

Defining India: Exploring paradigm shifts in the ideas of India

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Abstract

The idea of India is a dynamic concept that continually evolves and adapts to the changing times. The idea of India has been shaped by its rich history, diverse culture and long standing traditions, and witnessed profound changes that have brought about a major paradigm shift in its national identity, self-perceptions, aspirations and challenges. This research paper aims to explore the major paradigm shifts in the idea of India providing insights into the key factors that have shaped its narrative and national identity and shedding light on the driving forces behind the changing idea of India. It examines the original impact and implications of these paradigm shifts highlighting their significance in shaping India's past, present and future. By using discourse analysis, this paper has systematically examine the shifts in language, representation, and ideology that reflect the changing paradigms of the idea of India and uncovers the underlying power structures, contestations, and social dynamics that drive these shifts, providing a deeper understanding of how different visions of India are constructed, disseminated and contested over time. It also has limitations, particularly its subjective nature and potential to overlook non-discursive factors. However, its ability to reveal subtle changes, it provides a nuanced and in-depth understanding of these shifts that might be missed by other methods.

Keywords: Idea of India, identity, democracy, Pluralism, socio-economic development,

Introduction:

The concept of India has evolved over millennia, influenced by religious beliefs, cultural exchanges, invasions, colonialism and nationalism. Since 1947, modern India has been the revival of a profound and enduring ancient civilization rather than a new nation. As one of the world's oldest civilizations, India's roots extend back over five thousand years, encompassing a continuous tradition of literature, institutions, and records. The country boasts a rich and varied heritage of religions, philosophies, arts, and sciences, each contributing to a comprehensive and diverse understanding of life.

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The idea of India is of one land that embraces many. The idea of an Indian nation is one that unites people despite their diversity in caste, creed, color, belief, culture, food, costume, and custom. The concept of India was not based on any of the traditional national identity indicators. In the West, they first created a nation and then nationals. But modern Indian nationalism's proponents would never have used the phrase "creating Indians," as they believed that India and Indians had existed for thousands of years before they expressed their political aspirations in the 20th century (Tharoor, 1997). However, the India that emerged in 1947 was in many ways a new nation: it was the first to make Ladakhi and Laccadivian fellow citizens, to separate Punjabi from Punjabi, and to inspire a Keralite peasant to pledge allegiance to a Kashmiri Pandit governing in Delhi. Nationalism in India has always been a nationalism of an idea. It is a vision of an eternal space that emerges from an ancient civilisation, nourished by pluralist democracy, and connected by a shared past. The idea of India is the antithesis of what Freudians refer to as "the narcissism of minor differences"; in India, we cherish the commonality of major disparities. If America is known as a "melting-pot," then India is a thali, a range of delectable meals in many bowls, as Shashi Tharoor accurately stated. Each dish has a distinct flavor and doesn't necessarily go well with the others, but they all belong on the same plate and work together to provide a fulfilling meal (Tharoor, 2020).

Evolution of India: Historical contexts

Humans have lived on the Indian soil for several thousand years, but historical narratives frequently begin with the Indus Valley civilization. The earliest written records of India's history dated from the Vedic period, around 1500-500 BCE. These manuscripts, generally known as the Vedas, were originally created orally and passed down through generations. They describe the early interactions between incoming groups to north India and the indigenous "dark-skinned" populations they encountered. A notable historical account from this era is that of Mauryan ruler Ashoka, who disseminated Buddhist principles through inscriptions across India. This marked one of the earliest instances of India being envisioned as a unified polity, at least from Ashoka's perspective. Additionally, during this period, India encountered Grecian powers, leading to a blend of Greek and Indian cultures, which resulted in new art forms, increased trade, and shared knowledge.

The ancient roots of India's identity goes back to the Indus Valley Civilization, Vedic culture, and the influence of Buddhism and Jainism which laid the foundation for the diverse and

pluralistic character that defines India today (Radhakrishnan, 1956). Again the medieval period in India saw the emergence of diverse philosophical and religious traditions that cut across religious boundaries and fostered a spirit of inclusivity and tolerance (Eaton, 2000). Furthermore, the colonial experience significantly impacted the way India was perceived both internally and externally. The freedom struggle redefined India's identity, emphasizing values of freedom, equality, and nonviolence (Gandhi, 1993). This period witnessed the rise of Indian nationalism, with leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore advocating for independence and asserting India's unique cultural identity.

