



# Reimagining India's Present

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Most of us have a massive psychological barrier against looking seriously at the future. Many nurture the not unnatural, latent fear that any engagement with the future will turn out to be an acknowledgement of their mortality and the transience of their world. Different cultures handle this fear differently. In India's middle-class culture, attempts to look at the future often end up as tame, defensive litanies of moral platitudes or as overly dramatic, doomsday 'propheteering'. Even those who avoid these extremes usually view the future either as the future of the past or as a linear projection of the present. If one is a fatalist, one sees no escape from the past; if not, one often desperately tries to live in the instant present.

Those who see the future as growing directly out of the present also often narrow their choices. When optimistic, they try to correct for the ills of the present in the future; when pessimistic, they presume that the future will aggravate the ills. If one views the future from within the framework of the past, one arrives at questions like 'Can we restore the precolonial village republics of India as part of a Gandhian project?' or 'Should we revive Nehruvian non-alignment to better negotiate the turbulent waters of India's inter-

national relations in the post-cold-war world?' If one views the future from within the framework of the present, one asks questions like 'Will the present fresh water resources or fossil-fuel stock of the world outlast the twenty-first century?'

Important though some of these questions are, they are not the core of future studies. No environmentalist can claim to be a futurist by only estimating, on the basis of existing data, the pollution levels in India in the coming decades. Exactly as no economist can claim to be a futurist by predicting the exchange value of the Indian rupee in the year 2005. The reason is simple. The future—that is, the future that truly intrigues or worries us—is usually disjunctive with its past. Defying popular faith, the future is mostly that which cannot be directly projected from the present. Actually, we should have learnt this from the relationship between the past and the present. The present has not grown out of the past in the way the technoeconomic or historical determinists believe.

I often give the example of a survey done exactly hundred years

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ago, at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was done mainly as an exercise in technological forecasting during the Paris exposition. The respondents were the best-known scientists of the world then. In retrospect, the most remarkable result of the survey was the total failure of the scientists to anticipate scientific discoveries and changes the world would see in the twentieth century. Thus, for instance, the scientists thought the highest attainable speed in human transportation during the century was 250 miles an hour and among the innovations that they thought would not be viable or popular were the radio and television. Indeed, novelist Jules Verne's fantasies often anticipated the future of science and technology more imaginatively and accurately. For a novelist's imagination is not cramped by the demands of any discipline or the expectations of professionals, not even by hard empiricism.

The present too is disjunctive with the past, though we love to believe otherwise. The past nowadays is available to us in packaged forms, mainly through the formal, professional narratives of the discipline of history. We feel that we have a grasp on it. History monopolises memories and offers us a tamed, digestible past, reformulated in contemporary terms. It is thus that

history fulfils its main social and political role—it gives a shared sense of psychological continuity to those living in a disenchanted world. You cannot do the same with the future, for the future has to be anticipated and it is more difficult to turn it into a manageable portfolio. Ultimately, Benedotte Croce’s aphorism—‘all history is contemporary history’—can be applied to all genuine futuristic enterprises, too. All visions of the future are interventions in and reconceptualisation of the present. My quick peep into the future of India, therefore, can only be a comment on India today. I offer it in the spirit in which my work on India’s pasts, too, has all along been an attempt to ‘work through’ or reimagine India’s present.

The future of India in my mind is intertwined with the future of diversity and self-reflection, two values that have been central to the Indian worldview, cutting across social strata, religious boundaries and cultural barriers. I believe that during the last two hundred years, there has been a full-scale onslaught on both these values. Even when some have upheld these values during the period, they have mostly done so instrumentally. Thus, even when they have talked of unity in diversity, the emphasis has been on the former; the latter has been seen as an artefact or a hard, somewhat unpleasant, reality with which we shall have to learn to live. A modern nation-state loves order and predictability and its Indian incarnation is no different. Sankaran Krishna’s brilliant study of Indian intervention in Sri Lanka, *Postcolonial Insecurities*, shows that, even when the Indian state has gone to war in the name of protecting cultural identities and minority rights, its tacit goal has been to advance the hegemonic ambitions

of a conventional, centralised, homogenising nation-state. In response to the demands of such a state, modern Indians too have learnt to fear diversity.

