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Plurality, Identity, Democracy, Globalization... A Conversation with Sunil Khilnani

Plurality or Fragmentation?

RC: Multiplicity can be considered the key feature of the Indian Subcontinent. Recurrent invasions and foreign dominations have configured its past whether in terms of an arena of clashing civilizations or as a fruitful history of cultural encounters. Today ethnic, religious, linguistic varieties still compose a tessellated nation. Society is crossed by differences that the heritage of the caste-system makes more numerous, complex and difficult to overcome than in any other country. For better or worse, India appears intrinsically, irretrievably plural.

Commentators and scholars agree on the substantially mixed nature of the country. And yet, with regard to its political perspectives, they tend to divide or at least to be internally divided between hopes and fears. More optimistically multiplicity is confidently believed to be able to ripen into pluralism; on the other hand it is feared that conflicting diversities may develop entropic tendencies capable of making India implode and collapse.

*Professor Khilnani, what do you see in the future of your home-country? I mean would you still describe India in terms of Nehru's idea of "some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed"?*¹

¹ Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (London: Penguin, 2003), XV.

Do you think that the dialogic, argumentative, non-clerical tradition Amartya Sen has helped to unearth will check the revisionist reconstruction of India as a fundamentally Hindu civilizational unity?

And finally would you still be ready to celebrate, in your own words, "the mongrel character of India's peoples and their histories"(XI), "its ability to transform invasion into accommodation, rupture into continuity, division into diversity"(XII)?

SK: When asked about the future, my initial instinct is to look back at the past for some clues – not because the past determines the future, but it does offer a set of probabilities on the basis of which one can try to say something about what is still unknown. If one looks back over the past 60 years of India's history, there have been recurrent periods of crisis when India seemed to be on the verge of losing its identity as a plural, tolerant space of democratic experience: this was true in the 1970s, when it was wracked by struggles over language, in the mid-1970 era of the Emergency,

during the violent secessionism of the 1980s, and perhaps above all during the 1990s, which saw the rise of an intolerant, aggressive Hindutva. Each of these episodes no doubt has affected, and sometimes scarred, India's identity – but they have not managed to transform its basic character and shape. Somehow, India has still remained something like that palimpsest of which Nehru wrote. Hindutva and exclusivist ideologies still remain a source of potential threat in India today, and I would not underestimate them – but the intensity that marked the debates over religious identity in the 1990s has somewhat receded, and the search for a 'master-cleavage' through which to divide Indians has so far proved futile. This does not mean that the identity battles are over in India – some new source to fuel them will quietly surface again. But the more conflicts a society survives, the more available resources it has to deal with the next one. It is that – rather than any belief in 'dialogic traditions' (about which actually I am quite sceptical) - which gives me some hope about the future.

Identity politics

RC: In *The Idea of India* you wrote: “Indians have poured their faiths into politics, pinning their hopes to once-great movements like the Congress Party or to its current challengers like Hindu nationalism or the surging movements of India's lower-caste and Dalit parties. Politics at once divides the country and constitutes it as a single, shared, crowded space, proliferating voices and claims and forcing negotiation and accommodation”(9).

If India has entered modernity through the language of politics, you went on, her particular way of speaking this language was not through the liberal lexicon of individual rights but through the language of community rights and collective identities. The Constitution itself anchored the recognition of civil liberties within the larger dimensions of communal groups. And as the ethos of democratisation entered the political arena, the hitherto marginalized and low ranking groups benefited from a principle of positive discrimination to compensate for the ominous inequalities and iniquities of the past. The affirmative action of the 'reservation' policy, originally intended to be a temporary expedient, aimed at articulating a space of negotiation and reparation. Yet its effect was in fact to reinforce the collective, caste/religion/ethnicity-based, identities it was supposed to dissolve.

