

Draft for Discussion

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The Idea of India

In the 21st Century

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I am grateful to the authorities of this university for this opportunity of a dialogue on issues of mutual interest in the social sciences. I believe that India and Brazil have much to teach each other and that this type of dialogue and research is long overdue. I hope this lecture is a start to an interaction which will give me the opportunity to welcome some of you in Bangalore and other parts of India.

"Shall (the idea of) India die...Then from the world all spirituality will be extinct, all moral perfection will be extinct, all ideality will be extinct; and in its place will reign the duality of lust and luxury as the male and female deities, with money as its priest; fraud, force and competition its ceremonies and the human soul its sacrifice. Such a thing can never be!"

Letters of Swami Vivekananda,
Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1991,
pp. 164-168.
Said more than hundred years ago.

The Idea of India in the 21st Century

I Introduction: The Idea of India

There are many reasons why scholars use the word 'Idea' to describe the ideals of the country now known as India. India is an ancient civilisation, but as a modern 'nation state' it is very young, having taken birth in 1947 when British India was divided into India and Pakistan. Both the Idea of India and its twin, the Idea of Pakistan were born in blood; the partition of British India into these two left millions dead and much bitterness on both sides. Since then the two have taken different trajectories. I will confine myself to the Indian one.

My purpose here is to bring to your attention some aspects of this sub-continent that in my view are essential to develop an understanding of what keeps this nation together, and of the tensions that it faces within and the factors that now propel its growth. I am not trying to present a Grand Theory or vision that 'explains' India. I want to place before you some aspects that I consider relevant to understanding this question, but which I think have often been pushed to the background. That should set the stage for an interesting dialogue.

The original 'Idea' of India referred to above is a spiritual one based in Vedanta philosophy. This 5000 year old tradition has survived because it has countered, learned from, and assimilated elements from the various traditions it came across. Other old traditions like those of Mesopotamia or Egypt, for example have not survived. This Great Tradition was then moulded by the likes of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, B.R Ambedkar, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, C Rajagopalachari—all iconic figures of India's Independence movement—and their generation to fit the context of a modern nation state.

It both built upon, and deviated from, tenets of the ancient civilisation¹. These were Indians educated abroad, with wide exposure to ideas and experiences in many countries. This experience finds its place in the modern Idea in the acceptance of the basic tenet that all citizens are equal, and in the fundamental role given to democracy in the governance of the new nation. Both are new elements for the Great Tradition. It is an inclusive idea, in which people of all religions, languages, regions and castes are equal as citizens. The Rule of Law in a democracy would be supreme. No one was to be above the law—an unusual notion to most people in India, a society of great historical inequity. India adopted universal suffrage before many modern countries, and it has stuck to this basic belief in spite of niggles in implementation. Thus this Idea of India is the vision of a modern nation state superimposed on an ancient civilisation.

¹ See the delightful accounts in Jawaharlal Nehru's *Glimpses of World History: Being Further Letters to His Daughter Written in Prison and Containing a Rambling Account of History for Young People*. Penguin Books India. [ISBN 0-670-05818-1](#). And his *Discovery of India*, Oxford University Press, 1946, ISBN [978-0195623598](#). For a different dimension see Rabindranath Tagore's collection of poems, *Gitanjali*, [<http://www.schoolofwisdom.com/history/teachers/rabindranath-tagore/gitanjali/>].

This Idea has been questioned all along, as an alien, western, impractical notion for this ancient civilisation, held by foreign educated, “English speaking Indians” who knew little of their country². There is a popular saying: “The people are like the King”. If the King is good, the kingdom is good. This is the traditional mindset. Democracy reverses this ancient creed: the ‘king’ is now like the people. This reversal is seen as an error. This school argues that Indian civilisation is rooted in a tolerant spiritual and ethical tradition, the *sanatana dharma* that is a way of life for all people. Kings rule by *dharma*, ethics. India has been invaded, but it has never invaded any other country because of this dharma. This tradition, which is predominantly cultural, is rooted in nature and gives space to all, including Muslims and Christians, to live in peace if they accepted universal ‘Indian’ values. That it has lasted so long is itself proof of its resilience.

This new Idea of India encapsulates the dreams and hopes of those who created this modern, democratic, and above all *secular* state. Ninety years before Independence in 1947, when there was a ‘mutiny’ against the British in Delhi in 1857, the mutineers approached the powerless Moghul Emperor, Bahadur Shah Zaffer, to lead them because they could not imagine a country without a king. Ninety years is not a long time, but the change within the country is dramatic. In 1947, no one thought of a king; everyone wanted democracy. We ourselves underestimate the rapid, even revolutionary changes taking place in ‘unchanging India’.

