

# IS THE IDEA OF INDIA IN TRANSITION?

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**Genesis of the Idea of India:** India is renowned for 'unity in diversity'. It is endowed with cultural pluralism and diversity of races, religions, languages, regions, flora and fauna. The existing potpourri of races, religions and languages in India indicate the migration patterns of various ethnic groups to India over the millennia. As values like tolerance, collective living, peaceful co-existence and mutual respect for each other were the basis of Indian civilization, the 'composite culture' of India became a reality. The prevailing cultural notions - like 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', and 'Sarvadharmasamabhav' further crystallised the 'cultural pluralism' or 'composite culture' in India. Gradually, the so called 'Indian culture' evolved from the confluence of the 'composite culture' of India. Thus, the evolution of 'Indian culture' is a melting pot of prevailing cultural traditions of various ethnic and religious groups of India over the years.

No single source can claim for the genesis of Indian culture. Actually, the stake holders of Indian culture are diverse ethnic and religious groups who are inhabitants of India. In ancient period, though India was not a single unit as it is today, the vast tract of territory was divided into different principalities being ruled and controlled by various feudal kings, but the sense of belonging into 'one nation' was kept alive by the idea of 'Bharat Varsha' through the narrative of mythologies, epics and legends.

In the medieval period, barring a few Mughal rulers, others encouraged religious harmony and plural traditions of India. The great Mughal ruler Akbar can be cited as an example for the 'epitome of syncretism'. Further, Bhakti movement and Sufism brought Hindus and Muslims alike closer in the medieval period. India as a modern nation state is a colonial legacy. Of course, kings like Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka, Akbar and Ala-Uddin Khilji tried to create one Indian empire. But it could not become a reality. Even the British could not control the whole India despite having modern administrative apparatus. Many parts of India were controlled by the Indian princes under the supervision of the British which are popularly known as 'princely states'. Nevertheless, the British must be credited for the unification of major parts and brought under one political entity. This resulted in intensification of 'Indian consciousness' which was further reinforced by the Indian nationalist struggle being led by the Indian nationalist leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and others.

The birth of Indian nationalism as an ideology to liberate 'Mother India' from the colonial yoke was not only from the majority Hindus of India, but was also from sustained contribution from other minority religious and subaltern masses of the country. During the British rule, the British were impressed with 'composite culture' of India and were in favour of its existence. However, they were trying to communalise the society through colonial strategy of 'divide and rule' for their political and economic advantages. Encouraged by the colonial rulers, the communal groups like the Hindu Maha Sabha and the Indian Muslim League were the harbinger of communalisation of society. The nationalist leaders like

Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru endorsed, insisted and committed to the ideals like secularism, pluralism, and equality in response to spread of communal ideas.

To counter communalism, the Indian National Congress explicitly expressed its secular commitment by passing a resolution at Karachi session in 1931 which declared that “every citizen shall enjoy freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess and practice his religion in free India”. However, the fuelling of communalism by the vested interest groups resulted in partition of the country. The Indian National Congress resisted and opposed ‘the idea of partition’. Many Muslim leaders belonging to the Indian National Congress leadership undermined their religiosity and endorsed ‘one nation’ or ‘one quam’. After the partition, the embedded values of Indian civilization such as diversity, heterogeneity, tolerance and collective living were considered essential elements for preserving the ‘idea of India’ in future.

**Nehru and the Idea of India:** The first Prime Minister of independent India Jawaharlal Nehru was committed to building modern, secular and inclusive India. He gave emphasis on fostering the following ideas such as plural democracy, rule of law, non-violence and secularism, social justice, socialistic pattern of economic development, morality based politics, scientific temper and cultural pluralism for nation building. He espoused his vision about plural democracy in his seminal work *Discovery of India*: “I am convinced that nationalism can only come out of the ideological fusion of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and other groups in India. That does not and need not mean the extinction of any real culture of any group, but it does mean a common national outlook, to which other matters are subordinated”.

Nehru’s commitment to secularism was unchallengeable. He vehemently opposed Hindu nationalism and looked at it with suspicion and contempt. In fact, he was instrumental in spreading the idea of ‘secularism’ very deeply in our society. He defined Indian secularism in the sense of keeping the state, politics and education separate from religion, making religion a private domain for the individual, and showing equal respect and opportunity for all the faiths. Nehru’s economic policy had socialist leanings. He was the proponent of ‘mixed economic model’ for India’s economic growth and development.

Nehru embarked upon a multi-pronged strategy of planned economic development based on self reliance. He laid stress on rapid industrialisation, multi-purpose projects like dams and power and steel plants calling them ‘temples of modern India’. He introduced a slew of economic structural reforms such as land and tenancy reforms, introduction of cooperative societies, the state participation in the production process through public sector, etc. He was the pioneer of scientific and technological revolution by setting up various scientific, technological higher institutions for forging scientific temper and outlook. As far as social policy was concerned, he drew inspiration from Gandhian ideas like Hind Swaraj by bringing women, Muslims and Dalits in to the mainstream of society. On the cultural policy front, he relied on the ideas of Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore for promoting cultural pluralism of India. The Nehruvian legacy was incredible in the sense that it created the basic physical and human infrastructure for present modern Indian economic growth and development. His economic policy was endorsed by loyalists and critics alike. Thus, he was the architect of modern, secular and inclusive India.