That fear cuts across the entire ideological spectrum and is ever increasing. Most Gandhians want an India that would conform *fully* to their idea of a good society, for they have begun to fear their marginalisation. The late Morarji Desai was a good example of such defensive Gandhism. But even some of the more imaginative Gandhians, the ones who cannot be accused of being associated with the fads and foibles of Desai, have not been different. They have absolutised Gandhi the way only ideologues can absolutise their ideologies. The new globalisers also have one solution for the entire world, though they sometimes lazily mouth buzzwords like ‘multiculturalism’, ‘grassroots’ and ‘alternative development’. The goal of their pluralism is to ensure the transparency and predictability of other cultures and strains of dissent. Likewise, I have found to my surprise that attempts to protect religious diversity in diverse ways is not acceptable to most secularists. They want to fight the monocultures of religious fundamentalism and religion-based nationalism, but feel aggrieved if others do so in other ways. They suspect the tolerance of those who are believers and trust the coercive apparatus of the state. Secularism for

such secularists serves the same psychological purposes that fundamentalism does for the fundamentalists; it becomes a means of fighting diversity and giving play to their innate authoritarianism and monoculturalism.

Things have come to such a pass that we cannot now stand diversity even in the matter of names. Bombay has always been Mumbai, but it has also been Bombay for a long time and acquired a new set of associations through its new name. Bombay films and Bombay ducks cannot have the same ring as Mumbai films and Mumbai ducks. Nor can Chennai substitute Madras in expressions like bleeding Madras and Madras Regiment. Many great cities like London happily live with more than one name. Indeed, in the Charles De Gaulle Airport at Paris, you may miss a plane to London unless you know that London is also Londres. Until recently, we Calcuttans used to live happily with four names of the city—Kolikata, Kolkata, Kalkatta and Calcutta. Indeed, the first name is never used in conversations, yet you have to know it if you are interested in Bengali literature. In recent years, the city has been flirting with a fifth name, thanks to former cricketer and cricket commentator Geoffrey Boycott—Calcootta. But the Bengalis have disappointed me. Many of them now are trying to ensure that there is only one name for the city, Kolkata. The gifted writer Sunil Gangopadhyay has joined them, because he feels that the Bengali language is under siege from deracinated Bengalis, Anglophiles and Bombay—or is it Mumbaiiya?—Hindi. I am afraid the change will not provide any additional protection to the Bengali language. It will only fuel our national passion for sameness.

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It is my belief that the twenty-first century belongs to those who try to see diversity as a value in itself, not as an instrument for resisting new monocultures of the mind or as a compromise necessary for maintaining communal or ethnic harmony. 'Little cultures' are in rebellion everywhere and in every sphere of life. Traditional healing systems, agricultural and ecological practices—things that we rejected contemptuously as repositories of superstitions and retrogression have staged triumphant returns among the young and the intellectually adventurous and posing radical challenges to set ways of thinking and living. More than a year ago, in the backyard of globalised capitalism, the US citizens for the first time spent more money from their pockets on alternative medicine than on conventional healthcare. The idea of the diverse is not merely expanding but acquiring subversive potentialities.

India of the future, I hope, will be central to a world where the idea of diversity will itself be diverse and where diversity will be cherished as an end in itself. By its cultural heritage, India—the civilisation, not the nation-state—is particularly well equipped to play a central role in such a world. However, the Indian elite and much of the country's middle class seem keener to strut around the world stage as representatives of a hollow, regional super-power. They want their country to play-act as a poor man's America, armed to the teeth and desperate to repeat the success story of nineteenth-century, European, imperial states in the twenty-first century.

India is also supposed to be a culture deeply committed to self-reflection. During colonial times, that



commitment began to look like a liability. Many critics of Indian culture and civilisation in the nineteenth century lamented that the Indians were too engrossed in their inner life. Others argued that Indian philosophy had marginalised the materialist strain within it and become predominantly idealistic. Their tacit assumption was that the Indians were given to too much of self-reflection and too little to action. 'We are dreamers, not doers' came to be a popular, simplified version of the same lament.

Whether the formulation is correct or not, it is obvious that we have overcorrected for it. We have now become a country of unthinking doers. Certainly in the Indian middle classes, any action is considered better than doing nothing. As a result, mindless action constitutes an important ingredient of the ruling culture of Indian public life. Even the few knowledgeable, nongovernmental hydrologists who support mega-dams, readily admit that most of the 1,500 large dams

built in India are useless and counterproductive. Their main contribution has been to displace millions of people in the last fifty years. And even these supporters are not fully aware that the millions displaced by dams, often without any compensation, now constitute an excellent pool for those active in various forms of social violence and criminality. Veerappan, son of a dam victim, is only the most infamous symbol of them. Likewise, even in the Indian army, many senior officers now openly say that Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple was worse than doing nothing. The price for that gratuitous intervention was a decade of bloodshed and brutalisation of Punjab.

