Anxieties and Visions of National Identity: The Contemporary Contest Over the Idea of India

Ansiedades y visiones de la identidad nacional: la disputa contemporánea acerca de la idea de India

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Abstract

This paper explores the anxiety about an impending crisis of Indian national identity expressed in the contest over the phrase 'the idea of India' in public and political spheres in 21st century Indian politics. The paper limits itself to exploring the sense of the crisis and the anxiety surrounding it as expressed by public intellectuals and political formations, in the use of the phrase idea of India. Within this limit, the paper is further focused on exploring the cultural and representational dimension of Indian national identity and its sense of unity. The introduction plots contemporary political developments and anxieties that have animated the contest over the idea of India, followed by a section that maps conceptual issues by understanding the different uses this phrase has been put to in the last two decades. The next section summarizes the major paradigms of Indian identity and unity that have emerged in Indian politics in the last hundred years and have been influential. The final section explores the uses of the idea of India in contemporary Indian politics by focusing on the recent public articulations of the phrase by a leading politician Rahul Gandhi.

Keywords: national identity, secularism, *Hindutva*, majoritarianism, Nehru.

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Resumen

Este artículo examina la ansiedad existente acerca de la inminente crisis de identidad nacional india, articulada en torno al debate acerca del concepto "la idea de India", en las esferas pública y política en la India del siglo XXI. El estudio se centra en explorar el sentido de la crisis y las ansiedades que la rodean, expresadas por intelectuales públicos y las distintas formaciones políticas a través del concepto. Dentro de ese marco, el texto se centra en explorar las dimensiones culturales y representacionales de la identidad nacional india y su sentido de la unidad. La introducción traza los desarrollos políticos contemporáneos que han animado el debate acerca de la idea de India. La segunda sección resume los principales paradigmas de la identidad y unidad nacional que han emergido y han sido influyentes en la política india en el último siglo. La última sección explora los usos del concepto en la política actual, centrándose en la articulación pública de la frase por parte del actual líder político del Congreso Nacional Indio, Rahul Gandhi.

Palabras-clave: identidad   nacional,   secularismo,   *Hindutva*, mayoritarianismo, Nehru.

1. Anxious Rediscovery of the Idea of India[2]

Indian parliamentary elections result for the 18th Lok Sabha (Lower House) were announced on 4th June, 2024. The results surprised many. The BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party), the party that formed the government with clear majority in the two previous elections (2014 and 2019) fell short of majority and has managed to form government through a coalition arrangement with other parties. For many concerned observers of Indian politics – both in India and abroad – stakes in these elections were substantially higher than any previous elections. The stakes were about the threat to the very character or identity of India as a nation, a concern frequently framed in terms of threat to the 'idea of India' or to '*the* idea of India.' The day after the elections results, in a newspaper column, the political scientist Ashutosh Varshney wrote an article in the Indian Express with this title, "In the results of 2024 elections, rebirth of the 'idea of India.'" (Varshney 2024) Similarly, on 10th June, historian and political commentator Mukul Kesavan wrote an article with a title 'The Great Escape: When India's Political Landscape Shifted'. In this article, invoking the

'idea of India', Kesavan wrote that on 4th June, India may have avoided 'the abyss'. (Kesavan 2024)

The phrase 'idea of India' gained currency in the last two decades. Apart from denoting a concept or a vision of and for independent postcolonial India – particularly in the thought of the nation's founding figures, the phrase also captures an anxiety among a section of public intellectuals, activists and politicians, as well as cross-sections of the people. The anxiety is captured in the title of a recently published book by the Indian political theorist, Rajeev Bhargava *Between Hope and Despair*. The anxiety – about being suspended in between the optimistic and pessimistic emotions – is primarily the anxiety about the future of India as a nation and its primary identity both for Indians and in the global community of nations. The image of India that the phrase 'idea of India' initially sought to capture was the one that supposedly underlay the constitutional vision of secular, democratic and pluralist India. It is this idea that is perceived to be under threat. Though the reasons for the rise of the belief and anxiety about such a threat have been accumulating for the last three decades, these became more concentrated in the last decade of the Hindu nationalist BJP's rule under the leadership of the current prime minister Narendra Modi. In a way, parallels can be observed between the growth of the BJP in Indian politics since the 1990s and the anxieties about the threat to the idea of India. The phrase became popular in the academic discourse and the larger public sphere after the publication of Sunil Khilnani's book *The Idea of India* in the late-1990s. There have been several academic and newspaper column discussions using this phrase, the majority of which have been in the last decade. (Bhargava 2022; Khilnani 1997)

Khilnani's book articulated the idea of India primarily in terms of the Nehruvian vision of India and for India. Social scientists are in broad agreement that the crisis of the Nehruvian idea of India began to emerge three decades ago, in the decade of 1990s. In that decade, Indian politics underwent multifaceted transformations: the liberalization of the economy; the democratic upsurge of the 'lower' caste groups; the rise of communal politics of Hindu nationalism; and a marked change in foreign policy. Stuart Corbridge and John Harriss have referred to the collective effect of these political events as the 'reinvention' of India. The implicit reference of the reinvention trope is to the original 'invention' or 'discovery' of India during the anticolonial nationalist movement culminating in the foundational moment of the adoption of the new Constitution of India. (Corbridge and Harris 2000) In the last decade, after getting the full majority in the lower house of the parliament twice, the BJP and the RSS have been able to pursue their agenda much more successfully, as there was no challenge from coalition parties like in the case of BJP led coalition governments in the 90s until 2004, wherein the government would be run on the

basis of a 'common minimum programme' shared by all the coalition partners. (for 'RSS family' Jaffrelot, 2005; for a pre-history of Hindutva, Sharma, 2003.)