Nehru spoke of the scientific temper as a foundation of new India, and of dams as the temples of modern India. This Idea of India *rejects* the opposite of what led to Islamic Pakistan—a theocratic state of the Hindu majority. It is a welfare state that would actively work to develop the country for its people; the state has been given an important role. It would control the ‘commanding heights’ of the economy. The Idea is of a modern, educated, democratic, secular, technologically sophisticated society, with equality of opportunity, and gender equality, whose people enjoy a comfortable and healthy life. It offered, not just freedom of worship, but equal respect for all religions.

The Constitution gives citizens the right to practice, preach and propagate their religion. Christianity and Islam speak of ‘conversion’. Evangelical priests tempt poor people to convert with promises of education, health care and so on. Many of these converted people go to Church on Sunday, but continue to worship their old gods at home. They observe the traditional festivals. This kind of ‘conversion’ is a deeply contested issue with those who reject this Idea of India. It is at the root of much social tension today. In a country where the Constitution gives citizens the right to propagate their religion, there are also demands for laws against [forced] conversion. If we miss this tension, we will miss something critical about today’s India.

² For example, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madhav_Sadashiv_Golwalkar. The Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad champion this viewpoint.

This Idea expected religion to remain in the personal realm and to play no role in the polity³, on the model of the separation of ‘church’ and ‘state’ in western democracies. That separation of church and state in the West had a specific historical context very different from the Indian one⁴. In India, spiritual ideas are everywhere⁵, they permeate all activities and to many a separation of the two is impossible to conceive⁶.

How does one institutionalise this Idea? What does ‘equal respect for all religions’ mean in practice? If one specific religiously significant day of each religion {Christmas, Id, Dussarah...} was made a public holiday, do we have equal respect for all religions? While the Constitution requires the country to move to a common civil code in law, today each religious group is governed by its personal law. Among them Hindu law has been subject to a great deal of reform—in marriage, in inheritance, in the rights of women. This may be cause for celebration but there are many who resent it because it has been limited to them. The Hindus, led by Nehru, may have led in reform of traditional religious practice, but others have not followed⁷. This is seen as pandering to the minority, not as treating them as equals: They should also move from personal law to a common civil code. The Hindus have shown the way.

This situation also shows how difficult it is for other religious groups to reform in tradition bound India. When the Supreme Court ordered payment of alimony to a divorced Muslim woman⁸ called Shah Bano⁹, the religious groups protested the judgement as against Muslim personal law. The national law was changed in favour of the traditional, conservative Muslim clergy. This was a move away from a common civil code. A Muslim minister in the government, Arif Mohammad Khan, courageously resigned—and that was the end of his political career. Can reform sustain if it is limited to the majority only? How can a conservative, ill educated,

³ Rather than keeping away from religion, in India the state gave equal respect to all religions.

⁴ Anyone who as read Alexandre Dumas *The Three Musketeers* will recall the power of the Church in Cardinal Richelieu.

⁵ This can be seen in the Fremmen culture in Frank Herbert’s classic novel, *Dune*.

⁶ In monist tradition, which I discuss below, Brahman is everywhere—in the tree you are about to chop, in the book you are about to read, in the plane you are about to fly in. In an illiterate society this is symbolised in the form of numerous deities who represent this abstract presence. Varuna is the god of the sea; Indra the god of thunder, Annapoorna the goddess of food. There are numerous stories in the oral tradition which illustrate different kinds of life lessons. One invokes the god or goddess that best represents one’s need. Why is it wrong for a Chief Minister to visit a temple before presenting a budget in the Assembly? Did not a priest deliver a sermon at the Inauguration of George W Bush? Do not western courts ask witnesses to swear on the Bible? Why should ministers not pray to the rain gods during a drought? Indians make deals with their favourite deities: help me pass this exam, and I will tonsure my hair in your honour! The debate in France on the burqua shows how complex this debate can be. What does ‘secular’ mean here?

⁷ See <http://koenraadest.bharatvani.org/books/wiah/ch3.htm>. I do not think passing these laws means India is a hindu state, as some believe.

⁸ <http://www.legalserviceindia.com/articles/sabano.htm>

⁹ See for example, <http://ojls.oxfordjournals.org/content/24/4/671.abstract>

minority that feels insecure [because they did not go to Pakistan?] be convinced it has a future in the Idea of India?

The Idea of India is a contested one. In this lecture I will explore some of these contestations. How has the Idea of India evolved since Independence? Where will it take us now?

II India and Bharat

The word India derives from the name of the river Indus [*Sindhu, Indu, Hindu*], and refers to the lands beyond that river, [which today, flows in Pakistan]. It is a geographical marker. It named people who lived beyond the Indus river, ‘hindus’¹⁰. When the Europeans came to this Hindu part of the world and encountered something they did not recognise as Islam or Christianity they called it Hinduism—a name or label never used before. Thus this ‘religion’ was born¹¹. A ‘hindu’ now is not a person from this region, but the practitioner of a religion called Hinduism. Many of us do not recognise ourselves in this!

