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Fractured Narratives: Identities in a Political Vacuum

Abstract

This article examines the dilemmas that India faced historically in its attempts to construct a coherent national narrative and a shared national identity. It is argued that the decline of the Congress Party and a larger loss of a unifying ideology in the 1980s created a political vacuum that resulted in attempts to shore up political support through appeals to identity-based politics. This in turn has served as an obstacle to inequality being bridged in India in the past decade. The void thrown open by the loss of Congress Party's longstanding uncontested mandate to rule was seized by political parties that campaigned along cultural lines for political gains, unleashing a divisive and intolerant brand of politics based on competing claims of cultural rights.

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Background:

The nation-building narrative of India since its independence has been based on the idea of ‘Unity in Diversity’. This maxim has been used as a powerful tool in shaping the national identity but has also created dilemmas of equality and the transcendence of cultural divisions in the pursuit of economic development and social change. In the past two decades the fabric of Indian society appears increasingly fractured where the language of equality has been displaced by competing claims to recognition or victimhood and an alarming rise in identity politics.

For instance, last month a petition in the high court in the Indian state of Gujarat demanded a ban on augmented reality game Pokemon Go because apparently its images of eggs in places of worship were ‘blasphemous’ to Hindus. The court has asked the makers of Pokemon Go to respond to the charges.¹ Earlier this year, the Sikh body objected to the use of a dagger, an article of Sikh faith, in a Bollywood film song claiming that it was used in an “inappropriate manner” thereby insulting Sikh tenets.² A Pakistani girl was assaulted in a Bombay shopping mall, by a group of women, for sporting a tattoo that said ‘Thank you, God’ in Urdu on her back. While the police found nothing legally objectionable about the tattoo, they decided to refer it to legal experts nonetheless ‘to see if they could book her for hurting religious sentiments’.³ Meanwhile, in the coastal city of Mangalore in South India, a group of men stormed a pub, and thrashed and molested the women guests for ‘violating the Indian ethos’. The organisation’s leader claimed they were protecting Indian culture and its women. Politicians from different quarters, while denouncing the attack said that it was against Indian culture for women to drink and visit pubs.⁴

Such incidents are now common in contemporary India, becoming the norm in the past decade. In an avowedly multicultural society, however, such violent assertions are not intrinsic, but a more recent phenomenon.

Nation-building narrative: Unity in Diversity

The most dominant and prevailing narrative since independence has been that of ‘Unity in diversity’. This is regurgitated through political rhetoric, the Republic day parade, the national anthem, public interest films and commercials. And yet, political conflicts around religion, caste and regional identities have multiplied in India and impassioned affirmations of identities and heightened group sensitivities are more conspicuous now than at any time since independence.

While the violence is denounced, there is an implicit support for identity-based political demands by the state and authorities, and in most cases the frontrunners are political parties and groups who

¹ ‘Pokemon Go in Indian court for “hurting religious sentiments”’, *BBC News*, 7 September 2016

² ‘Now Sikh body objects to Dishoom song, asks CBFC to delete Kirpan reference’, *Indian Express*, 14 June 2016

³ ‘Pak girl beaten up for sporting tattoo in Urdu’, *Mumbai Mirror*, 19 January 2009

⁴ ‘Girls assaulted in Mangalore pub’, *Times of India*, 26 January 2009

are the self-styled guardians of particular group interests. Culture, nationality and religion become the automatic basis for the 'right' to be offended or demand special privileges. 'Identity' is the new political playing field, with an ever-increasing number of competitors, an arena that witnesses heightened emotions, laced with words such as respect, rights, and recognition. 'Unity in Diversity' makes for an all-encompassing defining narrative of the country. The overarching values of tolerance and secularism have been etched so deep in the Indian ethos that these ideas have now attained an unquestionable status in political rhetoric. In the last two decades these defining values have mutated to take on amoebic meanings and proportions.