During its last two terms, the BJP government has tried to implement its Hindu nationalist agenda in multiple ways. On the top of these agendas has been the issue of Ram Temple, on the site of the demolition of the Babri mosque in December, 1992. The controversy has been going on since the 1940s, when the idols of Lord Ram – the hero of the epic Ramayana, and considered to be incarnation of God Vishnu by the believing Hindus – were surreptitiously placed inside a 16th century mosque. The RSS and the Hindutva family have been claiming that the Babri mosque was constructed on the site of a Ram temple, after the destruction of the temple, on the orders of the first Mughal emperor Babar. Throughout the 1980s, the Hindutva organizations mobilized large masses demanding the construction of the Ram temple on the site of the mosque. These mobilizations eventually led to the demolition of the mosque in December, 92. In 2019, in the final judgement on the legal dispute, the Supreme Court of India allotted the mosque site to the Hindu party in the dispute.

Early this year, on 22nd January, 2024, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, inaugurated the newly constructed temple at the demolished mosque site. The Prime Minister performed religious rituals in full light of the public sphere as the event was broadcast live on television and social media. For many social scientists and observers of Indian politics, this day marked the end of secular India and the inauguration of 'Hindu *rashtra*' (Hindu nation), for all practical purposes, even though there has been no official or formal declaration of India as a Hindu *rashtra* through a constitutional amendment. (Bal 2024) It is important to mention here that the Ram Temple inauguration event wasn't able to create a consensus in the political spectrum as most opposition political parties remained absent from the event. Yet, this lack of political consensus hasn't prevented some scholars from arguing that the shift in Indian politics in the last decade has been fundamental enough to be called 'the rise of India's second Republic'. (Vaishnav 2024: 38-56) Apart from this issue, there have been several other concerns that have been raised by scholars, activists and commentators invoking the threat to the idea of India. Take for example an interview of the political scientist and activist Yogendra Yadav during an academic conference at the London School of Economics in 2018, where he discusses his reasons for thinking why the 'very idea of India' may be under challenge and why we may be witnessing 'one of the darkest phases in Indian history.' (Yadav 2018) Yadav mentions a spate of incidents of street lynching of persons from minority communities, their systematic marginalization, the proposed changes in citizenship law and the systematic hollowing out of political and legal institutions.

This interview of Yogendra Yadav makes clear how central the questions

of secularism and intercommunity relations are to his idea of India. The violence that Yadav mentions is a case of open violence against individuals of minority communities, particularly the Muslims. In the most gruesome form, such violence has been observed in the form of street or roadside lynching. Such violence can be understood as a form of sovereign violence of the state wherein the rule of law is made to recede selectively to overlook naked violence. Thomas Blom Hansen's has characterized this form of violence as an exercise of 'informal sovereignty' of one community over another. In his studies, Hansen has traced the genealogy of informal sovereignty in India, wherein the concept of 'informal sovereignty' is developed to differentiate it from cases of formal and official declaration of the 'state of exception' – as in the theories of Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben – wherein the sovereign violence is openly at play, while the legal apparatus is placed in suspension temporarily. (Hansen 2005: 169-191; Schmitt 2005; Agamben 2005) What Yadav is trying to underscore in this interview is the unofficial but active or tacit support from different levels of state power for this kind of sovereign violence in the last decade.

Another issue that Yadav raised is that of his apprehension in 2018 about the changes in Indian citizenship regime, that were eventually passed by the parliament in December, 2019 in the form of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), leading to immediate nation-wide protests. The CAA law allows refugees from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh, who entered India before December 31, 2014, to apply for Indian citizenship with the important religious proviso that only non-Muslim refugees would be eligible. (Jayal 2022: 14-30) This is the first time since Independence that a criterion for religious discrimination has been introduced in the Indian citizenship regime. Apart from the spontaneous nation-wide protests on the streets, led by Muslim women, that ended with the onset of Covid-19, there were several petitions filed before the Supreme Court of India challenging the constitutional validity of the law. The case is still pending before the Supreme Court, but the highest court hasn't put a stay on the law. The critics of the current Hindu nationalist regime tend to see a continuity in the efforts of formal-legal exclusions through law, as in the case of CAA, and the informal sovereign violence discussed earlier. In these debates, the question of citizenship acquires centerstage as legal exclusions from citizenship were the first steps towards the rise of various kinds of fascistic regimes a century ago in Europe, as discussed amply by critical theorists of fascism such a Hannah Arendt and Agamben. (Arendt 2013; Agamben 2013)

Apart from the formal exclusions in the citizenship regime (beginning with the backdoor mechanisms as in the CAA case) and violence as the exercise of 'informal sovereignty', there are other ways of diluting the citizenship of sections of citizens; for instance, in the spaces of political and symbolic

representations. What Yadav meant by 'systematic marginalization' of the minorities includes all these modes. The political representation of minorities in the Union and state level legislative bodies and in the ministries have been at the historically lowest level in the last ten years, particularly in BJP led governments at both levels. In the last decade, it has further gone down drastically. (Farooqui 2020: 153-175)