Only recently has ‘India’ become a country. The Indian constitution of 1952 refers to “India that is Bharat”; this is the name we use ourselves for our country in our own languages. Bharat can be more than just modern India—it refers to the subcontinent from Afghanistan in the west to Burma and beyond. It is a continuity of many civilisations that thrived in this land for more than 5000 years. Gandhari in the Mahabharata was from Khandhar in Afghanistan; the Raja of Kambhoj from Kampuchea or Cambodia. It refers to the ancient civilisations of this huge landmass and evokes a sense of historical, spiritual and cultural continuity¹². The new Suvarnabhumi airport in Bangkok has a huge display of the churning of the ocean by the devas and asuras in search of amruta, the elixir of life. There is a Murugan temple in the Batu caves outside Kuala Lumpur. Bali has a hindu tradition in Indonesia. This vast historical span and its civilisations have left us a legacy of philosophy and social practice of which modern India is but a part.

Buddhism emerged in this land and spread across Asia. Sikhism and Jainism are other spiritual traditions [religions?] that emerged in this soil and are practised by large numbers. This presumably glorious past is often contrasted with the depressing poverty of today. The context makes clear whether one is speaking of the modern nation state of India, or of the larger landmass and civilisation that has existed and interacted over history. The two should not be mixed up and confused.

There were more than 500 little kingdoms within the borders of British India that were autonomous in 1947. They had treaties with the British, and enjoyed a measure of autonomy and freedom. This situation led to a great deal of scepticism

¹⁰ Amartya Sen in his many writings describes the Muslims of this part of the world, as a distinct group referred to as ‘hindva muslims’.

¹¹ In Indian law, a ‘hindu’ is defined by exclusion—not a Christian, Muslim... This is a recognition of the fact that it is not a religion in the sense the others are. It is a way of life. See <http://www.religioustolerance.org/hinduism.htm> for one discussion.

¹² Also called ‘Akhand Bharat’, a concept akin to eretz Israel.

about a federal structure for an Indian dominion in the early 1900s¹³. These kingdoms, in 1947, were given the option of joining either India or Pakistan. While reluctant, most did so. Hyderabad, ruled by the Nizam, was reluctant, but the Indian Army settled that. Kashmir dillydallied, the Pakistanis moved in, the King under pressure joined India, and today we have an unresolved dispute. But apart from this—and it is no small thing—the integration of these states into India is complete today. It is no surprise that politicians feel the need to swear by their commitment to the ‘integrity of India’.

The move from little communities and kingdoms to a modern state is also in part the result of the colonial experience. The British built a system of railways across the country that facilitated movement of freight and people, and which fostered a sense of belonging to something that went beyond one’s immediate horizon.

A very important reason for the integration of India after 1947 was the civil service which the British set up, and which India continued with. This consisted of well educated, broad minded urbane people who shared a vision of a modern nation state and formed a ‘steel frame’ around which the nation was built. The day to day business of government is administration, and this is where the civil service made its contribution in those early days. This civil service has been a powerful force in India since then; some say far too powerful. That is another story.

There was much scepticism after 1947 that this new country—a vast and diverse population under one government—would survive¹⁴ as a sovereign ‘nation state’. That it did, when so many others—think of Yugoslavia—have not, is remarkable indeed. How did this come to be, and what are the challenges this nation still faces?

III India: More Than The Tower of Babel

India is a ‘nation state’ consisting of many ‘nations’. Look at its currency notes—we print the denomination in 15 languages, each of which has a distinct script and literature. There are rich languages beyond this 15, like Mythli and Bhojpuri. I doubt there is even a single citizen who knows them all! The comparison could be with continental Europe. France has 50 million people—as does Karnataka, the part of India where I live. They speak French, we Kannada. They fuss with food, and we can give them competition in that field. They are a sovereign nation; Karnataka is one of the states in the Indian union. Many of the Indian states have a distinct language of their own. A few years after Independence, India decided to create ‘states’ on the basis of language. This was after a major movement for the creation of a Telugu speaking state led by one of the leaders of the Independence movement, Potti Sriramulu, who died after a fast unto death. The linguistic identity got melded into a political one. A kannadiga is a person who speaks Kannada, but

¹³ The most famous is B.R. Ambedkar’s argument against a federal dominion, but it must be remembered that he objected to a specific proposal, not to a general federal form of government.

¹⁴ Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi; The History of the World’s Largest Democracy*, HarperCollins, 2007.

the word is used to refer to a citizen of the state of Karnataka, which has citizens who do not speak that language. Categories get mixed up and cause confusion. People who have multiple identities then get defined in one-dimensional terms. Clearly this causes confusion.

