

The world's largest democracy celebrates its 75th Independence Day tomorrow. Where are we as a nation? Two views

Hold On To That Idea Of India

Mukul Kesavan



To mark India's fiftieth Independence Day, Sunil Khilnani published a book famously called *The Idea of India* and that four-word phrase passed into our rhetorical lexicon as a kind of shorthand for India's uniqueness as a nation-state.

Some of this was, of course, self-congratulation: all nations think they are special and exceptional. But India really was, in 1947, Indians were a poor, partitioned, short-lived people (our average life expectancy was less than 40), determined to be a non-sectarian democracy powered by universal adult franchise.

We were a subcontinental people, more diverse than Europe (which, understood properly, is just another subcontinental extension of Asia), and we were going to adapt this modern political community the nation, invented in the West, to our needs and our ideals.

We did this through trial and error. The remapping of India into linguistic states wasn't a blueprint in a Five-Year Plan; it was forced upon Nehru by the strength of regional feeling. But our founders understood that India was too large for Europe's homogenising 'one nation, one language' template; Mother India was too large to be crammed into petticoats made for smaller European women.

Ambedkar taught us that one size didn't, couldn't fit everyone in a country as unequal as ours. Gandhi recognised that in a country as religious as ours, the religion-blind secularism of France would be a perverse template for a non-sectarian public life. Instead of aping *laïcité* as Atatürk did, he and Congress chose pluralism. Nehru and his protean party were often confused and frequently wrong, but they were certain about one thing: India would not be a Hindu Pakistan.

Independence for Tagore and Gandhi was a chance to reimagine the world, not a cue for recycling second-hand notions of nationhood derived from the historical experience of Europe. MS Golwalkar's admiration for that grotesque apogee of European chauvinism, Nazi Germany, and its short way with Jews, was a good example of where such imitation could lead India.

Some of the years after independence

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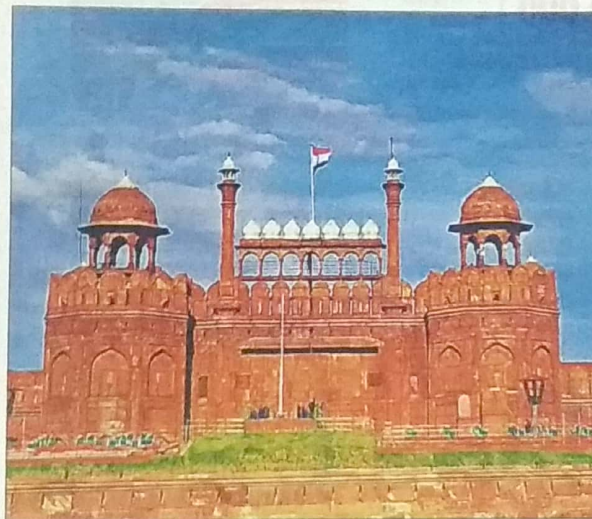
were squandered, as the Nehruvian state failed some basic tests of nation-building, like universal primary education and land reform. Excessive dirigisme led to the 'Hindu' rate of growth; it's hard not to sympathise with the annoyance that BJP must feel at economic growth (or the lack of it) in Nehruvian India being characterised as Hindu.

But through most of these seventy-five years of uncertain change, it was possible to think of this nation inaugurated on the 15th of August, 1947, as an inspiring project, simply because its ambition was both so awesome and so benign. For the first time in the history of the modern world, a country was going to undertake economic

modernisation under the auspices of mass democracy. A subcontinent ravaged by colonialism and the communal slaughter it left behind as a parting gift, was going to build a self-consciously non-denominational nation-state.

This idea of India is without question, the most benign utopian ideal birthed by the twentieth century. Its principal local rival, the dream of a Hindu Rashtra, isn't an idea of India at all. It's a second-hand castoff, indistinguishable from Putin's idea of Mother Russia, or Erdogan's idea of a perferdibly Muslim Turkey or Viktor Orban's fever dream of a Christianist Fatherland or Trump's fantasy of Amerika.

In this season of global majoritarian discontent, these strong men and the populisms that they represent, occasionally seem irresistible. As the climate emergency shrinks the world and triggers migrations, their nativism will



sometimes resonate but there is nothing inevitable or permanent about their ascendancy. Trump has fallen and Bolsonaro will likely fall. It's worth recalling that Hitler's thousand-year Reich was a smouldering bunker in a decade and a half.