The representations of the nation in history textbooks and in foreign policy discourse have also been primarily in terms of the portrayal of India as a Hindu nation in the last decade. For decades, as a matter of fact for the last hundred years now, Hindu nationalist organizations like the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha have been portraying India in these terms; now this is being done through and in the institutional apparatuses of the Indian state. Eminent former diplomats like Vivek Katju and foreign policy scholars have observed a marked shift and discontinuity in the representation of Indian history and culture abroad. Consistent with the overall shift in the paradigm of the regime internally, one of the discontinuities noticed in the recent Indian foreign policy discourse has been the representation of Indian history as that of being colonized for the last thousand years. Katju has pointed out that this was never the case before the last decade. India had been a leader of the international anti-colonial movements before and after Indian Independence, such as the leadership of the NAM (Non-Aligned Movement). (Katju 2022, a & b) In the erstwhile Indian foreign policy discourse, colonialism referred to the modern West dominated capitalist imperialism. The portrayal of Indian history primarily and originally as Hindu history and the representation of Muslim rulers as conquerors and aggressors has been the chief concern of Hindu nationalist and Hindutva historical narratives.

2. What is the 'Idea of India'?: Conceptual Issues

In its contemporary usage, the phrase idea of India can refer to either of the several different uses of the idea of India in different disciplinary settings; or to all of them simultaneously. One set of usages is by historians, wherein the main contest is whether India as a nation is a recent construct or imagination in the wake of modern colonialism, or does it have ancient provenance. This usage involves questions of territoriality, image of history, self-consciousness of identity as a national community with a more or less clear sense of its territory, and the proper name used to refer to this territory and the consciousness or a feeling of a unified community. The second usage is primarily when the term refers to the vision for India as an independent nation state. Needless to say, the two usages are bound to overlap, since image of the past and vision of the

future are intimately connected in imaginations and conceptions of nations. More than making any reference to anything concrete in the positivist empirical sense, the real import of the discourse of 'idea of India' should be located in its constitutive and performative power or in its ability to make people defend or promote certain visions of and for India. In a recent article, in insisting on the fact that the 'idea of India' is an empty phrase that doesn't refer to anything in reality, Manu Josesph is of course right in a literal sense but misses the performative dimension of the phrase. (Joseph 2023)The performative dimension of the phrase lies in the ability of the politicians or intellectuals to invoke the phrase to create a politics either to defend a certain state of affairs or create a new one based on the vision the phrase represents.

Historians have traced the first use of the phrase 'idea of India' to Rabindranath Tagore, who used it in 1921. In his essay, *Enemies of the Idea of India,* the historian Ramachandra Guha writes this about the recent discovery of the idea of India: "The poet Wallace Stegner once remarked that '…the tracing of ideas is a guessing game. We can't tell who first had an idea—we can only tell who first had it influentially, who formulated it in some form, poem or equation or picture, that others could stumble upon with the shock of recognition'. So, it is with the idea of India. Rabindranath Tagore used the phrase in a letter to a friend in 1921, writing that '…the idea of India is against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one's own people from others, which inevitably leads to ceaseless conflicts.' There may have been others who used the phrase before him. But it was only in 1997, when Sunil Khilnani used it as the title of his wonderful book, that his fellow citizens stumbled with a shock of recognition at what the idea of India represented" (Guha 2011: 2).

Sunil Khilnani's idea of India articulated in the eponymous book is primarily Nehruvian. (Khilnani 1997) Jawaharlal Nehru himself did not use the phrase in a unified way that it is used in contemporary discussions, except loosely as the idea or the spirit of India in *The Discovery of India* (1946). Khilnani's book seeks to assess how the postcolonial journey of the Nehruvian idea or vision had fared until the 1990s and what were the challenges it faced during this period. Apart from discussing the political and economic history of the postcolonial Indian state, through which the story of the idea of India is told, Khilnani also discusses formal and foundational questions. This is done by underscoring the centrality of politics in India through which the people of India constitute themselves dynamically. Politics is not just about the various facets of the diversity of Indian people and the democratic contestations they engage in, it is also the ground of their unity and identity as a people. For Khilnani, the idea of India was a 'wager' that the nationalist elite took, the wager to give India the 'garb of modernity' – as Nehru had put it in *The Discovery of India* – with a civilizational identity of its own. (Khilnani 1997: 4-9; Nehru 2008: 72) These two aspects unite the historical

and futuristic dimensions of the idea of India.

In the most frequent initial use of the idea in contemporary debates, its Nehruvian provenance was dominant. It was and is a defensive or protective use of the idea that seeks to defend the vision of secular, pluralist and inclusive India. It is primarily an idea of Indian culture and national identity that seeks to answer the question – Who is an Indian? – in a tautological way, that is by saying: an Indian is an Indian. The tautological definition based on the territorial conceptions of nationhood and citizenship, seeks to avoid a deeper or exclusive definition of Indian identity by avoiding what political theorist Pratap Bhanu Mehta has called the politics of 'benchmarking' identities. (Mehta 2004: 72-81) In this regard, this vision seeks to defend the idea of an inclusive India against the Hindutva vision of ethnically benchmarking the national identity in terms of the primacy of the Hindus. This is the way in which several politicians, prominent among them the leader of the Congress party Rahul Gandhi, and scholars, have invoked the idea of India. (Srinivasraju, 2023: 100-128; Verghese 2014) We can add to this list several scholars, activists, and journalists like Yogendra Yadav Rajmohan Gandhi, Harsh Mandar; Nidhi Razdan, eminent academics Ramchandra Guha, Gayatri Spivak, Romila Thapar, Pramod Kumar, Irfan Habib, Ashutosh Varshney, Mukul Kesavan and others who have used the phrase 'idea of India' in the last two decades. (Mander 2022; Thapar 2021; Thapar and Spivak 2024; Razdan 2017; Habib 2005; Kumar 2022).