Language is an important element in one's identity. The French speak French and belong to the French nation. We speak Kannada but belong to the Indian nation. As do Gujaratis, Bengalis, Telugus, Tamils, Odiyas and many others. All of them are Indian, even when they differ in fundamental ways, and need to communicate with each other in languages like English that are not their own. In this process, English *has become* an Indian language.

Indian identity is much more complex than the French one. Recognising this is an essential element in any understanding of India and how it has survived as a modern nation. But it is also an element of internal tension. Disputes tend to become bitter. My language is 'Classical', yours is not! There are languages that do not have a script of their own. Are they then inferior to others that do have a script? What is the line between a dialect of a language, and a different language? Tempers run high.

A dispute on how to use the water of the Cauvery river has led to riots and terribly bitter feelings between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Today there is an agitation for a separate state of Telengana, to be carved out of Andhra Pradesh. Both speak Telugu, yet the people of Telengana want to separate. As India evolves, language by itself does not seem to define identity. In a world of multiple and complex identities, this is not a simple matter. And we have not yet found an answer to this complex issue.

I have mentioned the 15 languages on our currency notes. There are in reality many more vernaculars and dialects—hundreds of them. Each region has its own version of the *caste-jati* system¹⁵ I discuss below; and caste is an important part of identity. A *jati* which is 'forward' in one region is 'backward' in another. Around each language is a culture of food, of music, of ritual, of dance and more. Each of these goes into defining identity. South Indians are rice eaters; north Indians wheat eaters; Bengalis fish eaters. To each his own. India is the original Tower of Babel¹⁶. Yet, these languages and identities share the sub continental culture in which they have originated and in which they thrive. Badrinath and Varanasi are sacred to all.

¹⁵ People are born into a caste. The term caste refers to the *varna*, or four fold classification of society—the *Brahmins* [keepers of tradition and ritual with a monopoly on Vedanta], *Kshatriyas* or soldiers, from among whom the kings are chosen, and *baniyas* or traders who keep the economy going. These three are the high castes. The fourth, *shudras*, consists of those whose occupations involve manual labour, like farming. Within this is a range of occupations, *jatis*, which runs into thousands. Beyond these four are those with 'polluting work' like leather tanning and are outcastes—also called untouchables, harijans etc, who now have constitutional protection through a Schedule in the constitution and so are called 'Scheduled Castes'. In the forested regions of the country there are indigenous people who are forest dwellers, who also enjoy constitutional protection as 'Scheduled Tribes'.

¹⁶ Indonesia too has many languages, but they have resolved this issue. By choosing the language of the smallest group, Malay, and making it the banana Indonesia, the national language, everyone communicates with it while retaining their language at home.

So is Mt Kailash in Tibet. References to pranks played by Krishna on the gopikas are understood everywhere as they are part of the folklore of Bharat. For many Sanskrit is the mother language¹⁷. We can travel from one language zone to another and be understood. Indians grow up in a multilingual environment that opens up many worlds to us. It makes it easy for us to learn languages. Most educated Indians are multilingual.

The epics—Ramayana and Mahabharata¹⁸—span the entire region of Bharat, and lie at the root of what we may call the Great Indian Tradition along with the vedanta. They illustrate *dharma*, ethics, by which people should live and kings should rule. But other countries also share in this Great Tradition. The Ramayana is regularly performed in Indonesia. People have communicated and interacted over the millennia. Many tongues have not meant not sharing a common history. Today there are many ‘nations’ in this vast landmass. And as nations they have charted their own path. Today they are all not part of modern India. Differences too have grown and emerged so ‘that who is an Indian’ can have many answers¹⁹. Language is not the only one that divides them. The diversity among Indians is mind boggling.

Contrast this with Brazil; a vast nation of almost 200 million people who all speak one language: Portuguese²⁰. I am struck with wonder!

IV Spiritual Traditions: The monist philosophy

I have used above a quotation from Swami Vivekananda, perhaps the best exponent of India’s traditional philosophy. Traditions here differ greatly from those of the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity in its various guises, and Islam. These religions are based on the belief in a single powerful God, a prophet, and a Holy Book. They also have a sacred place—Jerusalem, Mecca.

Our tradition in philosophy—and that is the most accurate way to describe it—is monist and it serves to chalk out a way of life²¹. To speak in simplistic terms, monism means a belief in a supreme unity—call it Brahman. This is the changing and unchanging universe of which everything is a part. Matter, spirit, energy—all are part of Brahman. It is ever changing and never changing. We are part of

¹⁷ Sanskrit and Pali are also the mother languages from which Thai, Malay etc are derived. And in India, Tamil has little to do with Sanskrit; it is Dravidian. Tamil is also a national language in Malaysia and Singapore.

¹⁸ Other countries too share these epics, for example Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia. This is because of age old relationships that go beyond today’s boundaries.

