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## An Essay for Our Times

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*Diversity & nationalism are complementary and not antagonistic to each other. The Constitution is built around the principle that Indians can love their country without surrendering any other equally legitimate identity. Ideas to think about on 15 August.*

A little after the inaugural meeting of the Indian National Congress on 28 December 1885, the *Bombay Gazette* carried a report on the event, expressing genuine wonder at the proceedings. To begin with, it was noted, the very fact that Indians ‘representing the various races and communities, castes and sub-divisions of castes, religions and sub-divisions of religions, met together in one place to form themselves, if possible, into one political whole,’ was ‘most unique and interesting’.

Then there was fascination born from the sheer visual extravaganza that the meeting appeared to be: ‘There were men from Madras,’ announced the *Gazette* (throwing political correctness to the wind) ‘the blackness of whose complexion seemed to be made blacker by spotless white turbans’. Standing beside them was the cream of colonial Bengal society, many of whom ‘appeared in entirely European costume’. There were ‘bearded, bulky and large-limbed’ Pathans, just as there were ‘Banyas from Gujarat’ and ‘Sindhees from Kurrachee’. The Marathi delegates came flaunting ‘cart-wheel’ turbans while the fire-worshipping Parsis displayed, in the *Gazette*’s opinion, a ‘not very elegant head-dress’. To add to this, there were many delegates from the South who appeared bare-chested, just as there were some who saw no reason to use footwear. ‘All these men assembled in the same hall,’ concluded the report, ‘presented such a variety of costumes and complexions, that a similar scene can scarcely be witnessed anywhere’ - except perhaps, it offered, ‘at a fancy (dress) ball’.

To Indians today there is nothing particularly unusual about the multiplicity of languages and cultures our countrymen and women uphold and celebrate - in a single urban classroom, for example, there may be children who speak English during their lessons, Malayalam or Meiteilon at home when with their parents, and Hindi to friends while playing *gully* cricket, added to which might well be extra lessons in Sanskrit or German. But a little over a century ago, the sight of so many diverse groups represented in one single room was nothing short of extraordinary. The proposition that these men - with their different colours, costumes, cuisines and castes - desired to assert a common political identity was even more revolutionary. After all, an almost chaotic sense of division seemed to be the guiding principle of life in India. There was language to begin with, so utterly complex that a dialect spoken in one district could be replete with peculiar inflections unfamiliar to fellow speakers of the same tongue in the next district.

Beyond geography, there were the divisions of caste: while Brahmins existed everywhere, there were 107 different types of them in Varanasi alone, each variety claiming superiority, and each asserting the distinctness of its identity. Costume, again, revealed a great deal: where Tamil Brahmins grew their tuft of hair at the back of the head, the Malayali Brahmin wore it in the front; where Iyengar women saw white as the colour of widowhood, the Namboodiri bride, just across the Western Ghats, wore nothing but white to her bridal chamber. And while the Rajput lady moved around with a veil, wearing even a blouse was considered indecent in Malabar. Only the most tenuous of links seemed to run through these groups while the more solid ingredients essential to the birth of modern nationalism seemed, even to most Indians, worryingly absent.

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What, then, united these people and slowly brought them together on a common platform? To begin with, it helped that they were standing up to British inequity, an unpleasant experience they all suffered in common. As was once remarked, ‘It is not so much sympathy with one’s fellows as much as hostility towards the outsider that makes for nationalism.’ It certainly did seem the case that while finding sturdy bonds between Indians was not an easy task, it was definitely possible to identify a common, oppressive enemy, in whose expulsion lay everybody’s combined salvation.

The irony that this nascent sense of national feeling was, in some respects, a by-product of British rule was not lost on India’s early freedom fighters. It was after all the English language - a colonial import, if ever there was one—that permitted India’s nationalists to

engage with one another. It was in English that Jyotirao Phule, one of India's most remarkable crusaders against caste, read Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, and it was also this very language, among others, that delivered to the Maratha rajah Serfoji lessons in science in early 19th century Thanjavur.