A brief survey will help us classify some of the dominant uses of the term in contemporary public articulations of the idea of India. One of these is the already discussed use of *the* idea of India primarily by the left and liberal intellectuals. The other use – often overlapping with the first usage in terms of its concern – appears in public discourse in the form of debate among the historians. These debates are frequently centred around the question whether India as a nation is recent nationalist construct, in the wake of modern colonialism and the emergence of nationalisms globally in the 18th and 19th centuries, or whether some feeling or consciousness of nationality or nationhood continued across centuries forming the basis of modern Indian nationalism. This historical discourse is framed in terms of the antiquity or modernity of the idea of India, wherein the main focus is on the proper name India and other names of India, including Bharat, Bharatvarsha and Hindustan. (See Chattopadhyay 2018; Kaul 2020; Kasturi and Mekhola 2020; Menon 2020) Apart from these two positions, several other more nuanced and in-between positions are articulated in historians' conceptions of the idea of India. (Habib 1999)

Another important intervention has been that of Gopal Guru, who in his essay 'The Idea of India: Derivative Desi and Beyond' has critiqued the prevalent ideas of India from an Ambedkarite perspective. In this 2011 essay, Guru divides the ideas of India primarily in terms of 'derivative' and 'desi'

(nativist). In Guru's formulation, the derivative discourse is the one that is "unable to escape the grip and gaze of the Western discourse" despite struggling to achieve epistemological autonomy, and desi refers to those strands of Indian thought that seek to achieve such an epistemological autonomy by being self-referential. (Guru 2011: 36-42) Guru's is primarily a critical response that points out the foundational exclusions of Dalit voices that both the 'derivative' and the 'desi' discourses suffer from. The excluded or marginalized space of Dalit voices is what he calls the space of the 'beyond'. However, Guru doesn't offer us a full-fledged idea or vision, which could be characterized as an Ambedkarite idea of India. Nonetheless, the Dalit-Bahujan discourse in contemporary Indian politics does make a contribution to this contest, albeit indirectly in the form of a strong defence of the vision of India perceived to be contained in the Constitution of India, not in terms of the idea of India per-se. To what extent these two discourses overlap is a question that will be taken up in the last section of this article.

The phrase idea of India has also found its way into the recent foreign policy discourse, for instance in a recent article by Ravi Agrawal in the journal *Foreign Policy* titled 'The New Idea of India: Narendra Modi's reign is producing a less liberal but more assured nation'. (Agrawal 2024) Ravi Agrawal's and similar other recent invocations of the idea of India or rather ideas of India – or the new idea of India or the idea of new India etc. – shows that the concept has entered a new stage in its life where it has acquired both, greater level of generality and greater contestability. Ashutosh Varshney, in the article cited in the beginning of this paper, is still saying that the 'Hindu nationalists have always resented this term, calling it a Nehruvian imposition.' (Varshney 2024) For Varshney, the right characterization of the idea of India is the idea enshrined in the Constitution of India itself and the underlying vision it represents. Yet, Harsh Madhusudan and Rajeev Mantri, who joined issue with Varshney on the question of interpretation nearly a decade ago, have come out with a book *A New Idea of India*. The two authors contend that they do not have any problem with the 'idea' part of the term, but the *the* part of 'the idea of India' as used by Varshney and others. (Madhusudan and Mantri 2023: 57) What is interesting to note in this debate is that the authors of Hindu nationalist persuasion, including the two authors of *A New Idea of India*, have moved from their earlier position of resistance to or reluctance to the use of the phrase, to an alternative – a Hindu nationalist – framing of it. This effort and the debate by historians Shonaleeka Kaul, Malavika Kasturi and others on the eve of Independence Day in 2020, point towards a direction where there is a greater acceptance via contestation of idea of India in the public sphere.

Though multiple different uses of the term idea of India in current scholarly and public discussions can be noticed, the majority of the debates and contests

revolve around the theme of secularism and communalism. It is well known that communalism as a term has acquired a South Asia specific meaning in the last hundred years of its conceptual history. Even if this term has a positive meaning in other regions of the world, referring to community in a way similar to the term communitarian, in South Asia, communal refers to the competition and conflict between religious communities around purely this-worldly power and resources. With this conceptual historical background, it is disingenuous to suggest, as Madhusudan and Mantri do, that the real conceptual opposite of secularism is theological rule and not communalism, while arguing in addition that the latter term should be understood positively in India like everywhere else. (Madhusudan and Mantri 2023: 42) The meanings of the conceptual terms depend on the discursive and historical contexts of their usage and cannot be reduced to their etymological roots.