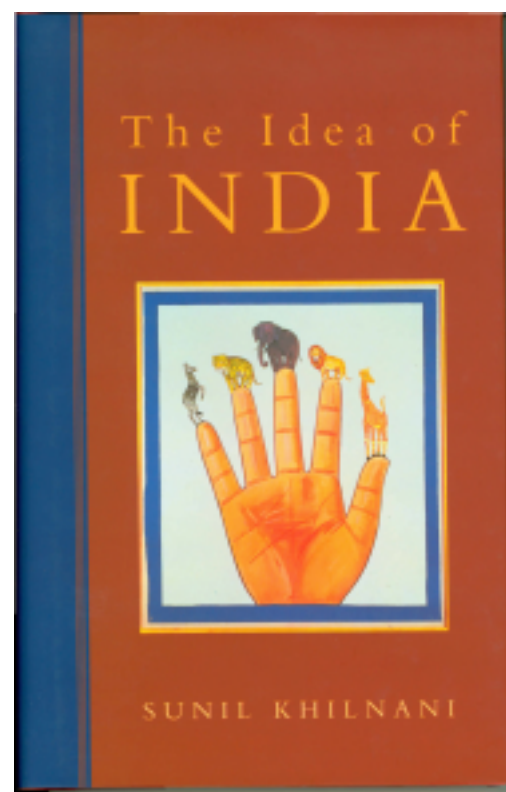


Fig. 1: Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 1997, cover by Francesco Clemente, courtesy of the author.

Professor Khilnani, if the individual is a multitude of selves, as so many writers and intellectuals tend repeatedly to emphasise, how do you see the phenomenon of prescribing and limiting identities, of enveloping and flattening the complexity of one's entire being along the schematic lines of exclusivist ideologies? What do you make of identities focused through the lenses of loyalty-filters? I mean, in your opinion, is there a possibility to reconcile the right of minorities to cultural specificity, on the one hand, and the free choice of individuals to be exempted from any compulsory affiliation, on the other? To put it differently, don't you think that cultural freedom has to be distinguished from the forced acceptance of any given or inherited identity?

And finally, considering how widely Indian problems resonate throughout the world, knocking nowadays at the doors of all democracies, affected as the latter are by parochial, particularistic internal dialectics and caught, one way or another, in the international reductionist trap of the 'clash of civilizations' (just for convenience I use here the much abused expression coined by the late Samuel Huntington), don't you fear that the whole globalized world is in danger of becoming a huge universal site of proliferating identity conflict?

SK: The space for individual rights is under pressure in India: we see this in the numerous attacks, verbal and physical, directed at India's artists, writers, filmmakers, scholars, as well as at ordinary citizens going about their lives – women who want to go to a bar for a drink, for example (who a few months ago were subject to a shocking attack by a Hindu extremist group operating in one of India's most liberal cities, Bangalore). What has occurred is a kind of democratization of offense and injury – every group can now make a claim that its sentiments are being injured by some one else's free expression, and can then take the law into their own hands to curb that free expression. This is to render Mill's Harm Principle into a farce, and a dangerous one at that. Indian public debate needs to address this shrinking of the space of individual liberties; and, linked to this, a debate too is needed on the commitment, made in the Constitution, to establishing a common Civil Code (Uniform Civil Code, UCC) for all Indians. This debate has been captured by the Hindu Right: but liberals and those who believe in pluralism have also to take it up, and acknowledge that now, almost 60 years since the Indian Constitution was promulgated, it is time to ask tough questions about the continuing legitimacy of India's legal pluralism.

At the international level, I'm afraid I do see a growing role being played by nationalist and identitarian claims. I think the view that economic linkages and convergence – 'globalization' – would blunt the edge of such claims was always very hopeful. And it seems to me that Asia will have to

face a period of rising and aggressive nationalisms jostling for recognition in close proximity to one another. That is not a comfortable prospect.

Democracy and its flaws

RC: As you yourself recognize, India's past and the contingency of its unity prepared it very poorly for democracy. The dimension of its poverty and the deeply hierarchical nature of its social order gave little hope that it could defend and keep its republican institutions and practices in the long run. Lamenting the contradictions of a system which guaranteed political equality to all its citizens without providing for free and equal access to resources and opportunities, the leader of the 'Untouchables', B. R. Ambedkar, poignantly expressed his fear that the whole democratic project would eventually be impaired by extreme social disparity. The Subcontinent's location in the most economically dynamic region of the world where, nonetheless, as you pointed out, the political regimes in charge consider the very idea of democracy extraneous to the nature of the people they govern renders the Indian experiment even more significant – a sort of historical challenge or a bet made by history.