Indeed, when that first meeting of the Indian National Congress was convened in 1885, the circular inviting participants insisted that while delegates 'from all parts' of India were welcome, they would need to be 'well acquainted with the English language' in order to be able to communicate with one another. In other words, to birth a mood of nationalism, what was needed was not only a shared love for India, but also one of the most potent instruments of imperial rule: the coloniser's grammar book.

As late as 1947, the lack of a common language troubled the minds of India's leaders, for language could potentially unite or divide. The report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission, appointed in 1948 by the Constituent Assembly, is telling of the formidable challenges in welding together such a patchwork of cultures as existed in India. 'The work of 60 years of the Indian National Congress' with its vision of a united land, the Commission noted, confronted 'face to face' the 'centuries-old India of narrow loyalties, petty jealousies and ignorant prejudices engaged in a mortal conflict'. They were, furthermore, 'simply horrified to see how thin was the ice upon which we were skating'.

After all, why should Naga tribes in the north-east feel any affinity with former subjects of the maharajah of Baroda in western India? What was to be done about the fact that though they were now people of one country, a Malayali's traditional links with Arabia were stronger than any that existed with Delhi, just as Delhi's bonds with Kabul were richer than its relationship with Tamil country? So, too, the Islam of the Mappila in Kozhikode had little to do with the faith as practiced in Bhopal, just as the daily worship of the Punjabi Hindu was vastly different from that of his co-religionists in Orissa.

Ethnic nationalism would not work here because the subcontinent was bursting with ethnic diversity, and forcing any kind of rigid, overpowering uniformity over its peoples would break the nation before it was even born.

It was no wonder, then, that while the Congress had, before 1947, established regional units on linguistic lines, there was profound (though ultimately unsuccessful) resistance to permitting Indian states to be established on the basis of language. As the Linguistic Provinces Commission warned, 'Some of the ablest men in the country came before us and confidently and emphatically stated that language in this country stood for and represented culture, race, history, individuality, and finally a sub-nation.' If such sub-nations were given political expression, would that not jeopardise the larger vision of unity? Was this not a recipe for the future disintegration of the India for which our freedom fighters had suffered and fought?

These questions had exercised India's best minds from the very start, with the result that more than one vision of nationalism was articulated across the political spectrum, from the poet Rabindranath Tagore to the proponent of Hindutva, V.D. Savarkar. As the scholar Sunil Khilnani notes, from the late 19th century the challenge, both philosophical and political, was always about 'How to discover or devise some coherent, shared norms - values and commitments—that could connect Indians together under modern conditions.' And whether or not India's diversity was an asset or a dangerous weakness depended on which of these visions was allowed to prevail and gain moral influence over the majority of India's people.

To some thinkers, India was enriched and made strong by the breathtaking heterogeneity that had long been its hallmark; others argued that homogeneity was what made sturdy nation-states, and as far as possible, diversity ought to make way for a master culture, woven around a majoritarian religious principle. To some, as Shashi Tharoor puts it, India resembled a *thali* or a platter with 'a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast.' This vision of nationalism focused on transcending difference by looking to a shared, modern future - whatever India's fragmented yesterdays may have been, everybody could now be an equal partner in shaping its tomorrow. On the other hand, to proponents of what would become Hindutva, this was, to quote Ashutosh Varshney, the 'opposite of nation-building' for a 'salad bowl does not produce cohesion; a melting pot does'. And if India had to become a melting pot, as opposed to a thali or a salad bowl, its regional cultures and local identities would have to make sacrifices for a greater cause. Hindutva was the pot, and it was the smaller cultures that would have to endure the melting.

Given that the freedom fighters had to rally Indians behind them and stand up to imperial might, it is understandable that the first of these visions were more popular - to take everyone along in a working consensus was wiser than to succumb to quarrels about which culture would become national, and whose identities would be renounced. Instead of one kind of uniform appearance, a joint cooperative effort was what they envisioned.