For years, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has been ventured as an excuse for every phoney, useless intervention—in nature, society and culture in India. The last time I saw this ploy was when our bomb-mamas justified the nuclearisation of India in the name of Gandhi. The Indian middle



classes have always been uncomfortable with the father of the nation and have always believed him to be romantic, retrogressive, and anti-modern. They have also probably all along felt slightly guilty about that belief. As a reparative gesture they have now begun to say, given half a chance, that Gandhi was a great doer; he did not merely talk or theorise. This compliment serves two purposes. It allows one to ignore Gandhi's uncomfortable, subversive thought as less relevant— 'Bapu, you are far greater than your little books', Jawaharlal Nehru once said—and it atones for one's hidden hostility and contempt towards the unconventional Gandhian vision of India's future.

Occasionally, some like philosopher T. K. Mahadevan have tried to puncture this self-congratulatory strategy. I remember him once saying in a letter to the editor of *The Times of India* that Gandhi

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went out on the streets only twice in his life; the rest of the time he was thinking. Such interventions are always explained away as esoteric, vended by eccentric intellectuals and professional iconoclasts. The dominant tendency in India today is to discount all self-reflection. It has turned India's ruling culture into an intellectually sterile summation of slogans borrowed from European public culture in the 1930s. Our culture is now dominated by European ideas of the nation-state and nationalism, even Europeans ideas of ethnic and



religious nationalism (mediated by that moth-eaten Bible of the 1930s, V. D. Savarkar's *Hindutva*, modelled on the ideas of Mazzini and Herder). Shadow boxing with them for our benefit and entertainment are European ideas of radicalism and progress, smelling to high heavens of Edwardian England.

In such a world, it is almost impossible to sustain a culture of diversity, particularly diversity as an end in itself. You learn to pay occasional homage to diversity as an instrument that buys religious and ethnic peace, but that is mainly to hide one's eagerness to deploy such ideas of religious, caste and ethnic peace to further homogenise India.

I have now learnt to fear the use of any cultural category in the singular. For years, I wrote about 'Indian civilisation.' I thought it would be obvious from the contents of my writings that I saw the civilisation as a confederation of cultures and as an entity that coexisted and overlapped with other civilisations. After all, some

other civilisations, such as the Iranian and the European, are now very much part of the Indian civilisation. The Islamic and Buddhist civilisations, too, clearly overlap significantly with the Hindu civilisation. However, even the concept of civilisation, it now seems to me, has been hijacked in India by those committed to unipolarity, unidimensionality and unilinearity. Our official policy has been shaped by a vision of India that is pathetically naïve, if not farcical. It is that of a second-class European nation-state located in South Asia with a bit of Gita, Bharatanatyam, sitar and Mughal cuisine thrown in for fun or entertainment. Those who do not share that idea of earthly paradise are seen as dangerous romantics,

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continuously jeopardising India's national security. No wonder that even many erstwhile admirers of India have begun to see it as a nuclear-armed, permanently enemy-seeking, garrison state. Edward Said will never know that few Occidentals can be as Orientalist towards India as educated, urban, modern Indians often are.

In Indian public life, the standard response to such criticism is to reconceptualise Indian culture as some sort of a grocery store and to recommend that one should take from it the good and reject the bad. This is absurd and smacks of arrogance. Indian culture represents the assessments and experience of millions, acquired over generations. It has its own organising principles.

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It cannot be used like an array of commodities at the mercy of casual purchasers. Diversity, to qualify as diversity, must allow those who represent the diversity to be diverse in their own ways, according to their own categories, not ours. We shall have to learn to live with the discomfort of seeing people using these categories, even when they are not fully transparent to us. For the true tolerance of diversity is the tolerance of incommensurable multiple worlds of culture and systems of knowledge. In this kind of tolerance, there is always the assumption that all the cultures covered by the idea of plurality are not and need not be entirely

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transparent, because there cannot but be a touch of mystery in the world of cultures.

My ideal India celebrates all forms of diversity, including some that are disreputable, lowbrow and unfashionable. It is a bit like a wildlife programme that cannot afford to protect only cuddly pandas and colourful tigers. It is an India where even the idea of majority is confined to political and economic spheres and is seen as shifting, plural and fuzzy, where each and every culture, however modest or humble, not only has a place under the sun but is also celebrated as a vital component of our collective life. That may not turn out to be an empty dream. I see all around

me movements and activists unashamedly rooted in the local and the vernacular. They are less defensive about their cultural roots and are working to empower not merely local communities, but also their diverse systems of knowledge, philosophies, art and crafts.

Underlying these efforts is a tacit celebration of everyday life and ordinary citizens. Everything in everyday life and ordinariness is not praiseworthy and many of these efforts seem to me harebrained, pigheaded or plain silly. But they represent a generation that is less burdened by nineteenth-century ideologies masquerading as signposts to a new era and at least some of them show the capacity to look at human suffering directly, without the aid of ornate, newly imported social theories. □

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