

# SAFEGUARDING THE IDEA OF INDIA

Relevant for: null | Topic: Regionalism, Communalism & Secularism

Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru addressing the nation from the Red Fort, Delhi, on August 15, 1947. Since Independence, the country has stood out as a beacon of hope, committed to democracy and secularism.

Ominous clouds have gathered over India, casting shadows of divisiveness and hate, threatening to undermine civil society and halt or even reverse economic progress. There is today a risk of going over a precipice beyond which there may not be a turning point.

As the new decade dawned, the two of us decided to get together to write not on problems of economic theory or some immediate policy challenge, as we did in the past, but on the nation's social and political predicament, which poses an existential challenge. We have known each other for decades, and grown up in an India that was imperfect but seemed to possess an ideal of togetherness that created hope. We come from different backgrounds. One of us (as the reader may have guessed) is Bengali, one Punjabi; one of us is Hindu, one Sikh. What is common between us is a concern for human well-being and a belief in the fundamental importance of empathy, tolerance and compassion; the need to treat all human beings as equal; and to reach out to anybody in need — irrespective of religion, gender, and caste. We believe that judgments concerning what is morally good or fair must not depend on who is making the judgment or his or her religion or race. These are principles emphasised in the writings of John Rawls and go back to the Enlightenment philosophers. These are also principles that can be found in the writings of philosophers and religious thinkers on the Indian subcontinent. These are the moorings of the very idea of India.

This is the time to remember the spirit of Guru Nanak, which led Guru Arjan to write, “No one is my enemy, no one is a stranger, I am connected with all,” and Guru Gobind Singh to insist, “Recognise all of humanity as one.” This is the time to remember Rabindranath Tagore's resonant verse: “Come Aryans, come non-Aryans, Hindus and Mussalmans/ Come today, Englishmen, come Christians/ Come Brahmin, cleansing your mind/ Join hands with all.”

It is the sharp erosion in these basic moral tenets in India that concerns us. India has had a turbulent history since its independence on that momentous midnight of August 1947. There have been dark times and events that we should all be ashamed of. Following the end of the Second World War, many new nations were born as peoples and lands shook off their colonial shackles and declared independence. These nations began with idealism, embracing democracy and equality, but military coups and religious captures felled the ideals of one nation after another. But India stood out as a beacon of hope, committed to democracy, freedom of speech and secularism. From the mid-1990s, it also began to see rapid economic growth.

There are still many challenges to contend with. There is poverty and discrimination, there is corruption and a growing environmental challenge, and there is pollution that, if left unchecked, will damage the cognitive powers of future generations. We have to attend to these urgently. The steady progress of the economy since the mid-1990s was raising hope that we would take on these challenges head on. The divisiveness being advocated has, however, caused a setback. This is affecting trust and cooperation in the nation. For example, the use of the state machinery in Uttar Pradesh to seek “revenge,” and to promote the ring-fencing of people and silencing of voices is ethically unacceptable and doing great damage to India's standing globally.

What is not always appreciated, but for which there is a lot of evidence, is that societal trust and

a sense of belonging improves economic outcomes, including growth. Economists Yann Algan and Pierre Cahuc have used rigorous statistical analysis to show that higher levels of trust can cause national income to increase dramatically: Africa, with Sweden's trust levels, would achieve six times its present per capita income. A recent study, published in *Harvard Business Review*, shows that if workers feel appreciated and have a sense of belonging to their company, they have a 56% higher job performance, there is a 50% drop in turnover risk, and a 75% reduction in sick days. "For a 10,000-person company, this would result in annual savings of more than \$52M". One has to extrapolate this to a nation to get a sense of how economically important this sense of belonging is.

Even before the turmoil of 2019, India's economy was already reeling, with industry, agriculture and exports all growing much slower than a decade earlier. But now, beyond the basic moral principles at stake, we argue that the promotion of hate and divisiveness is also hurting India's economy. We are at risk of a major downward spiral.

We must make this a moment to pause and ask ourselves what we as individuals must do. We write this to appeal not just to the young students, scientists and Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Muslims who are already out there protesting against the doctrine of exclusion, but also to those who are preaching violence. We urge them to look into their own hearts, and drop their cudgels. We suggest to the police and functionaries of the state that to make people listen to and respect them, they must not just wield the baton, but also be bearers of ethical standards.

We take hope from the fact that so many students on our campuses understand this. We take hope from the fact that so many leading thinkers and scientists, unaffiliated to any political party, have begun to speak up. We take hope from the Sikhs who have refused to discriminate against other religious groups, from the Hindus who have stood with the Muslims and Christians to defend all minorities, to uphold India's commitment to democracy and secularism.

We are not suggesting that if we stand together and pull back from the brink of the precipice, all our challenges will disappear. India is a lower-middle income economy, with a great deal of injustice, unfairness and suffering that will not vanish in haste. Yet, if we resolve to reject the partisanship that is being preached and then strive to take on the many challenges, there can be hope, the hope of pulling back from the brink and building a society and an economy that will be exemplary for not just its own people but for the world.

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