The encounter with Western ideas, particularly the notions of liberty, equality, and democracy, ignited a renewed sense of national consciousness among Indian intellectuals (Guha, 2007). The ideas of India during this period were shaped by the quest for social justice, individual rights, and a resurgence of national consciousness. The freedom struggle against British colonial rule witnessed the rise of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, who blended Western democratic ideals with Indian values and traditions. This paradigm shift brought forth the vision of a modern, independent India that would be egalitarian, inclusive, and self-reliant (Gandhi, 1993).

Debate over Idea of India: Clash of Narratives

Understanding what precisely defines a nation is necessary before one can comprehend the concept of India, or that of any other country for that matter. A nation is a narrative. According to Yuval Noah Harari, a nation's myth is a story that its people tell one another, hold dear, or even alter. According to Harari, one of the major factors that has maintained humanity's supremacy on earth is its capacity for myth-making and story-telling, to the point that people perceive made-up entities to represent their collective identity. People who believe in this shared identity feel a sense of unity and are better able to work cooperatively with strangers and those they do not know who are of different races, religions, and tongues but who still their fellow citizens are. In the light of this understanding about the nature of nations, let's now focus our attention to the ideas of India. It is important to keep in mind that creating a nation is a historical process rather than a predetermined, inevitable occurrence. Any process can be turned around. The idea or tale of India is not a single narrative, but rather a collection of narratives that exist in parallel and occasionally in conflict with one another due to the fact that Indian citizens are not a homogeneous mass by any measure.

The concept of the character of an independent India was the subject of a constant conflict between three perspectives that evolved throughout the course of India's freedom fight in the 1920s. A secular democratic republic was the mainstream Congress's ideal for an independent India. While agreeing with this vision, the Left went further to envision that the political freedom of the country could only be achieved through the socio-economic freedom of every individual, which they believed was attainable only under socialism. In contrast to both these views was a third perspective, which argued that the character of independent India should be defined by the religious affiliations of its people. This vision manifested in two forms: the Muslim League advocated for an 'Islamic State', while the RSS championed the idea of a "Hindu Rashtra." The former, with the help of the British colonial rulers, was successful in the unfortunate partition of the country. Having failed to accomplish their goal at the time of independence, the latter group is still working to turn modern India into their vision of an exclusionist majoritarian fascist 'Hindu Rashtra'. In a way, the various paradigm shifts in the idea of India's is a continuation of the clash between these three narratives (Ahlawat, 2022-23) (Gautam, 2020).

Modern Idea of India

The idea of India, shaped by its vast diversity, has been complex and evolving since independence in 1947. The creation of India brought about a partition based not on geography but on the question of whether religion should determine statehood. The fundamental principle of the Indian nation was equality for all citizens, regardless of caste, creed, or religion. The understanding of politics and institutions in post-colonial India was heavily influenced by British colonial rule, which unified the subcontinent and introduced Western socio-political structures. Nationalist movements emerged in response, using cultural symbols to assert a distinct Indian identity against colonial dominance. After independence, leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized secularism, socialism, and democracy, embedding these ideals in the Indian Constitution (Chatterjee, 1993). This period saw India transform from a colonial construct into a pluralistic and inclusive democracy. The vision of India as an inclusive, tolerant nation, rooted in liberal-socialist values, became central to the national identity, particularly in the wake of communal violence and the formation of the secular republic in 1950.

The nationalist intelligentsia drew on the reality of Indian society and how it organically dealt with religious, caste and other differences through the birth of new religions like Buddhism,

