stressing consumer industries-led development

- Techocrat / Planning-led development
- A view from Congress's left flank stressing redistribution but no real policy advice (Gandhi's influence reigned here) (Pg 70-71)

Nehru (and Bose) preferred a focus on heavy industries (key or mother industries), which they said were essential to build other industries. He saw consumer industries as a distraction from the larger task of pushing India towards an independent industrial future. (Pg 72)

The 1930s and '40s saw a conflict between industrializers and Gandhians, who wanted the Congress to commit to state ownership of key industries and services, and declare that it would only support village and cottage industries (Pg 73).

The industrializers lost out to the agrarian bloc led by the zamindars and rural rich, as the compulsions of electoral process took hold (1936-37 polls). The latter was in a position to deliver the large rural bloc of voters, and carried the day. They weren't too keen on industrialization. (Pg 74)

The Congress' character as a mass party with strong roots in the countryside took shape in the '30s. This led to the whittling down of land reforms, dilution of the emphasis on industrialization etc. In the '30s Congress, the basic dilemma of independent India's pursuit of economic development was presaged. In a country where the great weight of numbers, and considerable wealth, lay in the countryside, there were relatively few pressures to industrialize, still less to redistribute or to effect social reforms (Pg 74-75)

While Nehru did not believe in Marxism / Communism, he did believe that Marx's views on imperialism, of the colonizer exploiting the colonised was right; post 1947, he did not want India to be too dependent on foreign capital. Nehru thus saw a large public sector as not only standing in for lower levels of foreign investment but also as a counterweight to private sector (in Keynesian terms). Given low levels of taxation, and no tax on agriculture, he saw money generated by a productive public sector being used for redistribution and reinvestment. The Indian public sector thus had redistributive underpinnings, and is somewhat wrongly associated with Soviet influence. (Pg 76-77)

Land reforms - redistributing land to the tiller or tenant, whose family had farmed it for generations was not executed effectively. Congress was depending on rural votes, which could be delivered by zamindars who controlled the tenants, and therefore did not want to risk upsetting them. The execution was in the hands of provincial legislatures dominated by landed interests, who naturally stopped it from going through. (Pg 78-79)

On economic issues, Nehru subordinated the civil service to the Planning Commission. This was essentially a pool of ~20 members, of which half were consistently prominent. The Planning Commission, led by PC Mahalanobis was a powerful body in the Nehruvian era, wielding political and not just economic authority. Formulation of economic policy moved from parliament, and cabinet to the Planning Commission (Pg 81-82)

There was great optimism in the Nehruvian era that the economy could be subjected to conscious human control and action. In practice, Nehru's developmental strategy delivered moderate growth, but preserved its democratic legitimacy (unlike in East Asia, it did not have to trade democracy for development), and maintained economic stability through prudent fiscal management. (Pg 88-89)

Under Indira Gandhi, and subsequent leaders till '89, fiscal management got a short shrift - the

state made itself to the demands of those successful enough to get themselves represented, including rich farmers ('bullock capitalists', who benefited from the Green Revolution), manager elites and labour unions in public sector, Mumbai's industrialists who wanted permits and licenses etc.

Economic populism got a free rein under Indira Gandhi, including abolishment of privy purses, nationalization of banks and textile mills etc. However there was also no significant inflation (or recession) or increase in public debt, which few new nations have managed. This was thanks to the prudent fiscal management inherited from the Raj. (Pg 90-93)

The lack of any internal federalism in today's congress - historically the means by which demands by regions as well as cultural groups could be bartered - and the collapse of planning mean that the Indian state is without agreed principles and mechanisms to adjudicate claims relating to allocation of resources - river waters, reservations etc. (Pg 103)

The absence of a commanding national party that can stipulate decisive economic goals may temporarily return power to the technocrats, but the voice is passing from intellectuals to the demos - the powerful, the aspiring and the excluded, who have their own ideas of what development is and how it should be. (Pg 106)

### **Essay Three: Cities**

Modern India's political and economic experiences have coincided most dramatically in its cities - symbols of the uneven, hectic and contradictory character of the nation's modern life. (Pg 11)

Indian cities are also theatres where the contradictions (such as cosmopolitanism vs parochialism etc) in the Indian republic plays out most starkly. The experience that urban denizens have had in the city has altered beliefs, generated new politics and made the cities dramatic scenes of Indian democracy: places where the idea of India is being disputed and defined anew. (Pg 109).