Professor Khilnani, beyond the limits of all possible western/eurocentric implications, do you consider the recent 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human rights a date worth recording, and if so, what do you make of the so called Asian Values? I mean, is, in your opinion, the democratic option, with all its limits and contradictions, still the most reliable system for facing the immense problems of development or social justice in your country? What would you answer to those who lament the inherent encumbrances and weaknesses of democracy compared with the supposedly greater efficiency of other political models, such as the Chinese one, in satisfactorily facing the grave problems of social disadvantage and extreme poverty?

SK: I have no doubt that democracy anywhere and in general is a flawed system: so is any form of human endeavour. I would also agree that democracy in India has its own idiosyncratic imperfections and partialities: corruption, disenfranchisement, unaccountable power are all common characteristics of Indian democracy. Yet, equally, I have no doubt that there is no better or more reliable alternative system which would be better for India. Democracy is a continual project of self-improvement, which is also sceptical of any sort of perfectionism; other political systems generally assume that they are starting from a position of certitude and perfection – and that is an even greater form of self-deception.

The Indian political project is self-avowedly a universalist one: but it is also one concerned with particular contexts, that's to say it is not an abstract but an engaged universalism. Think for instance of some of the greatest figures who helped to define this project: Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru. All were universalists, but located in and engaged with particular struggles and ambitions. The recourse to 'Asian values' as a way of rejecting calls for liberty and democracy seems to me to have been an entirely self-serving ruse of reigning Asian despots. Finally, to respond to your last question: I think it is important to insist that democracy is a value in itself – it is not an instrument for achieving other goals, such as development or social justice. Those are other goals, no doubt, and have to be pursued by other means – in a way that does not do damage to democracy.

RC: Today one of the most effective denunciations of the conditions suffered by the very poor comes from the story narrated by Aravind Adiga in *The White Tiger*, in the form of an ironical epistolary addressed to the Chinese Prime Minister. In his Booker prize winning novel, through the protagonist, a low caste entrepreneur who fights his way out of the 'Darkness' to become an affluent businessman in Bangalore, the author gives voice to the rage and the sense of frustration and exclusion felt by the underdogs of society.

Indeed most of the flaws and grave deficiencies pointed at by the fathers of the Indian Republic seem unfortunately to be still there. Just to name a few of them: the neglect of massive school education especially in socially backward regions; the in-built corruption of the political system and its responsibility in maintaining the status quo, even among the parties born to defend the rights of the very needy; familism (according to the ironical 'relativity theory' enunciated by Salman Rushdie: "in India everything is for relatives"); the radically subaltern position of women among the disadvantaged groups, subjected to the exploitation and violence perpetrated within the dowry system and the terrible phenomenon of selective gender-based abortions; the lack of basic home facilities and infrastructure in the rural areas; etc...

Going back to the Indian political trends of the last few years, do you think that the recent option of economic liberalism will produce more results than the socialist, centralistic vision of the first decades after Independence? How would you judge the Indian present in the light of the enthusiastically promising goals listed in Nehru's 'Tryst with destiny' speech?



Fig. 2: Voters hold their identity cards in a queue to cast their votes in Badimunda village in Kandhamal district of Orissa, 2009, photograph, © Biswaranjan Rout/AP



Fig. 3: Voters show their voter identity cards before they cast their ballot in Bapally, Hyderabad, 2009, photograph, © REUTERS

In other words, are you confident about the possibility that in a reasonable time lapse, the yoke of caste would really be, if not eradicated, at least substantially reduced in its disproportionate power of interfering in personal fate and the range of existential choices?

SK: Over the past decade and more, India has been experiencing the highest growth rates in its history. Undoubtedly this is beginning to transform the country – in terms of material conditions certainly, but also very importantly in terms of people’s psychology, their hopes and fears, their sense of how they should be treated (that really is the insight of Arvind Aadiga’s novel). Caste too is being transformed – as much by electoral politics as by economic opportunity – and in this sense India is experiencing what my friend Christophe Jaffrelot has called a “silent revolution” through the ballot box. It remains a trap for many millions; but quite a few are now breaking through this trap.