But the issue of the conceptual opposite of secularism has greater significance that goes beyond historical semantics. It is indeed linked to the foundational dimension of modern politics. It is this foundational dimension that establishes the intimate connection between modernity and the secular. Theological dominance over the political begins to fade when the transcendent grounding of the state begins to give way to the immanent one in the early modern period in the Western debates around the institutionalization of modern politics. The immanent secular foundations of the political in the secular human needs for survival and security, abstractly framed as 'rights of man' in the liberal political doctrines of Hobbes, Grotius, Locke and others, and the invention of 'the people' as the ultimate source of sovereign power emerge in the early modern period. Apart from manifesting itself as the ultimate political ground of power of the modern state – not just as the demos of democracy, but, as Claude Lefort shows, as national-people for modern dictatorships or totalitarian states – modern nationalisms also ground their particular nations as 'a people', as the cultural ground of the *nation*-state. (Tuck 2015; Morgan 1988) This begins to manifest itself towards the end of the 18th century in the Western world, and in the 19th and 20th centuries in other parts of the world.

Secondly, the conceptual opposite of the political institutional arrangement of secularism – understood as an arrangement of separation of religion and politics, either through the wall of separation, or through state's neutrality towards all religions or equal or 'principled distance' of the state from religions – is not theological rule – as claimed by Madhusudan and Mantri – but different ways of perverting these institutional arrangements. In the trajectories of the modern nation-states, such perversions have come not so much from the desire to replace the secular foundations with the those of the theological ones, but from perversions emanating from nationalisms turning towards majoritarianisms of different ilk. Such national majoritarianisms have taken different forms – such

as racial, religious, linguistic – for discrimination against and marginalization of ethnic minorities. Communalism in India is nothing but the Indian version of modern conflicts, which, like other such conflicts, has worked within the paradigm of the deeper immanent secularity of the modern nation state. Yet, this deeper secularity cannot, on its own, guarantee secularism as a framework of fairness and justice for governance within the nation states.

3. Nehruvian and Hindutva paradigms

The common theme in all visions of national identity in modern Indian political thought is the search for a common national 'we' and its past. Most nationalist leaders – but not all, with Mahatma Gandhi being an important exception – since the late 19th century took recourse of history writing in order to construct the national past. These were undertaken in order to counter the colonial narrative of Indians lacking any sense of nationhood or peoplehood and political unity, and to challenge the colonial histories. (Khilnani 1997: 150-65) Like in most other modern nations, Indian nationalists sought to give India an antiquity and a common sense of destiny as a nation. In post-Independence India, according to Khilnani, three narratives and their accompanying visions became dominant: Nehruvian, Gandhian and Hindutva.

The Hindutva narratives, emerging strongly in the 1920s and 30s in the works of V. D. Savarkar and RSS ideologues like M. S. Golwalkar, equated Hindu and Indian identities, producing the Indian version of ethnic-majoritarian nationalism with Hindus constituting the central 'core' of the Indian nation. The framework of exclusionary Hindutva nationalism developed by Savarkar in *Essentials of Hindutva,* first published in 1923, is well known. Arguing that the Hindus had a common sense of nationhood since ancient time with common blood and one culture, Savarkar introduced the criterion of defining the core membership of the Indian nation. He claimed that India had communities that had their *pitribhumi* (fatherland) and *punyabhumi* (holy-land) in India, and communities for who India may be a land of their ancestors but had their *punyabhumi* outside India. (Savarkar 1969; Chaturvadi 2022: 121-203) Similar ideas of core membership were developed later by RSS leaders and intellectuals, such as M.S. Golwalkar, B. Devras, Deen Dayal Upadhyay and others continuing in the present times. (Shani 2021; Sharma 2007)

The most recent authoritative statement of Hindutva thought can be found in the book *The Hindutva Paradigm* (2021) by Ram Madhav, an RSS thinker and ideologue. Madhav defines this idea of the 'core national identity' by establishing the semantic equivalence between Hindu, India and Bharat: "The three words – Hindu, Bharatiya and India – are used interchangeably and

considered as synonymous in RSS parlance." (Madhav 2021: 231) Importantly, Madhav, like earlier RSS thinkers, emphasizes repeatedly and painstakingly – particularly in the chapter 'Identity as Ideology' – that Hindu and Hinduism are to be understood primarily in cultural terms, and it is cultural – not religious – nationalism that they claim to promote. In other words, for them the Hindu cultural identity is *the* national identity of India and the Indians. (Madhav 2021: 231-256) Any other identity has to be subordinated to the core national identity in the framework of assimilation within the core. Thus, the Hindutva idea of national integration is more an assimilationist idea rather than a multicultural one – the latter being a concept ingrained in the Indian constitution *avant la lettre*, as Khilnani and others have argued. (Khilnani 1997: 172; Parekh 2006: 1-15) Such an integration is to be achieved on the basis of what Madhav and other Hindutva thinkers call a process of 'Indianisation'.(Madhav, 2023: 231-235)