The decline of the Congress party and a larger loss of ideology in the 1980s created a political vacuum that has come to be filled with attempts to court individual and group affiliations and identities. This, coupled with the process of liberalisation and growth, and a simultaneous expansion of India's democratic base, has now meant that a new language of representative politics seeks to create an egalitarian polity. The language of identity that the political elite takes refuge in, keeps inequality intact.

At the time of independence, the ideas of secularism and diversity served Nehru's larger ambition of a planned economy as part of shaping a modern India. These dominant narratives have over the decades mutated from more progressive ideals that were at the heart of nation-formation to fierce identity politics, which serve narrow political gains. At the time of independence, the idea of diversity was about the right to free and open political, linguistic, cultural and religious expression. What stands in its place today is a politics of representation that has made diversity itself become a political right rather than a cultural fact.

Nehru's 'Discovery of India'

To understand the ideals of free India, the nationalist project that underpinned it, and the vision that backed what came about as a nation, it is useful to refer to the motivations and visions of independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. This is the consequence of two reasons: to begin with, Nehru was the first to inherit the modern nation state, and the ideas that became the mainstay of India—unity in diversity, tolerance and secularism—now almost chronically clichéd, were central to the process of national integration and Nehru's ambitions for the country. Second, the Congress, led by Nehru, was for decades before and after independence the only major single party to rule India, uncontested. The initial constitution of the Indian polity was single-handedly written and shaped by this monolithic rule. The subsequent decay of the party that created an organisational and ideological pit can be understood using this as a reference point.

Unity was a very real concern at the time of Independence, given that the colonial inheritance of arbitrary presidencies, provinces, and princely states had to be brought under the new Indian state. The building of the nation, literally and metaphorically, was a process much deliberated over and posing not just a few complications, protests, and contradictions. What used to be roughly etched

out provinces and presidencies of British India, native states and territories, and ‘hereditary demi-empires’ had to be brought together.⁵

Nehru was very aware of this, and his rhetoric and all his efforts and were employed in the task of integration. In an urgent nationalistic spirit, Nehru made liberal use of history, often appropriating history to make multiculturalism and tolerance seem inherent to Indian culture and being. He went far to invent a cultural and historical continuity and imagined narratives of multiculturalism and secularism from ancient civilisations through to the nationalist struggle.⁶ Anna Guttman in her reading of the *Discovery of India* sees Nehru’s seminal work as the first to ‘overtly privilege cultural diversity and tolerance as national values’ arguing that the essence of India for him is its ‘multiculturalism’.⁷ However, Nehru, although in his deep nationalistic sentiments, reified these values as inherent to Indian culture he did not promote cultural diversity as a national value. This was merely a fact, a fact that he elevated with great enthusiasm, never however, missing an opportunity to assert his ambitions of painting a future-oriented progressive ideal for India. Nehru made the following observation about India’s diversity, to which he often pragmatically referred to as ‘variety’: “The diversity of India is tremendous; it is obvious; it lies on the surface and anybody can see it.”⁸

Aware of India’s infinite divisions of caste and class, he believed in social change that would focus everyone on a shared future rather than divided pasts. He believed that the forces of social change and economic development would erode the base of the caste system, even acknowledging at one point that modern developments had a tendency to create a uniformity that transcended group identities. India’s integration and continued social cohesion was central to the project of planned development for the whole subcontinent.

A self confessed liberal humanist, Nehru nurtured the ambition of a modern nation where ‘hydroelectric plants’ and ‘factories’ were the ‘temples of our age’. He also introduced scientific research and teaching to Indian universities, institutes of technology and research centres, and believed in promoting industrialisation on a large and balanced scale, increase production, and build dams and reservoirs to create hydroelectric power.⁹

Aware of the looming demands for a Pakistan, Nehru was very conscious of promoting secularism as a national goal. The Congress party had always proclaimed itself as a secular organisation. This was imperative to the freedom movement and gave it strength. That India should be a secular state was an undisputed certainty. However, unlike the Western notion of a separation of state and religion, the Indian state defined secularism as the equal status and protection of all religions.

⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷ Anna Guttman, ‘Compromise and Contradiction in Jawaharlal Nehru’s Multicultural Nation-State: Constructing National History in the *Discovery of India*’, *CLIO* 32, no. 3 (2003): 1.

⁸ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 61.

⁹ Walter Crocker, *Nehru: A Contemporary’s Estimate* (Noida: Random House India, 2008).

Secularism was one of the defining features and pillars of Nehru's independent state. This, as Metcalf puts it, "encouraged a persisting allegiance to 'community' at odds with the individualism of a democratic polity."¹⁰

For nearly two decades, the Congress did not have any significant political opposition and enjoyed the moral status and legitimacy of the party that had won India its independence. After Gandhi, Nehru was the most popular political figure and enjoyed absolute authority. He had the unconditional mandate of the people and unquestioning loyalty of his party members, and he had if not a coherent, but a well articulated ideology—a secular socialist democracy. It was his ambition to direct India's economic development modelled on Soviet style central planning, and he had the history of a nationalist struggle to afford the party political certainty and legitimacy.

Shaky ideals: the emergence of new political moves

The two decades after independence were characterised by rhetoric of a modern industrialised nation, based on socialist ideals. Only, these didn't bring the promised prosperity to a nation of millions. Following the death of Nehru, the period of 1969-1984 spelt decline for the Congress. The 1967 elections failed to revitalise the institution and it was the beginning of the end. Congress majority in the parliament had reduced considerably—from a majority of over 100 to just over twenty seats. This was also the beginning of alliances transcending ideologies. Indira Gandhi, daughter of and successor to Nehru, introduced a shift from the traditional mantle of the nationalist Congress; voters were now courted on the basis of their ethnic and religious affiliations.¹¹

The secular orientation of Congress was no longer an encoded fact. With the split in the party in 1969, the resulting groups now vied for the same electorate, looking for alternative ways to appeal to the electorate. Indira's rise to absolute power, and her success in the 1971 elections, in which she employed new populist politics, was concomitant with the organisational decay in Congress. The slogan 'Indira is India, India is Indira' captured this personality politics.¹² Rajiv Gandhi, Indira's son and heir to the party, did not provide any stimulus to the party either. The Bofors arms scam plagued Rajiv; the party had already lost its reputation of being non-corrupt. The pillar of socialism that Nehru had erected looked shaky, and the party was ideologically bankrupt. The ideal of a secular tolerant India had capsized effectively and rhetorically. As Ashutosh Varshney has noted:

By the late 1980s, there was an organisational and ideological vacuum in Indian politics. Organisationally, the Congress was listless. Ideologically, it was not obvious what it stood for. Professing secularism, its leaders were unafraid to use

¹⁰ Metcalf, op cit

¹¹ Ibid p. 247.

¹² Ibid, p. 249.

*religion for political purposes. Professing socialism, some of its leaders wholeheartedly embraced the market.*¹³

It was in this climate of ideological and political vacuum that the right wing Hindu nationalist party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gained prominence. At the same time, the issue of caste reservations came to the fore. Both the issues, of religion and caste-based reservations, let loose violent passions and gave rise to a new politics of identity.

Mandir and Mandal: religion and caste in the politics of 1980s

Strategies to appeal to religious identities became embedded in the political system only in the late 1980s, with a void created at the Centre and political groups, especially Congress, unable to fill that void with any tangible nationwide plans. Two significant events during this same period can be attributed with the change in the dynamics of how party politics functioned in India. These are often referred to as Mandir, meaning temple and Mandal, which refers to the commission that recommended the implementation of caste-based reservations (the equivalent of what is understood as affirmative action in the West) for the ‘Other Backward Classes’ or OBCs in addition to the already existing quotas for the ‘Scheduled castes’ and ‘Scheduled tribes’ said to make up the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy.¹⁴

In 1980, the Mandal Commission extended the criteria of a new giant but vague category of the so-called OBCs by defining caste-based backwardness. Carving out a new list, the commission placed a total of 3,248 ‘communities’ in the OBC category, that is, over 50 per cent of the country’s population.¹⁵ In 1989, the move by then Janata Party government at the Centre led by VP Singh to extend reservations of public sector jobs to include the OBCs brought unprecedented violent and large scale protests across northern India.