¹⁹ I recently came across a book by Zaid Ibrahim, in Kuala Lumpur, on this question of identity, titled ‘I too am Malay’.

²⁰ Mariana Alves has cautioned me—there are indigenous languages in Brazil. My wonder, though, remains.

²¹ For an erudite exposition see *Outlines Of Indian Philosophy* by M Hiriyanna, 2000, Motilal Banarsidass Pvt. Ltd.

Brahman in the sense that the divine is everywhere. Life is a journey of discovery of Brahman by the individual self which is itself a part of Brahman. In the end one becomes a conscious part of Brahman. Each of us takes a unique path in this growth of consciousness that ends in Brahman. It can be through work, through meditation and some other way. If honestly pursued, they all lead to *moksha*—union with Brahman. There is no uniformity, there is no obedience to an almighty God, there is no sin and no redemption. If one does evil, one has to pay for it, if not in this life then in a later one. If one has done good, one will be born to a station that is closer to Brahman. When perfection is attained, there is no rebirth. Thus differences are ephemeral and all can co-exist. The Indian gesture of greeting, *Namaskar, Namaste*, says, ‘the divine in me greets the divine in you’.

There are so many differences amongst us that the only common element we can recognise is the hidden divine. As a common TV line puts it in Indian English: ‘We are like this only!’

There are different schools of philosophy around this basic theme. This Great Indian Tradition has made remarkable contributions to human knowledge, from mathematics²² to surgery. I am not competent to venture there.

This monist philosophy is quite different from that of other religions. It should not be treated as *another religion*, because it is not. Unfortunately, use of the word *hindusim* has made it appear to be one. This philosophy is essentially inclusive of all, human and animal. It inculcates a deep respect for nature, for we are part of it. Man was not created in the image of God. The world was not made for Man, as man is but a part of it.

This focuses attention on one’s inner self, on one’s path to *moksha* or union with Brahman. It stresses the ‘non’ aspect of qualities—non-violence, non-acquisitiveness, non-attachment and so on. It encourages a mood or attitude of resignation²³. It does not focus one’s attention outward, to economic activities, to business, to social action. It differs greatly from the Protestant Ethic of hard work. The external world is somehow less important. It is individualistic, not as individual versus society, but in an essential sense all the same. A person’s psychology, her motivations, will follow a different logic here.

This kind of philosophy is not limited to India; it pervades much of Asia. Buddhism is part of this Great Tradition as is Jainism. And it is within this Great Tradition that little traditions have flowered all over India—and its neighbourhood as well. This is unity within diversity because the diversity comes from the Little Tradition.

Marx wrote that every thesis has an anti-thesis. The anti-thesis of the monist philosophy and its Idea of India has emerged in recent years. It is *hindutva*, and I will come to it a little later.

²² A common quip is that India’s contribution to mathematics is 0—the concept of *shunya* or nothingness.

²³ What can we do if the people we elect to office are corrupt? There is nothing we can do till the next election, and even then the new ones may be corrupt.

V Historical Legacy

While this is the Great Tradition, society in India has become rigid over time. Our philosophy tells us we are part of Brahman, but in day to day life we see each other in unequal terms. We have different karma. Inequality is inherent. Our life today has to do with our achievements, good and bad, in past lives. We are poor or sick because of evil in the past that we must pay for. There is no forgiveness in this tradition. Similarly, we are fortunate because of good done in the past. In society this leads to lack of empathy, to a hardness that those from outside cannot understand. How can you look away without concern or pity from the hungry child knocking on your car window?

The next step in society is a rigidification of this *necessary* inequality. You are born into a family with a hard occupation, one requiring physical labour. If you want to improve in your next life, you must cheerfully bear this burden, and do your duty. One's birth determines one's occupation and position in society. This is *jati*—the structure of occupations in a hierarchical society. The *jati* structure serves to transfer skills from one generation to another. This required whole time study and devotion. And the instructor was your father. There is a logic to it, at least when the system was first put in place. Thus you are a carpenter or a barber or a potter, not because you chose to be, but because you are born to be that. You live like your father and grandfather. The family, and the larger family of uncles, cousins etc is what is important. The families of a *jati* form a larger clan within which marriages takes place. One lives within this shell, the outside does not really matter. Society is unchanging. The villages of India are eternal in this sense.

Thus the villages of India consist of settlements of various castes and *jatis*, each with its traditionally defined role. The village is governed by a group of 5 elders called a *panchayat*. This is a caste based institution and people accept its rulings. Political power in far away Delhi means little in these villages. Within the many *jatis*, local power can ebb and flow. As *jatis* grow and become prosperous or powerful, they tend to adopt the lifestyle of the upper castes, for example, by becoming vegetarian. This is a process called *sanskritisation*²⁴; adopting perceived 'higher' customs. This is part of the Little Traditions across the land.