I think the Hindutva thinkers' emphasis on understanding the term Hindu in cultural terms should be taken seriously as it will help understand closely the specific mode of exclusion and marginalization of the internal 'others' of Hindutva, namely the minorities. However, the practice of Hindutva politics is far more complex and layered. One of the disingenuities of this claim reveals itself when no account is taken of the fact that the Constitution of India uses the term Hindu in what can only be considered, from a legal point of view, a religious sense, insofar as the Hindus are distinguished from other religious communities as such as Muslims, Christians, Jews and others. Madhav writes repeatedly that Hindutva doesn't discriminate on religious basis and that for Hindutva the believers of all religions and practitioners of all modes of worship are equal. This means that believers of religions other than Hinduism in India are reduced to the status of *merely* religious in the narrow sense whereby religion is reduced to belief and mode of worship. The cultural symbols and other paraphernalia of representation of the national culture has to come from Hinduism, which is both a religion, a source of rituals of belief and mode of worship, and the *only* source of national culture. The real ingenuity of the Hindutva discourse comes from the fact that it can use the term Hindu in both the senses and conflate the two meanings as it suits its political purposes. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain how a temple, a place of religious rituals and practices, can become a symbol of *national culture,* on which Madhav devotes an entire chapter in *The Hindutva Paradigm.* (Madhav 2023: 257-78)

The main sources of the Nehruvian paradigm of national unity are found in Jawaharlal Nehru's *The Discovery of India* and other works written in the last decade of colonial rule. In *The Discovery of India* too, the question of national unity and identity is posed primarily in terms of culture. (Nehru 2008: 79-95) But Nehru's idea of Indian culture is very different from the Hindutva

idea discussed above. The most interesting idea that is explored at great length in this book is the idea of Indian culture as a kind of 'encounter' in Nehru's thought. (Bhattacharjee: 2023) The uniqueness of Indian culture – the element that differentiates it from other national cultures – lies in the unique capacity to assimilate and synthesise the other it encounters, without at the same time erasing difference. Nehru sought to convey this idea through his now famous image of Indian cultural history as 'some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously.' (Nehru 2008: 84)

Though framing the long *duree* of Indian history primarily in terms of encounter of cultures, Nehru doesn't make it clear whether the said encounter is between some pre-existing Indian culture and other cultures that came in contact with it historically, or is it the encounter itself that gives rise to the uniqueness of Indian culture? Perhaps Nehru can't answer this question within his nationalist frame for which the nation is to be axiomatically assumed to exist since time immemorial, as pointed out famously by Benedict Anderson. In terms of plurality of regional, religious and linguistic cultures, his notion of culture is expansive and broadly inclusive, primarily because of the space of heterogeneity introduced in it through the idea of encounter. However, like most nationalist thinkers of his generation except Ambedkar, Nehru explains away the structural exclusiveness of the caste system. Critics have pointed out that Nehru's narrative of Indian history is not free from having an idea of 'original' Indian culture as the starting point of his narrative, wherein the figure of the Muslim is necessarily of an 'invader' or 'conqueror' – originally introduced by colonial historiography, and centralized by the Hindu nationalist narrative. (Mufti 1995: 75-96) The Nehruvian paradigm, that was broadly shared across the political spectrum – by the liberal and secular factions of the Congress, left parties and other regional secular formations – was the dominant paradigm of thinking about Indian history, culture and national identity. It was also the paradigm that informed the practices of Indian state secularism and shared in its drawbacks and consequently its current crisis.

Insofar as the Gandhian approach to national unity, intercommunity relations and secularism is concerned, there is a sharp division of opinion among scholars. Some very influential thinkers have argued that the Gandhian approach cannot be termed secular at all since it was grounded in non-modern, non-statist and non-historical modes of thinking. In this way, M. K. Gandhi primarily relied on religious morality and religious traditions of tolerance to promote inter-community dialogue and harmony. It also clearly shunned taking recourse to history as a way of relating to the past but relied primarily on myths and legends (Nandy 2006). Equally important is the point that Gandhi, in his

practice of seeking inter-community dialogue and negotiation, sought to avoid mediation by the modern institutions of state and the liberal public sphere of civil society. The other argument contends in favour of compatibility between Nehruvian and Gandhian paradigms of national unity, without necessarily denying the differences in their fundamental modes of thinking about this question. For instance, Neeti Nair has argued recently that the Gandhian approach played a central role in shaping the ideology of state secularism, particularly after Gandhi's assassination by a Hindu extremist influenced by the ideology of Hindutva. She shows that the specific South Asian variety of secularism as respect for all religions emerged from the creative Gandhian practices that borrowed and combined elements from different religions. (Nair 2023)

4. Contemporary Indian Politics: Rahul Gandhi's Idea of India

While the idea of India has gained a substantial currency in the academic and journalistic parlance in the last two decades, it did not find as much echo in the political sphere. However, in the last few years this phrase has been used quite frequently by one of the prominent political leaders, Rahul Gandhi (Srinivasraju 2023: 100-128). With this phrase, Rahul Gandhi seems to be articulating a cultural vision – alongside other aspects – of India as an alternative to the Hindutva vision presented by the RSS-BJP combine. This is a significant event in Indian politics because no other political party seemed eager to confront the BJP on the cultural question of redefining Indian identity in majoritarian terms. Most political leaders tended to evade the question by brushing it off as not being a 'real agenda', wherein the supposedly real agendas were defined in terms of peoples' economic interests like unemployment, inflation, jobs, and everyday necessities like water, electricity and infrastructural needs. With an effective control over the media and other institutions like the police and the Election Commission, the success of BJP was so great that it seemed to be running away with its majoritarianism as the new template of Indian politics that no political party was willing to disturb. Against this political backdrop, which became particularly stark in the second term of the Modi government beginning in 2019, Gandhi started articulating his idea of India.

