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What Is the 'Idea of India'?

By: R Srivatsan

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On the evening of Republic Day this year, 2026, the back gate of our apartment block had a flag tied to it. A woman had gathered the children who normally play there, provided tiny decals of the India flag for them to stick on their cheeks, and had them all sing the national anthem. The children loved it and the event was a success.

What was the *Idea of India* behind this heartfelt display of national pride? I will try to use Hegel's *Idea* as a way to approach this question.

Hegel's Idea is a bit different from many others, which were by and large rooted in Plato. The Idea according to the latter existed as a pure type in an unreachable regime of perfection, and all actually existing instances were imperfect copies of that type. Many variants of this thought have existed through Western history.

Hegel's Idea exists as a concrete universal in actuality, not in some abstract space, but as a living, breathing concept in its conscious self-development. The Absolute Idea for Hegel is the logical drive of any entity towards its complete rationality as Idea. This Idea is not an external regulatory ideal of the good against which all real action should be judged (Kantian), or model of abstract perfection which we aspire to (Platonic) or embodied in a transcendent Christian God who is far beyond our reach (Augustinian). It is an immanent (internally driven) development through contradiction and reconciliation. Ideas are expressions of the Absolute Idea, i.e., they are entities that organically express the Absolute seeking rational perfection between subjective and objective expressions of their truth.

The movement of the Idea towards its self-perfection through history, the becoming self-conscious of some entity as an individual and species, the movement from a blind substantive life steeped in belief into a reflective and mature one that knows what it is, are all what Hegel has called *spirit* in various stages of development. A religion, a nation, a state, an economy are concrete universals or Ideas that seek their perfection. There is no doubt they are spiritual formations in Hegel's concrete sense.

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Postmodern and postcolonial thought have repudiated the idea of an Absolute, of an orientation towards development, thus critiquing the Western norms that measure the rest of the world's progress. No doubt this move had its purpose and time in the last three decades of the 20th century and has been a fruitful intellectual venture during a phase of India's development. Today, it seems necessary to ask the question - what is the direction toward which India should move. What should be its Idea? How should it evolve its historically specific norms?

Is India an Idea, i.e., is it an expression of Hegel's Absolute Idea? Does it exhibit that drive towards self-perfection as per its immanent possibilities? At this point it would be useful to differentiate between the Hegelian concept and the Hegelian *Idea*. Hegel's concept is that which shapes actuality through a logic (often from without). For example, a university is a concept: it is an application of logic to the transformation of reality from outside by administrators who build its buildings, design its curricula, set up its faculty, take in students, and design systems to teach, train, educate and examine/assess them so that they go out with a degree. However, if the university faculty and students grasp that concept, teach, learn, research, produce excellence (even if they have to redefine that excellence) and function as a truly organic unity according to its historical purpose, they embody those concepts from within and are the Idea of the university - they are expressions of the Absolute Idea in that university, its *spirit*.

So, is India an Idea? Perhaps one can begin with seeing India as a nation-state (a trite enough repetition). The twist is that India as a state is a concept (in the Hegelian sense): it is an actually existing unity forged through a Constitution, a set of enabling and enforcing institutions like the judiciary, the army, the police, etc., laws, currency (including the latest UPI online payment system), banking, systems of taxation, of physical and digital communication, of education, of development and perhaps too of welfare, even of traffic

regulation, and so on bounded by, well, the boundaries of this state. There can be no doubt that the Indian state exists as a living concept. It is also true that the bureaucrats, judges and managers who run things are trained to internalise this concept and see that India is an Idea - they are taught to embody the state's systems and work them from within: with a mutual coursing of the conceptual blood between the State and their particular individualities. How far this is successful is a problem for their introspection.