As the Mahatma wrote, ‘Hindustan belongs to all those who are born and bred here and who have no other country to look to. Therefore, it belongs to Parsis, Beni Israels, to Indian Christians, Muslims and other non-Hindus as much as to Hindus.’

As early as 1884, the poet and champion of the modern Hindi language, Harischandra, explained this vision of Indian nationalism. Referring to all residents of Hindustan as Hindus, he declared: ‘Brother Hindus! You, too, should not insist any more on all details of religious faith and practice. Increase mutual love and chant this “mahamantra”. Who lives in Hindustan, whatever his colour and whatever his caste, he is a Hindu. Help the Hindus. Bengalis, Marathis, Panjabis, Madrasis, Vaidiks, Jains, Brahmos, Mussalmans, all should join hands.’

The following year, the prominent Muslim reformer Sir Syed Ahmed Khan added his weight to this conception of Indian nationalism: ‘Remember,’ he pointed out, that ‘the words “Hindu” and “Muhammadan” are only meant for religious distinction, otherwise all persons whether Hindu, Muhammadan, or Christian, who reside in this country belong to one and the same nation.’ By 1909, Madan Mohan Malaviya too reaffirmed this position. ‘How ennobling it is,’ he pronounced, ‘to even think of that high ideal of patriotism where Hindus, Mohammedans, Parsees and Christians stand shoulder to shoulder as brothers and work for the common good of all... we cannot build up in separation a national life such as would be worth living; we must rise and fall together.’

Perhaps the greatest support for this vision of modern Indian nationalism came from Mahatma Gandhi and our future prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Though they disagreed on many things, the Father of the Nation and his protégé were more or less in agreement on the broad idea of what made the Indian people one. Ethnic nationalism would not work here because the subcontinent was bursting with ethnic diversity, and forcing any kind of rigid, overpowering uniformity over its peoples would break the nation before it was even born.

Religion, as far as Gandhi saw it, could mobilise people but could not serve as a sufficient or enduring basis for nationalism. It had value, admittedly, and there was civilisational unity among the people despite numerous differences - why else would men and women from across the subcontinent crisscross the land on pilgrim routes that encompassed Rameswaram and Benares, Jagannath and Haridwar? But this did not make India a land of Hindus alone - everyone who had adopted India as their home had a place in the nation.

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As the Mahatma wrote, ‘Hindustan belongs to all those who are born and bred here and who have no other country to look to. Therefore, it belongs to Parsis, Beni Israels, to Indian Christians, Muslims and other non-Hindus as much as to Hindus. Free India will not be a Hindu *raj*; it will be an Indian *raj* based not on the majority of any religious sect or community, but on the representatives of the whole people without distinction of religion...’ ‘Religion,’ he believed, ‘is a personal matter which should have no place in politics.’ Naturally, the idea of nationalism as a commodity designed only for Hindus was as abhorrent to him as the notion that Muslims constituted a separate nation and could seek, for that reason, partition.

Nehru, too, articulated nationalism in similar terms where diversity was not an impediment to love for one’s country, and inclusiveness and tolerance were, in fact, an ancestral principle once again elevated to the forefront as modern India reclaimed its destiny. He too pointed to a certain civilisational bond. ‘Some kind of a dream of unity,’ he argued, ‘has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilisation. That unity,’ however, ‘was not conceived as something imposed from outside’, as the British had done. ‘It was something deeper, and within its fold the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practiced, and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged.’

Various races, religions and ethnicities had co-existed in India, and difference was accommodated within a larger tradition rather than subjugated or rejected. There was, in other words, room for everyone in India in the past, and the India of the future would reinforce such inclusive national ideals in order to make its way in the 20th century and beyond.

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diversity.

This vision of nationalism was not without its challengers. V.D. Savarkar articulated in what is now a founding text of Hindutva an ideology where ‘Hinduness’ rather than a celebration of unity in diversity becomes the cornerstone of the nation. This was not a religious argument, offering instead several political criteria. After all, Hindus themselves were hardly a united force. The 1911 Census of India found, for example, that ‘a quarter of the persons classed as Hindus deny the supremacy of Brahmins, a quarter do not worship the great Hindu gods... a half do not regard cremation as obligatory, and two-fifths eat beef.’ There was, in other words, no perfect way to define who was a Hindu and who was not on account of the sheer divergence of custom and practice within Hindu communities - i.e. Hindus, too, could only be understood in the plural rather than the singular.