Other *jatis* have other duties and there are hundreds of them. Populations grew, invaders came and went, migrations took place, but the rigid caste system remained unchanged. Over time, the Great Tradition leads to a society in which some are fortunate, many unfortunate. This inequality is not the doing of those who are well off. They are not exploiters; those who are suffering do so because of their own past. Each *jati* has its rituals. If performed one gains merit. The caste that is born to perform and enforce these rules is the Brahmins. Others have their duty, as soldiers, as traders, farmers and so on. The Brahmin has to perform his own rituals to live up to his traditional obligations; in addition he must provide

²⁴ Samskruta is culture, and this is a process of adopting the culture of those higher in the caste hierarchy. It should not be confused with Sanskrit, the language. I mention this as it is sometimes spelled sanskritisation in English.

services to all those of other jatis who need them. He cannot trade and become rich. And a trader cannot aspire to perform the sacred rituals. Each has a place and must maintain it. Each village and region then develops over time a set of traditional duties and reciprocal obligations, called the *jajmani* system. This is the eternal brahminical order²⁵, by its nature an unchanging one.

The economist may describe this as a low equilibrium trap. It is also a society in which even those who are well off cannot indulge in conspicuous consumption. In traditional agricultural economies, being rich means having enough to eat and not much more. But, through the *jajmani* system, it also places obligations on those who have a surplus, with rules about how it should be shared at times of celebration or calamity. Society places a value on austerity—an attribute of the higher caste. Life styles are defined by simplicity. It is a society where there are few who are rich in the contemporary sense of the word. This is a society of social inequity, not of economic inequality. It is a society where opportunities are defined by one's *jati*, not one's desire or capacity. It is inequitable, but it is not racist as some have argued.

This is the social structure that resulted from the Great Tradition we call Brahminism. This Great Tradition exists all over Bharat; details may differ due to local circumstances and many Little Traditions thrive. Brahmins in the north may do things differently from those in the south. *Raksha bandhan*, in which a sister ceremoniously seeks protection from a brother, is important in the north but not in the south. Each *jati* or caste [which is a cluster of *jatis* in a fourfold classification] claims to be superior to the other. While the higher castes are clearly defined, local power need not vest with them. Thus there are dominant castes that are otherwise backward; the situation is complex.

Farmers in one area may grow *bajra*, in other regions they grow *ragi*. Climate plays its part in the evolution of social customs; of ritual; of what is done and not done. And with these differences there are differences in food and other customs. Differences come from the Little Tradition.

This eternal order of Brahminism has faced challenges many times. Buddhism was a major one. So was Jainism, and in more recent times the rebellion of Basaveshwara, whose followers are called the *lingayats*. Many of these were spurred on by the clear inequity in brahminical caste society. There have also been Brahminical revivals. This is one reason why there are so few Buddhists in India. The Idea of India questions this inequity, and it has made all equal by giving each individual a vote. Can the Great Tradition assimilate this change?

Today these castes are all political forces with considerable voting power. None are large enough to dominate the political system in a democracy. But there is scope for bargaining and it is being used. Groups that never had a share in political power have tasted it in India's democracy. They will certainly not give it up. In that

²⁵ For a clear description see *The Last Brahmin*, Rani Sivasankara Sastry, Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2009.

sense the changes brought about by the Idea of India are irreversible. We can only move forward now. This direction will define the India of the 21st century.

But with all these convulsions, the essentials of the old order not only survived but continued. For example, there is supposed to be no caste distinction within the lingayats. That is theory; the reality is different. Caste practices exist among Indian Christians too; they are Indian after all.

This society has faced challenges from outside. India faced a number of invasions. The most famous ancient one is that by Alexander the Great. Later there were encounters with other Great Traditions. The invasions from the north brought in Islam, itself a Great Tradition. The invaders stayed and settled. While Christianity has been present in India since the time of Thomas the Apostle, the coming of the Europeans brought in the Great European, largely Christian Tradition. With colonialism came what Karl Polyani has called the Great Transformation—the increasing importance of the market as an institution in society.

We have an interesting situation in which these Great Traditions interact. The impact on India, in terms of food, of architecture—in every sphere—has been profound. The Great Tradition of the ancient times absorbed elements from the other Great Traditions it came into contact with. Islam brought in new kinds of food, new architecture, and new music. So did other traditions. The Great Tradition of history absorbed much from them. Invaders came to conquer, but they stayed on and made their lives here. The result is the syncretic culture of the India of today²⁶. Babur may have come from Tajikistan in central Asia, but he founded an Indian dynasty of Moghul Emperors. Ours is a tradition of assimilation. It is an essential and continuing element of our Great Tradition.

The Great Tradition of Bharat has been assimilating various influences over a thousand years. It is not a question of a Great Tradition modernising. It is one of evolution through assimilation. There is great philosophical sophistication in much of it. And it co-exists with an inequitable social structure.