Mandir refers to the temple politics of the BJP—their demand to build a temple in place of the existing 100-year-old mosque in the city of Ayodhya in North India, which is considered to be the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama. That these two events took place nearly simultaneously speaks of the considered strategic moves across political groups and the deliberations over the impact of their caste and class affiliations on the share of votes.

These events saw flared sentiments engulf the political stage, but the desire and strategy was for caste and religious groups to get noticed—conflicts around identity politics in India had started the

¹³ Ashutosh Varshney ‘Contested Meanings: India’s National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety’, in *Daedalus* 122, 1993.

¹⁴ For a detailed account of the political climate within which these events took place, see Amrita Basu and Atul Kohli, eds., *Community Conflicts and the State in India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998). p. 38-47.

¹⁵ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India: from the 18th Century to the Modern Age*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). P 295.

multiplication process. This was also the beginning of the rise of regional parties, which professed to represent specific caste and regional groups.

Caste Identities—bargaining for equality

While caste has always been a reality in India, caste politics is a relatively recent arrival. Thrown into the political space first in 1989, caste-based political parties and campaigns have become the mainstay of current Indian politics. Demands for reservations in the education sector, in private colleges and in the private employment sector too have appeared on the political scene. From demands for reservations to citing offence by virtue of belonging to a particular group, caste has joined the competition for recognition.

The trend of reservations unleashed by caste politics has become a popular means of getting noticed, and the competing claims to victimhood are plenty. In Mumbai in the western state of Maharashtra, a political group has demanded that the local Marathi-speaking community be afforded reservations in all educational institutions, in housing and in employment. Likewise, the Patidars in Gujarat and Gujjars in Rajasthan led agitations for recognition under the OBC category even as these groups have enjoyed economic prosperity. There has been a fundamental shift of political identity away from party ideologies and toward group identities of caste, religion, and region. The language of national equality that had been envisaged at the time of independence is now translated into the language of diversity, and proclaimed community identities seek preference in the name of equality. Narratives based on the personal compete in the political space, while the political classes are unable to create one that can transcend these.

Far from the project of making a modern casteless society, the new brand of politics seeks to create and perpetuate an entrenched view of group identities as absolutes. The dynamism that diversity affords to Indian culture, then, has been supplanted by competing claims that perceive unfair advantages to rival groups. The rhetoric of equality has been reduced to the bargaining power of different groups.

Conservative ideologies: politics on the ‘right’ and the ‘Indian culture’

The BJP’s conservative ideology of Hindu nationalism has preoccupied itself with a revival of history, rooted in Hindu nationalism, culture, and tradition. With liberalisation and globalisation trends in the 90s, this came to be arbitrarily defined more in relation to what it was not. But the 1990s also saw the beginning and irreversibility of coalition politics, with no single party winning absolute majority. As the dominant partner of a 14-member coalition government, when in rule briefly in 1996 (it survived only 13 days) and later in 1998, the BJP had to distance itself from its overtly traditionalist ideology, in support for continued liberalisation.

Today the conservative ideology has been reduced from the proclaimed ideals of national integration, democracy and ‘value-based politics’ to indiscriminate use of ‘Indian culture and identity’ to register offence and practice violence. The right constructs “Indianness” only in relation

to the ‘Other’. Indian culture is everything that is not Western, and the protection of Indian culture takes the form of protests against everything perceived as western. Indian culture and identity are then defined in such capricious forms, as protests against the celebration of Valentine’s Day, opposition to beauty pageants, films considered too ‘sexy’ or to a rigid brand of patriotism that resists challenge and criticism.