Jainism and Sikhism or movements spanning many centuries like the Sufism and Bhakti movement. They emphasize a crucial aspect of India's civilizational history: the capacity to coexist with, accommodate, and transform differences rather than suppress them. This perspective highlights the shared traditions in language, music, poetry, painting, architecture, philosophy, and everyday practices that transcend religious and caste boundaries. Figures such as Buddha, Guru Nanak, Kabir, Akbar, Mirabai, Dara Shikoh, Ramanuja, and Amir Khusrau are celebrated for their contributions to a composite culture. Jawaharlal Nehru, perhaps the most prominent representative of this viewpoint, eloquently articulated this in his magnum opus, 'The Discovery of India', written during his imprisonment in the 1940s. Nehru described the evolution of Indian civilization as a process of 'absorption,' 'assimilation,' and 'synthesis' of various influences that India encountered through trade, invasions, migrations, and cultural intermingling. From the Indus Valley civilization five thousand years ago to the Dravidian, Aryan-Central Asian, Iranian, Greek, Parthian, Bactrian, Scythian, Hun, Arab, Turk, early Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Afghan, and Mughal influences, each left an indelible mark, like layers on an ancient palimpsest, where no subsequent layer completely obscured the previous ones. This organic process of negotiating differences across religions, languages, castes, and other identities was abruptly disrupted by colonialism, which not only halted this dynamic process but also deepened and solidified these differences.

Further, as it was essential to shape the collective memory and identity of the newly independent nation through education. Textbooks, therefore, became a key tool for inculcating these values in young minds. In the 1960s, **National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) were established** to standardize and oversee the content of textbooks, ensuring that they reflected the secular and inclusive narrative. Alternative interpretations of history, particularly those aligned with Hindu nationalism, were often marginalized. Similarly, the emphasis on Muslim rulers' contributions to Indian history was a direct counter to the Hindu nationalist narrative that often portrayed them as foreign oppressors. This effort involved the intentional and, in some cases, forced promotion of a particular narrative through the education system, with substantial contributions from intellectuals like Romila Thapar, Bipan Chandra, R.S. Sharma, and Satish Chandra. They emphasized the pluralistic and composite nature of Indian culture, while marginalizing or reinterpreting historical events and figures that could be seen as promoting religious or regional divisiveness. These historians were instrumental in shaping the content of history textbooks used in schools and universities across India. **Romila Thapar** work on the Mauryan Empire and Ashoka, highlighted the secular and humanitarian

aspects of these periods. Thapar's emphasis on the role of non-Hindu religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism, in shaping Indian culture was a deliberate counter to the Hindu-centric narratives. **Bipan Chandra** analysis of the Indian freedom struggle, particularly in works like *India's Struggle for Independence*, presented the movement as a broad-based, inclusive struggle involving various social groups and ideologies. **R.S. Sharma**'s Marxist approach to history provided an alternative to the glorified narratives of Hindu nationalism. **Satish Chandra**'s work emphasized the composite culture that emerged from the interactions between Hindus and Muslims. His interpretations of Mughal history, particularly the policies of Akbar, were used to highlight the possibility of religious tolerance and coexistence, directly countering the communal narratives that painted Muslim rulers as oppressive.

A major break in the academic sphere in the discipline of history comes as the output of a very high level of scholarship in premier universities of the country began to emerge by the 1960s and 1970s, seriously questioning Eurocentric/colonial and communal perspectives in not only the understanding of history from the ancient past to the modern and contemporary period but of Indian social structure, polity and economy. This paradigm shift had a significant impact on public discourse in India. The secular, inclusive narrative became the dominant framework within which Indian history and identity were understood by the majority of the population, particularly the educated elite. Such an experiment on such a grand scale have ever replicated anywhere else in the world (Mukherjee, 2022).

During the 1980s, Doordarshan was the primary state controlled television broadcaster in India and was heavily influenced by the Congress led government. Doordarshan played a key role in disseminating this narrative. Shows like "Bharat Ek Khoj," which was based on Nehru's *Discovery of India*, explored India's cultural and religious pluralism. Critical or alternative perspectives were largely absent from its content.

New India: Paradigm Shift

India is currently witnessing the manipulative use of 'history' to undermine the very basis on which the democratic Indian republic was formed following independence from British colonial rule in 1947. Today, not only is the character of the Indian nation-state at risk, but its very future is also in jeopardy (Mukherjee, 2022). The vision of a secular nation crafted by leaders such as Nehru, Gandhi, and others during India's independence has sustained the country for over seven decades by appealing to the higher ideals of society and the pragmatic

understanding that peace is preferable to conflict. However, fissures have emerged in this narrative, partly because many accepted it superficially without fully internalizing its principles—a nuance that the founders of independent India may have overlooked or hoped would resolve over time. Furthermore, Nehru and Gandhi's framework tended to marginalize and obscure the contrasting ideology presented by Savarkar, rather than critically engaging with it and exposing its contentious aspects.