Rahul Gandhi's idea of India began to gain a clarity of vision in his speeches during the *Bharat Jodo Yatra* ('unite India walk' or literally, 'join India walk) that he launched in September, 2022. (Gandhi 2022; Deshpande and Chaturvedi 2024; Devy 2023) Gandhi started Bharat Jodo Yatra from the Southern tip of India as a journey across the length of India from South to North on foot. The walk ended in December 2022 in Srinagar, Kashmir. It was

an open invitation walk in which thousands joined on the way, some walking all the way with Gandhi. On the way he met and interacted with people from all walks of life and addressed them on the way on a daily basis. As stated earlier, as important as the content of that idea was the fact of his effort at communicating that idea with the common people. At the same time, this wasn't a one-way communication. Gandhi said repeatedly during and after the yatra that he wished to listen to the diverse people of India on what their views and ideas were. In this way, his idea of India matured through the exploratory mode that walking slowly across a diversity of regions involved. During and in the months following the Yatra, Gandhi also made trips abroad, particularly to press clubs and universities in the US, UK and Europe. These addresses too provide an important insight into the social imaginary of the idea of India he is trying to articulate (Gandhi 2023 a, b, c, d & e; Gandhi 2022 a & b).

Throughout these speeches, talks and interviews, Gandhi is seeking to define his politics through a contest around the idea of India. His idea of India is layered with multiple dimensions. Economically he articulates an egalitarian vision where the sections of population left behind in the neo-liberal economy to bridge the increasing inequality of rich-poor divide in India. He has frequently accused the Modi government of promoting a form of crony-capitalism, wherein select business houses are promoted and favoured to the detriment of not just the poorer classes but to the Indian economy generally. (most recently Gandhi 2024 (e)) Politically and territorially, he articulates a vision of regional diversity of India in terms of linguistic and cultural diversity. Equally noticeable is Gandhi's accent on defending the Constitution of India and the independence of constitutional institutions like bureaucracy, the police, the judiciary, the Election Commission and the parliament; all perceived to be under threat from the more and more authoritarian BJP government. The INDIA alliance – an alliance of several non-BJP parties formed in 2023 to contest the 2024 Lok Sabha elections – turned 'save the Constitution' into a successful slogan during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The slogan tended to stick to the BJP as the RSS had historically denounced the new Constitution of India in the 1950s as largely borrowed from abroad and thus not being 'Indian' enough.

Valuable as these issues are for defending Indian democracy and its constitutional vision, I think the most important contribution of Gandhi's recent campaigns articulated in terms of the idea of India has been his taking the communal bull by the horn. What complicates the majority-minority demographic picture further in the Indian context is the caste question, originally internal to Hinduism but affecting other Indian religious communities including Muslims, Sikhs and Christians. In the 1990s, the BJP's communal campaigns, seeking to unite the Hindus, found an antidote in the emergence of several

Dalit and Backward Caste based parties building their politics on the agenda of caste equality and caste empowerment along with adequate representations to the minorities, thus disrupting the BJP's plank of pan-Hindu unity. In the last decade, the BJP responded to these political dynamics through a strategy of inclusion of Dalit and Backward Caste leaders and greater representations of these communities in positions of power. The BJP achieved great success through this strategy in the parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2019.

The 2024 elections saw some setback to the BJP, with some political parties including the Congress managing to win back sections of Dalit and Backward castes and a consolidated support from the minorities. It was widely reported during the election campaign that the Bharat Jodo Yatra has had a considerable impact on the prospect of the Congress, particularly helping it garner the votes of the minorities and youth in large numbers. During the Bharat Jodo Yatra and later, Rahul Gandhi also addressed the social question of caste, demanding greater representation of the lower caste groups and more importantly, raising the demand of a nation-wide caste census. The caste-based census in India, never undertaken in the decennial census operations after 1931, has the potential of transparently revealing not just Indian social demography in terms of caste numbers, but also the caste wise distribution of resources, offices and political representation. Gandhi has frequently used the metaphor of 'x-ray' in his public speeches for explaining the significance of such an operation. (Gandhi x ray 2024 c) Caste census seems to be an anathema to the RSS-BJP, who raise the bogey of it dividing Hindu society, as any such 'x-ray' would upset their plank of Hindu unity across social divisions. The Hindutva formations have always sought to suppress the social divisions within the larger Hindu society.

Needless to say, there are underlying values that permeate the idea of India of Rahul Gandhi and the Congress under his leadership in the last few years. Some of these values are social inclusion, achieving national unity without undermining religious and regional diversity. His vision of culture or national cultural unity is not as deep as the ones developed by Jawaharlal Nehru or the Hindutva ideologues, but a rudimentary development or contours of a vision can be noticed. While for developing such a vision, he has to turn to resources in the past, what seems clear is that the contemporary Gandhi is not merely trying to repeat or rehash the visions of secularism and cultural pluralism associated with either Jawaharlal Nehru or M. K. Gandhi. On this count, it is therefore difficult to agree with Sugata Srinivasraju's remarks, in his recent book on Rahul Gandhi, *Strange Burdens,* that Gandhi either doesn't have a cultural vision or his vision is nothing more than the old – rootless and deracinated – vision disconnected from the larger masses. The same goes for his remarks about the lack of emotional chord in Gandhi's recent public addresses during

and after the Yatra, a contention I return to later. (Srinivasraju 2023: 100-128)