### **A Paradigm-Shift in the Idea of India?**

Following Nehruvian era, barring brief interregnums, the successive governments have been led by the Congress party until recently, which had been adhering to the Nehruvian vision of nation building. However, it failed to contain the communalisation of society, surging communal riots and expanding

economic inequality. Indian secularism has suffered severe damages in the wake of Hindu Nationalism nurtured by the Hindu communal groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh(RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad(VHP) and Bajrang Dal which are collectively known as the Sangh Parivar. In order to achieve the Hindutva agenda, the Bharatiya Janata Party was floated as the political force of the Sangh Parivar for the establishment of 'Hindu Rashtra' or 'Hindu State'.

The Sangh Parivar has been indulging in spreading communal hatred, intimidation of minorities and communalisation of society. Neither the secular and liberal parties like the Congress and the Left nor any regional progressive party took any concerted efforts to resist or curb the communalisation of society. The United Progressive Alliance(UPA) government had promised to bring a Communal Violence Prevention Bill but it never turned into reality. Finally, the communalisation of society reached a crescendo by resulting in major communal riots such as the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi in 1984, followed by the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the consequent anti-Muslim pogroms in Mumbai in 1992-93, Kandhamal riot against Christians in Orissa in 2008 and the Gujarat carnage in 2002.

The frequent occurrences of communal riots in various parts of the country have made the minorities feel anxious, insecure, and alienated from the society. When communal riots were orchestrated, the secular, liberal and progressive political parties at the national level either became mute spectators and came out with the statements of contempt or indulged in anti-communal rhetoric. Even pro-Muslim political parties like the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar have failed to meet the expectations of the Muslim minority on the instigation of communal clashes. For instance, the Samajwadi Party which is in power in Uttar Pradesh has permitted the monster of communal violence to occur in Muzaffarnagar in 2013. It can be discernible, after Nehru's demise, the principle of secularism became a political calculation for gaining votes of the minorities rather than a principle for political parties in India. This being the reason, many of us would look at Nerhuvian era with nostalgia.

On the surge of Hindutva politics, not only the idea of secularism is in distress, the basic tenet of Indian civilization like 'cultural pluralism' is in danger. Because, Hindutva intends to make Hinduism as 'semitic or monolithic religion' by unifying, codifying and standardising its plural character under the garb of modernisation of Hinduism. The plural character of Hinduism has given away various forms of fine arts and cultural practices and traditions. It would get extinct gradually if attempts are being made by the Sangh Parivar for transforming Hinduism into a monolithic religion. The ideas of inclusiveness have taken a back seat over the years after the demise of Nehru. During the Nehruvian era, the Muslim and other minority leaders were given key cabinet positions as part of government. Over the years, the Muslims were given only ceremonial posts like president, vice president or governor as a measure of tokenism to silence the community. During the UPA government a high level committee was constituted in 2005, presided over by Justice Rajinder Sachar, to prepare a report on the welfare of Muslims. The committee identified the social and economic backwardness of the Indian Muslims and recommended 'affirmative action programmes for their empowerment. The committee report reflected the exclusion and discrimination being faced by the largest minority of India because of their socio-religious identities even though they are the equal citizens of the country.

Apart from minorities, one can learn from many studies and reports that the most oppressed sections like Dalits and Tribes face social and economic discrimination and marginalisation even after many decades of Independence. Despite sustained economic growth in the recent years, there have been increasing

farmer suicides and massive scams, rising food inflation and widening gap of rich and poor. At this juncture, under the pretext of good governance and economic development, the communally tainted Narendra Modi who was schooled in the Sangh Parivar was given the sweeping mandate in the recently held 2014 election to head the country as the Prime Minister. The forming of the government with a majority by the BJP at present shows the penetration and legitimisation of Hindutva politics in the country. Some may argue that it is unclear whether the people voted for the appeal of Hindutva face or for the want of economic change. Whatever the cause may be, the communalisation of Indian multi-cultural and multi-religious society would begin with rigour and fresh outlook for realising the cherished goal of a permanent majoritarian Hindu state.

Prime Minister Modi has begun his work to realise his veiled aspirations by appointing the adherents and hard line proponents of the Sangh Parivar principles as heads of the various cultural and educational institutions. So, Mr. Modi is arming to execute 'his' ideas of India. The political parties which are known for their secular and liberal traditions have become degenerated or slumber on the popularity and rise of Mr Modi. Some of them are even being co-opted for engineering the 'Hindutva politics'. Under this context, the Indian civil society across the board should pitch in educating the masses about the glorious Indian tradition of 'unity in diversity' which is the need of the hour. The priority of the civil society should be the curbing of communalisation of Indian society rather than stopping the communal riots. If communalisation of Indian society remains unchecked, it will lead to polarisation, disunity and consequent communal riots. The balkanization of Indian states would become inevitable. Finally, India will never be the same again and the idea of India will become history.