To this evolving Great Tradition the Idea of India added democracy. All citizens are equal. Discriminatory practices of caste, like untouchability, have been abolished by law. Reservations have been introduced in schools and government jobs to ensure that the former low caste people get a good education and a fair share of jobs. It has expanded the knowledge base of the country with more and more people, formerly excluded, in getting educated. Persons hailing from these groups have held positions like President of India and Chief Justice of India. This policy had general social acceptance in the country, though some opposition has emerged on the ground that this has over-reached and gone too far, so as to become reverse discrimination.

²⁶ The other Great Traditions have also evolved in India as a result of this interaction. Hindva Muslims differ from those elsewhere. Christianity too has imbued local practices. Hindu gods have a childhood—*Balaganapathy* or *Balasaraswathy*. In Bangalore we have the *Infant* Jesus church.

All citizens have one vote. This has resulted in an incredible social upheaval in the unchanging nature of the Old Great Indian Tradition. People from all walks of life can stand for election and office. People from their jati will vote for them. People opposed to the incumbent who want change vote for them. Groups that have never exercised power suddenly find they not only have a voice, they can act. Vote banks form. New political forces are unleashed.

Large groups of young people find they no longer have to do what their parents and grandparents did²⁷. They can do what they wish to. Many no longer wish to follow the father's footsteps. They want to move away from hard manual labour to skilled work. Farming no longer has a great attraction. The city beckons. Traditional family structures are under pressure. The joint family was the backbone of society, its social safety net. Today, when all are equal, when sons and daughters can follow their whims and move out, this structure is breaking down. The nuclear family has come to stay.

Families which had no exposure to education now have access to it; and their expectations from life go up. This is the impact of the Idea of India on today's society.

There is a boom in schooling, in technical education. Access to education is improving, scholarships are available, even though we are far from equality of access. Life expectancy at birth has increased by 20 years, largely due to a reduction in death rates because of improvements in public health. Economic opportunities are opening up outside of the traditional economy of agriculture and handicrafts, which unfortunately are in decline.

Energies hitherto dormant have been unleashed. There are high expectations. The economy has begun to move. In the first three decades after Independence the economy grew at about 2.5% a year—jokingly called the Hindu rate of growth. Before 1950, the economy had grown at less than 1% a year. And in the last 20 years it has approached 9%. But not all sections of society have benefitted from this growth. A new class of the super rich is emerging.

There are signs that this has gone too far, that in discarding some old values, we are also discarding others that sustain us with its moral or ethical force. If you can do what you like, you can take a bribe as well if it enriches you more quickly. If giving a bribe speeds up a business decision on which profits depend, then why not? If you can get your salary without doing any work, why not? This is a serious problem in government offices, where employment is guaranteed for life. The vast increase in corruption in our society has its roots here.

The scale of this change brings it own constraints. When educational institutions are opened at this rate, it is difficult to find enough teachers. Libraries and universities cannot be built overnight. Hospital buildings can be put up, but health

²⁷ For an excellent discussion of these forces and energies, see V.S. Naipaul, *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, 1990. See also for a contemporary account from Bangalore of what young women are doing: <http://epaper.timesofindia.com/Repository/ml.asp?Ref=VE9JQkcvMjAxMS8wMy8wNyNBcjAwNDAw>

services are another matter. Quantity does not mean quality. Degrees from such colleges do not always give students the skill they should have. We need to do things fast, but some things take time. Building institutions is one of them, and we do have a problem here in a situation of rapid population increase. The labour force is expanding dramatically. It has been called the demographic dividend. Without skills, it may not be one.

We have a new phenomenon: educated unemployment. High unemployment among the young, who have education, creates major tensions in society. India has been facing this on an increasing scale in many parts of the country. It is called naxalism, and some are violent.

All this is the impact of this Idea of India.

To the Idea of India an anti-thesis has emerged in the form of hindutva or hinduness. It builds on a strand of the ancient tradition, and specific steps that have been taken in Independent India. Democracy has shaken up the ancient order of unchanging India. Many, especially the upper castes, are unsettled at this. They see the pursuit of position and power as against traditional values. As economic growth takes hold, economic inequality is increasing. There are now many rich people, and they are beginning to flaunt their wealth. The ordinary people see the young urban rich consume pizzas, pepsi, and swing to the music of the Beatles. They are horrified at the commercial success of Valentine's Day. This is seen as a loss of one's cultural roots, of one's identity to 'foreign' influences. This must be fought. And they are willing to fight on the streets for 'cultural nationalism' which they see as patriotism. Unemployed youth, struggling to find jobs and join in the consumer revolution, frustrated because a lack of English has closed many opportunities to them, form the base for such a movement that urges us to get back to our roots. Let us learn our languages, English is the problem. These contradictions need to be resolved.