It is essential to recognize that multiple conceptions of India's identity have coexisted, often in contradiction to each other, including those proposed by figures like Bhagat Singh, Tagore, and Gandhi himself. In his essay titled "Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?", Vinayak Damodar Savarkar introduced the concept of 'Hindutva,' advocating for a nation characterized by explicit dominance of the Hindu majority rather than striving for inclusive prosperity for all citizens (Mukherjee, 2022) (Shajahan, 2024) (Mehta et al., 2024) . Within this ideological framework, Muslims and Christians are perceived as foreigners with questionable loyalty to India, primarily because their sacred sites, or '*punya bhoomi*', are located outside the country's geographical boundaries—in Mecca and Palestine, respectively. And only the Hindus, according to them, truly constitute the Indian nation (Mukherjee, 2022).

Although Hindu nationalism grew in India during the 1990s, such as in December 1992, when Hindu nationalists stormed and demolished the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, resulting in a wave of communal violence across India. But after 2014, the political landscape in India has experienced significant changes because of the rise of Hindutva forces that have reshaped the idea of the nation. The rise of a strong and assertive leadership, along with a shift in political ideologies, has influenced India's emerging vision. And in its second term of office, the current government has made clearly apparent its vision for India. Regardless of what the top leadership says or does not say, the message to their cadre on the ground is clear: the goal is to transform India into a Hindu Rashtra and bring to fruition the ideas of Savarkar (Mukherjee, 2022).

Under BJP governments, particularly in states like Gujarat and Rajasthan, there have been significant efforts to revise school textbooks to reflect a more Hindu nationalist narrative. This includes emphasizing ancient Hindu achievements, downplaying or omitting the contributions of Muslim rulers, and portraying the partition of India in a manner that aligns with Hindu nationalist sentiments. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), responsible for setting the curriculum for schools, has been a battleground for this ideological contest. Revisions in history and social science textbooks have often been criticized for

promoting a Hindutva agenda, including the erasure or marginalization of Muslim and Christian histories in India. There has been a concerted effort to cultivate a cadre of academics, historians, and public intellectuals who support the Hindu Rashtra vision. These individuals have been instrumental in shaping public discourse, writing books, and influencing educational policies that align with the BJP's ideological goals. Control over key cultural and educational institutions, such as the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), has been a strategy to propagate the Hindutva narrative. This includes funding research projects that reinforce Hindu nationalist views and marginalizing scholars who adhere to the secular, pluralistic vision of India. Once again to sustain this vision of India, the ruling forces controlled the narrative formation discourse. In 2014, the process of communalizing educational institutions got a boost. What we observed lately was a systematically organized attack on secular, scientific history texts. The Public Policy Research Centre (PPRC), a think tank supposedly sponsored by top BJP leaders, released a report which vehemently criticized the existing history textbooks in June 2021. Working in sync, the University Grants Commission (UGC) also developed a curriculum framework for the BA in History from Ancient to Contemporary without a single reference to the country's large body of very distinguished specialists in the subject, instead supporting the ruling party's nationalistic 'ideological offensive'. A new narrative is being propagated in history books where the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a communalist is completely ignored, and Nehru is condemned and accused for every imaginable misfortune that has befallen our nation.

Today, it is asserted that the Hindu community faces significant threats, with recurring reminders of alleged historical atrocities committed by Muslims. In 1992, the Babri Masjid, a 16th-century mosque in Ayodhya, was demolished by right-wing religious extremists who claimed that the mosque had been constructed over the birthplace of the Hindu deity Rama, after demolishing a temple. This act of destruction was portrayed as the rectification of a historical wrong. A grand Ram temple is currently under construction at the site, with its foundation stone laid by Prime Minister Modi in 2021. More recently, there has been a renewed claim that the Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi was built by demolishing a portion of the Kashi Vishwanath temple, with allegations that the mosque houses Hindu deities and that a fountain used for ablutions is, in fact, a Shiva Linga, a symbol of the god Shiva revered by many Hindus. These assertions have fueled demands for the correction of what are perceived as historical wrongs, including the belief that thousands of mosques were erected on the ruins of temples, and that such rectifications are essential for restoring Hindu pride and healing deep-seated

psychological wounds (Mukherjee, 2022). The push for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) is often framed within the Hindu Rashtra discourse as a necessary step to ensure national unity and secularism. However, critics argue that it is a thinly veiled attempt to impose Hindu norms on all communities, particularly Muslims.