The major cities in India are either the product of colonialism or ripostes to it. (Pg 110)

Ahmedabad was the 1st modern city created by Indians. (Pg 114)

The British created 2 kinds of cities - the 3 big port cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras; and the cantonment cities across many towns such as Bangalore, Agra etc, culminating ultimately in New Delhi. (Pg 111)

Historically in India, the conjunction of economic and political power was rare. Calcutta perhaps is the only exception. (Pg 114)

New Delhi was planned to let the Indian 'see for the first time the power of Western science, art and civilization' (Lord Stamfordham). New Delhi was a sublime fantasy of imperial control over the boundaries and definition of urban space. (Pg 121-2)

The chapter explores how New Delhi, Chandigarh, Bombay and Bangalore have seen the idea of India play out since independence.

### **Essay Four: Who is an Indian?**

In India the sense of regional identity (Bengal, Maharashtra etc) only came into being as Indians tried to define a national identity. Indian nationalism did not unite and subordinate established re-

gional identities. A sense of nation and region emerged together, through parallel self-definitions. (Pg 153)

Indian nationalism really emerged as a response to colonialism, as the idea of India as a geographical unit arose only with the British Raj, who unified it from a motley bunch of empires. This nationalism took three broad narrative arcs. The first, best espoused by Vinayak Damaodar Savarkar, saw Indian nationalism in terms of a common culture derived from Hindu religion. The second led by Gandhi did see an influence of religion but in a pluralistic and secular sense. The third, espoused by Nehru, turned away from religion and discovered a basis for unity in a shared historical past of cultural mixing. (Pg 154)

What made possible the self-invention of a national community was the fact of alien conquest and colonial subjugation. It was the British interest in determining geographical boundaries that by an act of parliament in 1899 converted 'India' from the name of a cultural region into a precise territory. (Pg 155)

Nehru's regime was able to install a layered pluralistic definition of Indianness, one which he saw as the end culmination of a millennia of historical mixing and cultural fusion. Unlike German or Italian nationalism which saw the state as the response or result of the struggle towards a common ethnic identity, Nehru felt that Indian nationalism and an Indian identity could only emerge within the territorial and institutional framework of a state. This Nehruvian model protected and celebrated linguistic, religious and cultural differences, rather than imposing a uniform Indianness. Nehru's model also saw colonialism as having added the layer of modernity to the ancient Indian palimpsest (see quote below), as opposed to other models which saw colonialism as a defiling of Indian identity. (Pg 166)

"She was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously. All of these had existed in our conscious or subconscious selves, though we may not have been aware of them. And they have gone to build up the complex mysterious personality of India." - Nehru, *The Discovery of India*.

In Nehru's India, Indianness was not defined as a singular or exhaustive identity, but one which recognized linguistic and cultural markers. This layered Indianness meant a single majoritarian definition of Indianness couldn't emerge. (Pg 175).

Within two decades of Nehru's death, the nationalism that he had woven into being was in difficulty, impacted by Congress's own transition from a federal party (which balanced regional pulls and pressures through internal bargaining, thereby restricting caste and religious groupings to local levels) to a mass party, where national leaders directly appealed to people as members of a particular community, thereby bringing casteism and religious identities to the national stage. (Pg 179-80)

The crisis of Congress became a crisis of the state itself. Along with the earlier transition to a mass party, there was also centralization of powers. This weakened their regional roots, and no longer allowed regional demands to push through, leading to rising irritation levels against the state - such as the 80s/90s Punjab, Kashmir agitation. (Pg 185).

The fundamental debate in Indian political and intellectual life in the 1980s and '90s about the crisis of secularism has tended to skirt around the depth of BJP and the Sangh Parivar's desire to reform the constitution and impose a uniform civil code, especially on regulating Muslim personal

law. The pluralistic nationalism outlined after 1947 was certainly informed by the language of western constitutional theory but was accompanied by relatively limited interference in the society's religious practices. The political proposals of Hindu nationalism veer away from this historical pattern: they hope to bring the array of Indian religious and cultural activities under command of the state. The Hindu nationalist aspiration to redefine Indianness always presumed the availability of a strong state as the instrument through which to forge an identity. (Pg 189-90)

The political momentum of lower-caste and regional parties is the single biggest obstacle to nationalist Hindu ambitions. Most regionalist ideas of India are plural rather than shared, shaped by the legacies of different colonial pasts and varied experiences of political rule and economic development. The most spectacular instances of regionalism have been the violent separatist movements of the 1980s and '90s, which proposed a dissolution of the Indian idea. (Pg 191)