This kind of view is a wide sentiment in today's world, not limited to India. Why were the Buddha statues in Bamian in Afghanistan destroyed some ten years ago? What is Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka?

The anti-thesis of the Idea of India sees the government 'pandering to the minority'—by which they mean Muslims, who they think are loyal to Pakistan, not India: as Muslims they must be Pakistani! One dimensional identity in a complex world.

They point to historical injustice, to the fact that Muslim rulers had destroyed Hindu temples in their attacks on 'idols'. They have begun to demand 'justice', by which they want to demolish specific mosques and build temples in their place—because the mosques were built on temples destroyed earlier. One of these mosques stood in Ayodhya, which is where Ram of the Ramayana was supposed to be born, This set of people—and there are a large number of them—would like to build a 'grand' Ram temple where the mosque, which was demolished in 1992, stood. To this hindutva brigade, Ayodhya is a holy place like Mecca or Jerusalem. To them Ram, an avatar of Vishnu, is a god, like Jesus. To them, The Gita is a holy

book like the Bible. Hinduism—and they have adopted this word—they say has a tolerant tradition that has been taken advantage of by ‘foreigners’. Let us get back to our Hindu roots, and this will be a paradise on earth.

It is not surprising that some see this Hindutva thinking as Christianity in disguise²⁸. If this is the anti-thesis of the Idea of India, we badly need a synthesis.

The Idea of India in the 21st century has to deal with this backlash. It cannot be wished away, and needs to be faced squarely. It is a big challenge.

VI Contemporary Challenges

In 1951 India had about 3.5 million people. Today it is well over a billion. We are in the throes of a great change. This change includes within it a high level of economic growth and a growing economic inequality. Expectations have outstripped the ability of the governmental system to respond to reasonable demands. Growth, per se, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to deal with issues of growing economic inequality. Surely economic growth will help if the economy expands, but measures will be needed to ensure a better redistribution than we have today.

While the past is relevant, so is the future. The forces unleashed by the Idea of India have to work themselves out. The old values can guide us, but the old values are now under question. How does one cope with such fundamental changes in people’s aspirations and attitudes? Where can one find the moral compass to navigate such change?

And the future must take into account the aspirations of more than a billion people. They are no longer content to do without the basic good things of life. Everyone wants education, health care, clean drinking water, food security, safe cities and so on. The task is so vast that we forget how much we have actually achieved. It is because of this achievement that we have realised how more has to be done.

This is what the Idea of India has done—or achieved since Independence. Even those who do not accept this Idea will have to work towards a future which provides citizens with these services and securities. In this India is now no different from other countries in the world.

Since the basic element of this change has come through democracy, I would expect a deeper impact from democracy if the country can go in for electoral reforms. The Idea of India gave everyone the vote. But we need a system in which the vote can be converted to government. Today we have a system in which a person can win with 15% of the vote, because there may be 10 or more candidates. This has meant that politicians cultivate a strong votebank of 15 to 20% of the electorate, and brazenly ignore the rest. Instead of trying to find consensus across the population, politicians have been dividing them on linguistic, caste, religious lines. Should only a Muslim represent Muslims? Cannot a Muslim politician

²⁸ Rani Sivasankara Sarma, *The Last Brahmin*, op cit, for a lucid explanation.

represent others adequately? The compulsion would come if the politicians needed to depend on a real majority. This is not the case today. Perhaps we can bring in the runoff system you have in Brazil. It will force our politicians to seek wider support.

Funding of elections is another issue. So long as contributions are made, vested interests will prevail. State funding of elections may be the way to go.

The quality of candidates has to improve. Today there are many members of parliament who have serious cases, like rape and murder, pending against them. Our law disqualifies only those who have been convicted, and justice takes a long time. Recent initiatives from civil society have begun the process of reform. Today, every candidate in an election has to declare his wealth and assets. He has to declare if there are cases pending against him. This is a start. But we must find ways of getting qualified and honest candidates to fight elections.

For the Idea of India to continue to make an impact, for the vision to be achieved, the 21st century will mean electoral reforms in practice. These are big challenges, and it is the young generation that will have to face them.

To end, I have examined the Idea of India in this lecture and will be happy to debate issues further. But before that, let me mention an interesting book I have recently read. This book²⁹ makes interesting claims about Brazil—that the Chinese had come to this country before the Europeans. The Europeans apparently used maps that the Chinese had prepared. This book claims there was a Brazilian ambassador in the court of the Ming Emperor before the Europeans came to Brazil. This is a major reappraisal of classroom history. How valid is such a reappraisal?

I am no one to comment, but may I ask: What is the Idea of Brazil? What is your Great Tradition? What was your encounter with colonialism like? What can we now learn from each other? The time has come for me to listen.

²⁹ For details, see <http://www.1421.tv/>.