I would just add that it’s important to remember that economic growth, even as it solves a variety of problems, generates many new and sometimes unanticipated problems – some obvious ones for instance concern the environment, the uneven distribution of the benefits of growth, the consequent internal migration this often creates, and so on. India’s challenge is going to be as much how it deals with the consequences of growth.

Globalization and culture

RC: Globalization is not a new phenomenon. In the past, cross-cultural dialogue and commerce have produced circulations of ideas which greatly contributed to the development of many countries and to the shaping of modernity itself. India-China relations, for example, were highly productive for each other around the end of the first millennium and they also contributed, via Persian and Arabic cultures, to the birth and spread of notions that were fundamental for Europe’s subsequent Renaissance.

Today the role played by culture is considered central in theoretical reflections upon the way Globalization is taking shape. It is currently maintained that while cultural homogenisation, resented as a form of ‘Westoxication’, is generally resisted, the history of European modernity itself must be ‘provincialized’: questioned in its ethnocentric universalistic presumptions, situated in its peculiar and contingent historical context and conditions and rewritten in its entanglement with imperialism (Dipesh Chakrabarty). The other move to define Globalization is the attention nowadays paid by preference to the locally accentuated versions of modernity (Partha Chatterjee, Arjun Appadurai, Avijit Pathak and many others). The very concept of hybridity itself, as the new quintessential feature of contemporary culture, has been conceived and given theoretical

dignity largely through eminent Indian intellectuals and artists. Many of them, like you, are now stars of the international Academic system.

Professor Khilnani, what's your position with regard to the centrality accorded to the role of culture in shaping new globalized scenarios for the third millennium?

Both in its spiritual mystic version, as the land of Ayurvedic wisdom and New Age wonders, and in the more recent dynamic, colourful, metropolitan 'shining' image conveyed by movies and novels, India is central in the contemporary western picture of the world. What do you make of these images, are they to be dismissed as only the latest form taken by Orientalistic attitudes, now expressed in terms of marketing and consumerist assimilation, or do they constitute a possible space of approach, of meeting, of improving reciprocal knowledge and symmetrical cultural exchange, however imprecise and entangled in desires and projections this may be?

In your opinion what are the chances and the still substantial limits of India's presence on the international scene as a protagonist, in economics and politics as well as in culture? Does it gain more power from the strength of its cultural identity, its economic vitality, or its nuclear power?

And finally, since you are at the moment based in the USA, what's your position towards the new American leadership? Do you feel optimistic about the opportunities of a new multilateralism in international questions?

SK: Indians have always – or at least for the past 200 or more years - been very concerned with how the world sees them: not least because they do see themselves as part of a universalist project of humanistic progress. This sensitivity to India's place in the world continues today- and because India still lacks what people like to call 'hard' power, Indians have taken refuge and comfort in the idea that they have considerable 'soft' power, based on cultural products etc. But I think this can be self-deluding. Culture has become an object of mass marketing and consumption – this is certainly true of how many aspects and products from India are today circulated. Real 'soft' power is the ability to persuade by non-coercive means – Gandhi was the first practitioner of this. Here, India continues to have some abilities – but it needs to develop these. Ultimately, the source of such persuasive power will have to lie on India's continuing political legitimacy – as a democracy, based on pluralism and tolerance. If India does damage to this aspect of its identity, its legitimacy will weaken. But if India really wants to be able to pursue its own interests in the world order, and defend itself against threats which arise from this, it will definitely need to develop its economic as well as its military capacities – that latter need is a sad but true fact of life for any modern state. It's particularly true for India, which

is located in one of the most volatile regions of the world, surrounded by an arc of failing and authoritarian states. In this task, India must devise its own protections: it cannot rely on other friends to do this for it. The US under President Obama, for instance, is preparing to engage much more intensively with Pakistan and Afghanistan – but this will be entirely to pursue American interests, which do not by any means always coincide with India's. India has to be prepared to develop a coherent conception of hard power – and to accumulate such power.

RC: Thank you very much.