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Savarkar offered an explanation for this state of affairs. The Hindus, soon after the Aryans arrived, had formed themselves into a nation. Over time, however, this was ‘first overshadowed and then almost forgotten’ as culture became fragmented. Lord Rama, who is treated by Savarkar as a historical figure, rejuvenated the nation, only for its unity to be crushed by the advent of Muslim invaders. Leaving aside the lack of historicity to this argument, the point ultimately made was that what bound together the Hindu nation was the ‘blood of the mighty race’ of the Aryans, so that ‘no people in the world can more justly claim to get recognized as a racial unit than the Hindus and perhaps the Jews’ That is why, he claimed, ‘the Nayars of Malabar weep over the sufferings of the Brahmins of Kashmir’ (when in fact the Nairs had little knowledge of where precisely Kashmir was or what its Brahmins were doing). Meanwhile, though Muslims and Christians in India were converts from Hindus of yore, they were, nonetheless, disqualified from membership of the nation.

Why was this so? Hindus, according to Savarkar, were members of a single nation because no matter the countless diversities they counted within their ranks, no matter how fragmented they were, they saw India not only as their motherland (*mathrubhumi*) and fatherland (*pitrubhumi*, the land of their ancestors), but also as their holy land (*punyabhumi*). Muslim and Christian converts might fulfil the first two criteria but they did not envision the subcontinent, defined since antiquity as the land between the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean, as sacred - it was in Mecca and Rome that their sacred sites were located. The Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, and others whose religions were born in India were all eligible to be members of the Hindu nation, but Christians and Muslims, whose faiths emerged in lands beyond India’s historical limits, were at best second-class citizens.

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Savarkar’s heir, M.S. Golwalkar, built on this and rejected the notion of territorial nationalism, as promoted by Gandhi, Nehru and the freedom fighters. ‘In this land,’ he declared, ‘Hindus have been the owners, Parsis and Jews the guests, and Muslims and Christian the dacoits.’ Religious resentment was pronounced in Golwalkar, who was suspicious of minorities. ‘They are born in this land, no doubt,’ he wrote. ‘But are they true to its salt? Are they grateful...? Do they feel that they are the children of this land... Do they feel it a duty to serve her? No! Together with the change in faith, gone are the spirit of love and devotion for the nation.’

In essence, then, the Hindutva vision was perched on the twin notions of Hindu pride as well as an antagonism towards the disloyal ‘other’ - nationalism, according to Golwalkar, was not ‘a mere bundle of political and economic rights’, it was a cultural idea in which some were included and some had necessarily to be left out.

But this predictably controversial Hindutva vision existed largely on the fringes of society. While the inclusive nationalism of Gandhi, Nehru and assorted political leaders came from direct experience of fighting for freedom, Hindutva was constructed by thinkers who were not active participants in the struggle against imperialism and therefore could fabricate theories divorced from the lived experience of the masses. In actual fact, most Hindus hardly saw themselves as a fixed, united group who could transform that identity into a rock-solid sense of nationalism.

Even the question of who exactly a Hindu was, in practical terms, remained frustratingly unresolved. In 1871, for example, a ‘committee of native gentlemen’ defined as Hindu all those who believed in caste. But caste appeared among Muslims and Christians

also. In the 1891 census, then, the Hindu was defined by exclusion, as ‘the large residuum that is not Sikh, or Jain, or Buddhist, or professedly Animistic, or included in one of the foreign religions, such as Islam, Mazdaism, Christianity, or Hebraism’.