On the question of national unity and identity, Gandhi's strategy is different from the Nehruvian one even though it may not be abandoning the Nehruvian secularist vision of national identity completely. Inherent in the practice of Nehruvian secularism, shared by the left parties and the English speaking and at least a layer of vernacular elite, was a certain disavowal and distancing from religion, particularly the public display of religiosity. Equally important component of that discourse was an understanding of secularism as a space of neutrality and non-belonging. What Srinivisraju has called 'deracinated' refers to a discourse and practice of secularism in India the critique of which has a long lineage, going back to Ashis Nandy and others in the 1980s. (see Nandy and T. N. Madan in Bhargava 1998) The other problem with that discourse – as Yogendra Yadav also mentions in the interview cited earlier – was a disconnect with the people at large or its inability to take itself to the ground by translating itself in the language of the masses. One of the clearest differences of Rahul Gandhi on this count is his avowal of his religion, Hinduism, several times, not only in verbal articulation but in public or even publicized visits to temples. Gandhi has also made public visits to shrines of other religions. In addition, in several of his public speeches recently – most spectacularly in this first speech as the Leader of the Opposition in the new Lok Sabha – Gandhi sought to distinguish Hinduism from Hindutva. In these public articulations, Gandhi's main charge has been that the BJP and the RSS completely distort both, the meaning of Hinduism and the meaning of India. (Gandhi 2024 b)

At this point, bringing up the question of emotions in Gandhi's public performative in recent times is unavoidable. Contrary to Srinivasraju's charge about the lack of emotional connect in Gandhi's approach, one cannot help noticing an overwhelming presence of emotionality in it. I used the term 'public performative' because the presence of emotions or affects have to be observed as much in spoken or written articulations as in gestures, in photographs, in ability to create public enthusiasm, etc. A separate study would be needed to do justice to the entire range of political emotions and affects that saturate these public performatives. The relevant point in relation to the main theme of this discussion is that Gandhi frequently takes recourse to emotions in talking about national unity, pluralism, inclusion and exclusion.

In one of his addresses to the Indian diaspora in New York, he contrasted these two visions in terms of the binary of the vision of M. K. Gandhi and that of his assassin Nathuram Godse, who belonged to the Hindutva fold. (Gandhi 2023 c) The former vision is that of love, compassion, inclusion of the other, and non-violence, whereas the latter is that of spreading hatred and violence. Similarly, he gave an evocative slogan at the beginning of the Bharat Jodo Yatra

that became very popular: *nafrat ke bazaar mein, muhabbat ki dukaan* (A shop or stall of love, in the market of hatred). Very importantly, he has argued several times that Hinduism and by implication, the Hindus are not in conflict with any religion or religious community in India or abroad. It is only the Hindutva distortion of Hinduism that was responsible for injecting the poison of hatred in the public and political spheres. In his recent speech as the Leader of the Opposition in the parliament, Gandhi again delivered an emotionally charged speech articulating his vision of national unity in terms of a vision of tolerant and inclusive Hinduism and its compatibility with other religious traditions. The central message that he sought to convey in this speech – again in binary terms – was that of fearlessness and hope against the politics of fear and hatred spread by the votaries of Hindutva.

5. Conclusion

Couple of weeks after the Lok Sabha elections results were declared, the political theorist Pratap Bhanu Mehta opined that India had 'walked back from the brink' but that its democracy was 'still in danger'. (Mehta 2024) The expressions used here and in earlier citations evoke feelings of fear, anxiety and despair and a need to clutch at some source of hope. As historians and social scientists have pointed out recently, the feelings of fear and anxiety tend to get heightened during the periods of perceived crises or of breakdown of a familiar order of things. (Biess 2023: 90-102; Baumgardt 2018: 40-52) In this way, India's historical predicament is not very different from what several other countries, including the Western ones, have been facing across the globe, namely the right wing, authoritarian and populist threat to democracy. In India, the idea of India was initially used primarily by public intellectuals to defend a vision of a secular, pluralist and democratic nation. More recently, the idea of India not only became a matter of ideological contest but was also sought to be popularized in mainstream politics, primarily by the leading politician of the opposition, Rahul Gandhi. This article has tried to show that Rahul Gandhi's idea of India is not strictly Nehruvian, but isn't entirely deviating from it. In fact, the idea has been given a more Gandhian accent through the open public avowal of religion and through the attempt to use Hinduism as a tradition of tolerance that can live very well with other religious traditions.

As the paper showed, in the recently concluded parliamentary elections, Gandhi's idea of India may not have got that much resonance directly in terms of the popularity of the phrase itself, but the content of the idea seems to have gone down well in terms of the success of the opposition slogan of 'save the constitution'. Originally the idea of India was supposed to defend the vision of

India enshrined in the constitution. However, Gandhi and other politicians who wish to use Hinduism as a tradition of tolerance will have to do some tight rope walking in Indian politics in the near future because of its intimately antagonistic relation with the politics of caste equality, which is also an agenda Gandhi is trying to support simultaneously. Whether Gandhi's religious tolerance-based approach to secularism in India comes in conflict with a radical Ambedkarite agenda of priority of caste equality based on critique of Hinduism, or the slogan of 'save the constitution' can successfully create a bridge between the two agendas of politics in the near future, is something that remains to be seen.

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