
Defining India's Identity: An Alternative Vision

by *Bhikhu Parekh*

NEHRU'S VISION of India, which dominated our political life for several decades, has come under considerable, often unmerited, criticism. The alternative Hindutva view of India has proved politically inept and culturally bankrupt. The resulting ideological vacuum is currently being filled by a new vision, canvassed by an influential body of opinion cutting across the usual political and ideological divide and enjoying the support of influential sections of the NRIs.

India has long felt that its size, civilization, long historical continuity, and successful secular democratic institutions entitle it to greater international recognition and role than it has received so far. This legitimate aspiration is



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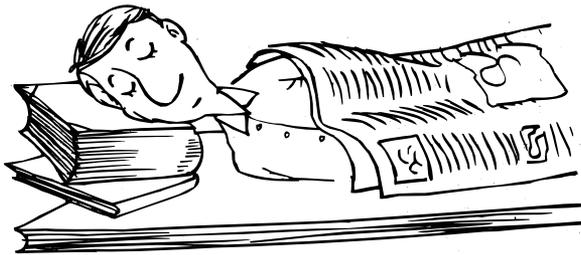
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currently being articulated in economic and military terms. It is argued that our overarching goal should be to become a great economic and military superpower, a global player occupying a seat at the top table and shaping the affairs of the world. India, we are told, cannot do so unless it is fully integrated into the global economy, opens up its markets, liberalizes and deregulates its economy, and in general does all that is needed to ensure a free inward flow of capital and goods. It should forge close ties with great powers, especially the U.S. with its control of major international institutions and ability to meet our nuclear ambitions.

I feel troubled by this vision, for several interrelated reasons. First, it is born out of fear and frustration: fear of being bypassed by history and overtaken by China, frustration at being ignored or patronized by others. It is other-determined, and does not spring from our own autonomous choices based on a careful assessment of the available alternatives.

Secondly, suppose we did become a great economic and military power by 2020, or at least 2050. So what? Military power is always relative, and cannot guarantee security beyond a certain point. If inequalities increase or persist in their current form as they certainly will, should we be willing to pay that price, especially as they impact unevenly in our religiously, ethnically, linguistically, and socially divided society? In other words, economic development cannot be an end in itself. It is a means, and requires a clear moral vision of what we intend to do with it.

Thirdly, the proposed vision leaves unanswered the question as to the kind of people we wish to be. Unlike most western societies in which middle classes played a socially and culturally revolutionary role, ours remain intellectually superficial, culturally dilettante, and politically apathetic to the plight of their underprivileged countrymen. Recent surveys suggest that the reading habits



of most of them remain disappointingly shallow. Few read serious literature even in their own languages or patronize the arts, and many of them find even the newspaper editorials and the declining group of serious columnists intellectually challenging.

Finally, this vision of India as marching single-mindedly towards becoming an economic and military superpower is narrow and exclusive. It has no place for large sections of Indians, is consumerist in its orientation, morally uninspiring, and lacks shared values on which to unite all Indians. It is hardly surprising that it relies on the state as the sole source of unity and order. The poor and the underprivileged cannot count on the state to redress their heart-rending grievances or on their morally insensitive fellow-citizens to campaign for them. They either suffer and decay quietly or direct their fury against the state.

The idea that India's overarching aim should be to become an economic and military superpower then is deeply flawed. We need an alternative vision of the kind of country we wish to be, and of our place in the world. That vision must have a moral core, and should embody the principles of individual liberty, social justice, equal opportunity, and fraternity or a sense of community that are articulated in the Preamble of our Constitution. Our economic development should realize and be judged and guided by these goals. This calls for a social democratic, not a neoliberal state that we are bent on becoming, carefully monitored global integration, and close attention to the quality of life available to all our citizens, especially the poor.

While we must be able to defend ourselves against those who wish us ill and equip ourselves accordingly, we need to make a clear and objective assessment of the likely sources of threat. We should appreciate that a sensible and generous foreign policy devoted to cultivation of friends, regional cooperation, and giving voice to the poor and oppressed people of the world is a better form of national defense than military power and dubious global alliances. We should ensure that no country is in a position to dictate to the world, and should work with others to build up representative global institutions and international balance of power. We can also play an important role in curbing the apparently endless and brutal war on terrorism by mediating between the West, especially the U.S., and the Muslim world.

Strengths and weaknesses

Nehru's vision had its weaknesses but it also had its great strengths. We need to incorporate its abiding insights into a more satisfactory vision of India. We need to undertake a critical and careful assessment of our civilisational resources. No society can altogether break with its past, certainly not ours in which the past is a constant present. We have much to be ashamed of in our civilization but also much to be proud of.

Our strengths include our openness to the world, our pluralist attitude to life, our capacity to take a relaxed view of and live with multiple identities; our composite culture that has resulted from the unplanned dialogue and day-to-day negotiations of the various cultures and religions that come to our land; and our aesthetic, erotic, and philosophical heritage that is so rich that few currents of thought in the world do not have analogues in ours.

Our weaknesses include our relatively rigid social order, a weak social conscience, passive tolerance that allows different cultures and relations to coexist in peace but without much critical engagement, and our inegalitarian and hierarchical self-consciousness that finds it difficult to detach individuals from their social status and nurture the spirit of equality. We need to take a calm and critical look at all this, consolidate and build on our strengths, find ways of overcoming our weaknesses, and construct a new vision of India on that basis.

The alternative view of our identity that I am advocating cannot be fashioned in the Prime Minister's office, the Planning Commission or meetings of some advisory body. It can only grow out of a vigorous democratic debate. Democracy is not just about voting in elections and choosing a government. It is also about deciding what kind of country we wish to be. Political freedom is not just about choice between available alternatives, it is also about exploring new alternatives.▶

About the Author: **Lord Parekh**, *Professor at Hull University is a political philosopher and academic who has taught at several British universities, including the London School of Economics.*