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IDEA OF INDIA: AN EMANCIPATION?

By Priyanshi Bhardwaj

“... the true India is an idea and not a mere geographical fact.”

My understanding of India so far had been limited to Diana L. Eck’s analysis that India existed as a geographical fact, an idea that Rabindranath Tagore countered with the ‘idea of India’. What we had planned on determining in our own way was whether India was a unity in diversity, a homogenous nation-state, a relativist or a universalist idea. As much as I would want to further connect these ideas with the constitutional project, my interpretations of the material is much more elementary in the academic sense. In the course of this answer I will introduce five ideas of India that I have inferred from my understandings of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee and the lectures.

I will be creating relations of these ideas with the constitutional project that was undertaken and is still in the works. Through this, towards my conclusion of these answers, I will be posing the question of whether it *was* the idea of India that held hopes of emancipation instead of the constitution, as we had previously assumed.

Idea of India as Jinnah’s Hindustan & Pakistan

For Jinnah, the idea of India was the colonised nation that existed before partition. After the partition, India should not have existed anymore and in its stead it should’ve been Hindustan and Pakistan. The post-partition creation of India and Pakistan irked Jinnah, the ownership over the legacy of India was being claimed by a single nation instead of the two.

In my opinion, the constitutional project that the present India undertook created a cognitive dissonance between the shared history of the two nations. Jinnah’s fears that the legacy of India

was being claimed by the single nation was not misplaced. Nor were his issues with the Cabinet Mission Plan unaccounted for. The enterprise undertaken by present India could now claim secularism as a core principle whereas Pakistan was going to be a Muslim-majority nation. However, at present, this claim of India as the secular nation is wavering with the rampant rise of Hindutva.

Idea of India as Savarkar's fatherland

The best way to truly understand Savarkar's idea of India is to look at the hyper-nationalism of Maharashtra. Chatterjee paints the picture of how Marathas came to be the first nationalists, as the pioneers of the principles of freedom, unity and leadership. It is in Marathi literature that we see the nation as a male, deeply contrasting Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Bharat Mata*.

This idea of India as a hyper-nationalistic fatherland does not overtly find its existence in the constitutional enterprise that we undertook, unless you look closely. In Savarkar's India, a Hindu had to consider India as his *pitrabhoomi* (fatherland) and *punyabhoomi* (holy land).

When we look at the form of morality that has been incorporated into the Constitution, we see remnants of the concept of *punyabhoomi*. The emphasis on protection of cattle¹, the prohibition of intoxicating drinks², *et al*, are all part of the non-justiciable Directive Principles of State Policy. However the above two have just been introduced as examples, what I am furthering is that Savarkar's idea of India can be found in the moral stands that the Constitution takes.

Idea of India as a nation indebted to the British Raj

Chakrabarty talks of four borrowings that he is thankful that India took from UK, these being modern science & logic, equality before the law, no human being could be property of another (no commodification of men) and the concept of self-government. The last one being one of the most impactful of the borrowings, giving us the strength to fight clamorously with demands that we would probably not have raised before emperors.

¹ Constitution of India, 1950

² Constitution of India, 1950 art. 47

Ever since elementary school, the ‘borrowed’ aspect of the constitutional project has been highlighted multiple times. Thus, the idea of India as a nation that is indebted to the British Raj should not come across as a surprise. This becomes even more crucial when we relate this idea to the so-called image of India that has long since prevailed in the eyes of the West that it was the ‘land of savages’ who needed to be *civilised*, at times through racial violence similar to the one that almost befell Swami Vivekananda for dressing like a *fakir*.

This idea of India however does not sit well with the current wave of nationalism, this India wants to attribute self-governance to itself by romanticising the village (an aspect we will come back to later). This India believes in reclaiming *fakir* through slogans such as ‘*hum toh fakir aadmi hai, jhola leke chal padenge*’³. The antagonising of everything West compels us to look at the amount of influence the British had on our constitutional project that we undertook almost seventy years ago.

The flagship project of ‘Make in India’ of the current government relies on the principle of self-government that was left to us supposedly by the Europeans.

This idea however does not allow for the emancipation merely by buying into the trope laid down and further supported by scholars such as Diana L. Eck, that India was a geographical accident that still owes something to (Great) Britain, the uniter and creator of India.

Idea of India as the romanticised Village

The perpetuator of this idea of India is the Mahatma himself, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. However what Gandhi did was create the ideal village that consisted of intelligent human beings⁴ and thus the village was free from the evils of the caste system.

Ambedkar stood against this idea, realising that what Gandhi was romanticising the village and by the way of this validating the evils of the society that flourishes there. Even currently 70% of

³ PM Modi at the Parivartan Rally in Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh on Dec 3, 2016.

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Civilizational Roots of Indian Democracy’, Harper Lecture 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX31U50-1pQ>

India lives in rural conditions, and contrary to the Mahatma's dream, the village rarely consists entirely of intelligent beings.

This idea of India as the romanticised village has found its way in the global popular culture imagination for the longest time.

Constitution as an emancipatory text

The paradox that had been presented to us signified the amount of hope that people held in the constitution.

“even though constitution is not an emancipatory text, there is no emancipation outside of it.”

The significance of *Hum dekhenge* amidst the CAA-NRC protests⁵ made it evident that people held the constitution at a pedestal, even during times when it wasn't worthy of it. The *samvidhaan* has been put to flames multiple times in the years following its creation. I propose that the claim of constitution as an emancipatory text in a way eclipses the aspect of people looking at the constitution *because* it represents the idea of India, it represents the image that millions of Indians had in mind.

Idea of India as emancipatory

I do not believe that it was any one idea of India that we can dub as emancipatory, the mere fact that there was an idea of India was what held the hopes of emancipation.

On an economic front, I am compelled to agree with Chakrabarty and his analysis that India's relationship with poverty is a complex one. It loves its poor in the future but in the present they need to suffer a little more for a better government⁶. The ideals of Mahalanobis that were along the lines of civility have been forgotten in a way.

⁵ Shruti Kapila, 'India's Constitution isn't Saving it from Narendra Modi's Assault on Rights', Prospect Magazine, 2020:

<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/india-constitution-democracy-modi-book-review>

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Civilizational Roots of Indian Democracy', Harper Lecture 2014:

The decades following the creation of the constitution give us a clearer indication of what India was going to be. The tussle between the judiciary and legislature in determining what were going to be the power dynamics that a free democratic was going to have. India, in figuring out what it could be, ignored the fact that the preamble did say ‘We the *People*’. Despite my belief that the People here are a metaphoric people and not the physical entity we need to realise that India chose the path of a secular democracy⁷.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the idea of India as a place of secular, multi-cultural and multi-lingual existence started fading from the creation of the *rath yatra*, thus reviving the us & them divide. The idea of India as an emancipation is slowly failing, or perhaps has already failed.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX31U50-1pQ>

⁷ and not secular dictatorship or theocratic democracy