Democratic strength — the optimum use of identity politics

The growth of community identities and conflicts has coincided with a deinstitutionalisation of the Indian state. Both the normative and organisational pillars of the post-independence Indian state — secularism, socialism and nationalism — had weakened definitively by the late 1980s. The decade of 1989-1999 saw a shift in the manifestation of democracy in India. State specific parties grew in numbers and in strength, gradually commanding a stake in national politics at the Centre. Today with over 400 registered political parties in the country, each claiming to represent specific groups and agendas, a fractured electorate is a reality of Indian politics, and many even consider this to be an irreversible development. Yogendra Yadav describes this new trend as:

The last decade stands out for sudden outburst of some of the maladies inherent in our system: the endemic multiplication in the number of political parties and the fractionalisation of the political space; the rise of regional parties and caste-community based parties that threaten to unleash fissiparous tendencies and a clash of primordial loyalties; end of ideology-based politics and the decline of political morality... to sum up: our politics is one big mess.¹⁶

And yet, it is not an ominous warning of democratic collapse and national disintegration. Fresh cleavages across the country on the one hand, has also meant that an electorate largely left unserved by the ‘Brahmin-bourgeois’ Congress in the initial decades of post-colonial India have now gained a more dynamic and definitive role to play in the democratic process. With the changes in the 1990s, a previously inconspicuous electorate of lower castes and minorities in India have more control over the composition of the political class. The base of electoral democracy has expanded to become more inclusive. With the increased size of a multiplying electorate, competition for state-controlled resources has increased, traditional social hierarchies have eroded, and the spirit of democratic competition has spread.

However, as Yogendra Yadav rightly points out, in the current political scenario of electoral representation of individual groups, ‘the voters can choose from a set, but they cannot determine which set to choose from.’ This ‘choice’, he says, is far removed from the ‘act of sovereignty that the fiction of liberal democracy makes it out to be’.¹⁷ Democratic competition has also created new cleavages along multiple lines creating increasingly fractious domestic political interests. With

¹⁶ Yogendra Yadav, ‘Electoral Politics in the Time of Change: India’s Third Electoral System, 1989-1999’, in *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, Aug. 21 – Sep. 3, 1999), pp 2-8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.1.

political parties being answerable to particular states, caste groups, sects, economic groups, religious communities, and peasant class, leaves only a narrative of diversity, where each group makes its own claims, and every claim is accommodated without contest.

Identities are not simple objective realities; these are constructs, which most often become a concern for the political elite in the absence of any coherent vision for the electorate and a rising political cynicism that disconnects it from the masses. Besides, an enlarged base of material expectations and aspirations, thanks to economic growth since the early 1990s has created in the place of a centralised political culture, a medley of diverse ethnic, regional, religious, caste, and economic groups and subgroups who now believe that they can most effectively pursue their interests as narrowly defined political entities.

Identity of a group or a nation is not an objective reality. In India, as in much of the world, the 1980s spelt decline in political ideology and a sense of political exhaustion. With the weakening of the organisational pillars of post-independence Indian state — secularism, socialism and nationalism — the political elite found it unable to infuse any new meaning into politics, the language of identities becoming a tool to make symbolic appeals to different groups. Nehru thought that state policy, institutions, and ideological discourse would deepen the nation's commitment to modernity. Nehru's vision of modernity is now twisted into mere claims for recognition of customs, language and traditions, which do not have the potential to dislodge the wedge of inequality. So while the nation is economically achieving unprecedented change, identities in the political space assume an unchanging nature, and the electorate makes the best of what is offered.

Biography of the author

Dr Sadhvi Sharma is a researcher and writer in political economy. After graduating from the University of Warwick, she received her PhD from Singapore's Nanyang Technological University for her research on the interplay between corporations and civil society in the advocacy of sustainability in Indonesia. Prior to this she has worked extensively in the non-profit and policy sectors as a research consultant on projects ranging from multiculturalism, international development, non-traditional security, climate change policy across India, SE Asia, UK and Sweden. Dr Sharma is a regular commentator on political and social developments in India. Her research aims and interests include politics of resources and environment, transnational civil society and advocacy, identity politics, and the rise ethical business norms.

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