Sir Monier Monier-Williams felt that the notion of a pan-Indian Hindu identity was ‘wholly arbitrary and confessedly unsatisfactory’ for the simple reason that in practice, Hinduism was amorphous. Some, such as a Brahmin census commissioner in princely Travancore, argued that Hindus were those who accepted the faith of the Brahmins, which, however, ran into trouble when one considers the words of J.W. Massie, who as early as 1840 pointed out that to consider the Brahmin as representative of all Hindus was as bewildering a statement as saying that the Italians represented all Europeans—there was too much diversity for simplistic statements to be true.

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The issue of diversity and nationalism and whether they complement or oppose each other, then, boils down to which vision of the nation is embraced. The Constitution India adopted in 1950 enshrines the former idea, creating a space for Indians to love the country without having to surrender any other equally legitimate identity - to repeat a cliché, one can be simultaneously a proud Santhal or Kashmiri, a devout Muslim or Parsi, a determined atheist or rationalist, a straight majority or a gay minority, and yet love one’s country. One can assert proudly a patriotism that rises over and above other feelings, without clashing with individual and group identities.

In this vision of the nation, nationalism is not a zero-sum game; it can coexist with a variety of other valid sentiments. It draws wisdom from the past, but is oriented towards a progressive future. As Nehru saw it, it was predicated on a national philosophy featuring the seven goals of unity, parliamentary democracy, scientific temper, non-alignment, socialism, industrialisation and secularism.

Some of these values may change with time, as we evolve as a people, but the Indian nation is not threatened if a state voices sharp concerns, or if raucous debate and disagreement take place routinely, so long as they occur within established institutions and in keeping with certain ground rules by which everybody agrees to play. Indeed, it creates checks and balances that prevents any one group from dominating the rest; any one region from engulfing others; and one version of a religion from enforcing its principles on even the last rationalist, or those who believe in a different definition of the same religion. The principle was that we could all continue to embrace our differences while staying wedded to a national consensus.

The other vision of nationalism, meanwhile, has mutated into a one-size-fits-all variant, which is at odds with history, and denies consensus as the guiding principle of the nation. ‘Such identity,’ the historian Romila Thapar notes, ‘tends to iron out diversity and insists on conformity’ - in other words, pluralism is weakness.

Leaving aside the treatment it proposes for religious minorities, this means radical changes even for Hindus themselves, as a tradition that has been described as a fascinating ‘mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas’ (including contradictory ideas) is regimented to address various anxieties. This is a nationalism that follows one definition, one form, one loyalty, and one narrow ideology.

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Naturally, this calls for a new structure and a new vocabulary of Hindu identity, featuring certain sacred books but not others; fewer gods, at the cost of others; and a standardisation of practice that sometimes goes against India’s own manifest heritage in its quest to service an overarching, synthetic cultural identity. So, for instance, all Hindus must avoid eating beef (though several castes happily did in the past) and should avoid meat in general (though a number of Brahmin communities too were not vegetarian). Nationalism must have a fixed language—Sanskrit is ideal but in the interim, Hindi will do - a language that to large numbers of Indians is hardly less alien than English, with which the country has made its peace. And then dress codes, social behaviour and much else must also fall in line, creating more a sharp machine to nurse insecurities than an organic people who live, breathe, prosper and preserve their diverse traditions and personalities.

One-size-fits-all rules, however, have a tendency to backfire in India. And decades and generations of officially promoting diversity means that attempting to reverse the flow and manufacture a narrow nationalism will provoke challenges, if not long-term disaster. When, for instance, Hindi nationalism was force-fed from Delhi, the powers in Karnataka responded in 2018 with a Kannada-oriented

sub-nationalism that even flew its own flag. If the idea is to create an ‘us or them’ with the ‘majority’ on one side, and the minority as the enemy within, the architects of this scheme will discover too many ‘thems’ sown into the fabric of the majority itself.

The historical lesson is clear - there was a reason why in 1947 India prevented nationalism from distorting into a rigid beast and envisioned it as a more malleable reflection of our multiple realities. To re-engineer this mature, long-standing policy in black and white today will only prove calamitous, showing that far from making India great again, what we will end up doing is breaking India.