A second type of regionalist idea of India has acquired prominence recently since the devolution of some economic powers from the central state. Politicians such as Laloo Yadav, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Deve Gowda all have their own distinct regionalist perspective. They do not dream of dissolving the Indian union, but neither do they propose a coherent idea of an Indian identity. They see the economy as a cluster of regional units - each seeking to maximize benefits at the expense of others - rather than as a unified national economy. (Pg 192)

But potentially the most far-reaching consequence of this new regionalism lie squarely in the cultural realm. India's regional politicians have essentially parochial views, and they are devoted to cultivating their own vernacular gardens. The developments of the 1990s as an emergent cultural pattern mark a serious rupture with the idea of a layered Indian political identity. Yet what is striking is that after fifty years of political freedom is the depth and extent of the commitment to the idea of India. (Pg 193)

British domination helped to create the opportunities for Indians to acquire a modern self, a political identity guaranteed by a state. After fifty years of an Indian state, the definition of who is an Indian is as passionately contested as ever. What has kept it in contest is the presence of the state whose access to resources makes it a real prize, and the persistence of democratic politics, which has kept most people in the game for this prize. The contest is over economic opportunities and about cultural recognition: it is a contest for ownership of the state. The intensity of that conflict can be seen in the dizzying assortment of claims upon that state. Acceptance of this proliferating diversity and the capacity to live with it are for Indians pragmatic necessities. India's history shows two broad possibilities of dealing with that diversity: a theoretically untidy, improvising, pluralist approach, or a neatly rationalist and purifying exclusivism. India's history has for the first time in all its millennial depth, given the present generation of Indians the responsibility to choose between them. (Pg 195)

### **Epilogue: The Garb of Modernity**

Partition is the unspeakable sadness at the heart of the idea of India: a *memento mori* that what made India possible also diminished the integral value of the idea. Like 1789 for the French, partition is the moment of the Indian nation's origin through violent rupture with itself. What exactly was done? Was it the division of one territory between two 'nations' or peoples? Or the breaking of one civilization into two territories? (Pg 200-02)

Partition emerged out of a conflict over the state: a conflict about whether a single successor state ought to acquire the rightful authority to enforce its judgements over the entire population and ter-

ritory left by the Raj. For those who wished to separate and establish their own state, the promise of partition was the promise of a state made less alien. Muslim separatists were led by the desire to reduce the impersonality of the modern state. Since the eighteenth century, all efforts to make the state less impersonal have invoked the idea of the nation: a form of solidarity usually specified in terms of a common religion, language, culture, race or history. This is of course a fictive, spurious perception yet no modern idea has managed to summon up stronger, if erratic, feelings of identification with the alien apparatus of the state. (Pg 202-03)

The modern state is by definition impersonal, and it needs to remain that way if it is to be a state at all. It is an alien, unnatural entity but it also offers its subjects protections, not just of physical and material security but also of their citizen's identities. The ambition to rid oneself of the state or the misdirected desire to blend the state with the identity of all or some over whom it rules: to make it the state of a singular religion, culture or *ethnos* is a forlorn one. The only ambition is to make the states more trustworthy to all who must live under them, and civilized in their dealings with their citizens. In this, the model of constitutional democracy has proved the most reliable and effective instrument available to modern populations. (Pg 203-05)

What has made democracy viable in India is not simply the appeal of the idea or economic success of the nation under democracy. Rather it has been the continuous stability of the state that has been essential to India's democracy. This stability rests on countering external threats, which are usually sporadic and intermittent, and successful economic performance, assessed in terms of growth and distribution, and adroitly navigating the opportunities and hazards of the international marketplace. But ultimately, the viability, and most importantly, the point of India's democracy will rest on its capacity to sustain internal diversity, to avoid giving reason to groups within the citizen body to harbour dreams of having their own exclusive nation states. There is no ideological or cultural guarantee for a nation to hold together. It just depends on human skills. This is why politics as an arena where different projects are proposed and decided for and against, has never been more important for Indians. (Pg 205-07)

India's experience reveals the ordinariness of democracy - untidy, massively complex, unsatisfying, but vital to the sense of a human life today. It establishes that historical and cultural innocence do not exclude Asian cultures from the idea of democracy. These cultures are not tailor-made for democracy. It will always be a wary struggle, but for advocates of democracy, democracy's persistence in India is a basis of hope. (Pg 207)