The idea of India will endure not because it was produced by great men; it will endure because it was an idea designed to address the unprecedented challenges faced by a subcontinental nation-state. Those challenges remain and the stunted, brutish prescriptions of majoritarians don't even begin to answer them. Hindi, Hindu, Hindusthan, is not a nationalist motto; it's a suicide note.

There's a reason why the Independence Day speech is made from the ramparts of the Red Fort. Subhash Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru knew instinctively that this icon of imperial power could be transmuted into a unifying nationalist symbol. Anti-colonial patriots turned the omphalos of the Mughal empire into the navel of the nation-state. The Red Fort became our umbilical connection with a precolonial yet pan-Indian past.

The Right's ideological ancestors sat out the anti-colonial struggle and some of its contemporary leaders repudiate the Lal Qila's medieval past. Its netas would like the nation to peep into their Hindutvavadi looking glass and feel at home in a mirror image of Pakistan. They will arrive at the Fort on the 15th, at a patriotic tableau designed by India's founding fathers, to understudy a role not written for them.

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India Has Finally Got A New Idea

Rajeev Mantri



The Nehruvian idea of India rests on three principal pillars – in economic policy, socialism and state control over economic activity, at the cost of the private sector, is inviolable. In social policy, group rights are given primacy, and the state boxes citizens into fixed identities even if citizens do not view themselves from a unidimensional lens. In foreign policy, India should be “non-aligned” and not be very assertive.

What did “the idea of India” achieve? Until the 1991 economic reforms, India's per capita GDP grew at a snail's pace and poverty was endemic. Stagnation was accepted as a way of life for three generations, as India's GDP per capita crawled from \$330 in 1961 to \$595 in 1992

“preferential policies, far from moderating conflict, encourage it”.

If Nehruvian economic ideology peaked in the 1970s, then the 2000s marked the pinnacle of Nehruvian social policy, when religion-based welfare explicitly to favour minority groups was attempted to be made the standard. It is a long-standing mystery how such policy could be called “secularism”, and it took extraordinary intellectual gymnastics to promote the unjustifiable. Even as most intellectuals and academics revelled in such gymnastics – some of them collecting government-provided rewards, posts and doles along the way – Indian voters rejected the poisonous politics.

Additionally, far from what even Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru would have claimed for themselves, it became fashionable to deny the civilisational history and unity of India and anoint a small group of freedom movement leaders – carefully selected to represent different communities and reinforce the power-sharing model – as “India's creators”.

A civilisational nation united by its ancient cultural heritage was projected as just another post-colonial entity held together by a carefully curated clique of leaders whose ideological proclivities were suitably airbrushed, if not fabricated, to manufacture a commonality. This fiction too has been rejected in the last decade, both politically and intellectually.

Finally, even as India professed “non-alignment”, in practice it loosely positioned itself alongside the erstwhile Soviet bloc through the Cold War and even enfeebled itself on the world stage. Shackling the economy had hobbled foreign policy – India's merchandise trade as a share of GDP rose from 9.8% in 1960 to just 12.9% in 1990, even as adversaries in the Asian neighbourhood with whom India fought wars, China and Pakistan, performed better, integrating with the world economy and leveraging trade relationships to wield international influence.

When a section of intelligentsia pines today for “the idea of India” that is seen to be fast losing currency, one wonders what the whining and wailing is for. The evidence is clear that socialist economic policy, group-based rights and an inward-looking, effete foreign policy did India no good. By supporting religion-based social policies, this

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intelligentsia only helped to discredit genuine secularism.

Even the heavy dilution of freedom of expression and property rights, two key bulwarks of a liberal polity, came from Nehru himself when he pushed through the First Amendment to the Constitution of India. These are errors which the New India must correct.

The Nehruvian idea of India is useful insofar as it offers a playbook for whatnot to do. A prosperous, harmonious and powerful India can be built by embracing markets in economic policy, placing primacy on individual rights for social policy, and resolutely upholding the national interest in foreign policy.

The writer is author of *A New Idea Of India*, and co-founder, India Enterprise Council.