The 1990s saw the proliferation of private news channels and the mainstreaming of Hindutva. Some news channels have played a significant role in mainstreaming Hindu nationalist discourse. Channels like Republic TV and Zee News have been known to support the BJP's policies and rhetoric, often framing issues in a way that aligns with the party's Hindutva ideology. This includes a focus on Hindu cultural revivalism, glorification of historical figures like Savarkar, and emphasis on Hindu festivals and symbols. Coverage of issues like the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the abrogation of Article 370, and debates around religious conversions often reflects a Hindu nationalist perspective, portraying these events as victories for the "real" India. The media landscape has become highly polarized, with different channels presenting vastly different narratives about India's identity.

This narrative, however, neglects the historical reality that for generations, Hindus and Muslims have coexisted peacefully in cities like Ayodhya, Mathura, and Kashi, often sharing religious spaces and participating in each other's practices (Varshney, 2002). The invocation of imagined grievances and the revival of traumatic memories, akin to the colonial-era manipulation of the Somanatha temple controversy, are strategies used to polarize society and establish a majoritarian political order. In this process, history is distorted, even falsified, to undermine the shared cultural heritage and foment anti-Muslim sentiment. What was once considered fringe has now entered mainstream discourse, with critics dismissed and ridiculed as anti-nationalists accused of constructing a 'Left-Secular' mythology that supposedly disrespects Hindu sentiments while appeasing Muslims and other minorities. The continuous process of using history by recalling horrific incidents, to generate hostility between the overwhelming religious majority and minorities for political advantages is like playing with fire.

Though the distortion of history and the rapid fabrication of truths in the name of history for purposes completely destructive to constitutional democracy in India are occurring at a menacing rate today, resistance to these efforts appears to be becoming increasingly muted rather than stronger. Perhaps it reflects the steady weakening of institutions that were meant to be autonomous, which we have all let to occur. The police, the media, and educational institutions are increasingly watching, if not actively participating, in the deterioration of our

democracy. The universities have been silenced, sometimes brutally. It no longer resembles the country that our freedom warriors fought for and established. The principles of the national struggle as embodied in our Constitution are being disregarded willfully.

Conclusion

In the years following independence, Nehru's vision eventually came to shape the nationalist elite. Democracy, religious tolerance, economic progress, and cultural plurality were among the qualities Nehru hoped to bring together inside a modern state. The unexpected historical trajectories of these various components since 1947 has made it more difficult to sustain a vision of a single political community (Khilnani, 1997). Indians now with wildly divergent backgrounds and aspirations all want to claim it for themselves, just like their nationalist forebears. The nationalist pantheon's symbolism is still being appropriated by contemporary Indian politics. Old debates and conflicts are reenacted in the present with the new meanings and aspirations of the current generation: Ambedkar is once again ranged against Gandhi; Patel is pitted against Nehru. Additionally, this history is reflective of the Indian notion because of its ongoing capacity to include various conceptions of what India is. The Congress party, the dominant force in Indian history during the 20th century who for so long dictated the terms of an Indian selfhood, is now in the role of a third party. After 2014, the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP), which represents a resurgent Hindu nationalism, was able to build a truly national base. The people of our nation are currently faced with a decision between two distinctly different conceptions of India: the India that exclusively discusses the past wrongs and how they may be rectified by doing new wrongs. If this vision of India becomes a dominant narrative, it may possibly stand up for a while, as evil frequently does, but it will also inevitably rot down and fall. The alternative India that we may yet select, reflecting ideas of Tagore and Bhagat Singh. This India, in contrast to the one that emerged after the British withdrew, would value acceptance over tolerance and elevation over appeasement. The future of future generations will depend on the decision we make today about these two Indias.

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