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However, to the extent that Indians break traffic regulations, don't pay taxes, find ways to cheat the system, defraud and scam others, commit violent crimes, or embark on riot and pogroms-to the extent that they do not internalise the logic that sustains India, it fails as an Idea. Or perhaps more optimistically put, the concept of India as determined from above by its administrative unity is not yet an internalised Idea in the minds of its body of people. But yet again, may be these failures are the interference between what India should be in the imagination of these 'criminals' and what India is according to the State, its concept. These 'criminals' effectively say: laws should exempt me, public property is mine, other's property is mine, etc. Or it could be that the Indian State as an Idea is spending its money on programmes (welfare, gender justice, education, weapons, etc.) which these 'criminals' don't agree with or are cynical about. Yet again, the State may support a status quo of socio-economic hierarchy that 'criminals' don't subscribe to and find unjust. The fact that all these forms of refusal exist means that the Idea of India is in contradiction - more precisely, the concept of India hasn't yet found a home in the mind of its people. Does this mean failure? Perhaps one of the greatest misunderstandings of Hegel through the 20th century was that the Idea (a nation-state, communism) was supposed to be a non-contradictory unity. On the contrary, contradiction in Hegel is essential to the evolution of the Idea. The absence of contradiction would simply mean that the Idea is dead - it has ceased to exist. Contradiction, tension and disagreement are fundamental to the Hegelian Idea.

Let's take another example. There is a law against taking or giving a dowry (Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961). There is perhaps no act which is so ignored in practice as this one. The person who ironed my clothes once listed the several things he was giving his son-in-law to be and spoke of the many years of debt repayment into which he would descend. When I asked him why he did so, he responded, *what else do we live for? We should do our best to ensure that our daughter's family succeeds and does better than we have done in life. This is our purpose*. There is an intergenerational unity of spirit in an Indian family which far exceeds the moral framework of the law of dowry. So, in this case, the criminal is every third person (or perhaps even more frequent). The crime of demanding a dowry is simply erased by the willing acquiescence of the giver - and by his silent withdrawal from the marriage negotiation if the demand cannot be met. The unenforceability of the law has led to its desuetude. It is proof that an abstract (quasi-Platonic?) idea of what is good is not enforceable against the tide of cultural practices. What does this mean for the Idea of India? Perhaps it means that the law as an aspect of this Idea of what Indian social life can become in its best form has misunderstood the relations of force and power that occur between the two cis genders in India; that these relations of force are accepted despite the violence and exceptional brutality that accompany them on several occasions. Also, and importantly, that these relations of gender are part of the social Idea of India (and this is true in most of the religions). So, there is a hammering out in progress (or awaiting it) in this mismatch between the state's concept of dowry as a crime and the social idea of dowry as a socially accepted actuality. Which will win? No one knows.

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The historical difference in the way in which these specificities play out marks the difference in the Absolute Idea according to its expression in different historical contexts: i.e., in the actually existing, stable, logically consistent (but not necessarily just) forms of community life that have developed through tradition and habit. Does this mean that these systems will not change? Absolutely not! That is what the Idea is about: self-perfection. What that self-perfection will result in, we cannot say in advance and it most likely won't match our idea of it! But that does not mean we can be agnostic about it in our culturally relative utopias - we have to commit.

But let us now imagine the Idea of India as a nation (rather than as a state which we have been doing so far), keeping in mind Benedict Anderson's germinal formulation: a nation is an imagined community. It is the acceptance of the commonality of life that is shared in means of communication and imagination through which the community is constituted. As is widely understood, this idea of India as a community almost fails. The problem at one level is that the imagination of the goals of the national community, to start with in 'secular' terms (what freedom is, what well-being is, how much the defence expenditure should be) are not common even

among the elite, the upper-castes and the ruling classes-leave alone between them and those who constitute the large population of have-nots.

But this imagination of a national community in abstract secular terms surreptitiously collapses the problem of the nation into the form of the state. Put differently, stating something in abstract political and economic terms allows a common language and set of norms to emerge permitting the evolution of an idea of the Indian *State*. This is customarily referred to as the public, democratic, secular space. However, as is well studied in Marxist discourse, this idea of a public democratic secular space is, through its very commonality and non-interference, constituted as a universal expression of the ruling elite's ideas-those of the bureaucracy and the emerging bourgeoisie, both, needless to say, inflected by the continuing struggle for dominance of upper-caste privilege. There is a hegemonic claim on the part of this elite that determines what these terms mean in a way that ensures for itself a continuing dominance in society. This is one dimension of the fracture between the dominant elite and the populations.

If we for the moment eschew this tacit endorsement of negative secularism as we know it, the bigger fractures occur in terms of specific communities divided along caste, tribe, religion - and as we have seen in the dowry law example, intersecting all these, gender. So, do you go to a mosque, a temple or pray at home? Do you offer a sheep to a merciful god, do you eat beef, or do you insist that animals must not be killed in the name of ahimsa and that the cow is a revered divine being? In the flow and ebb of everyday practice these cultural differences quietly coexist in segregated forms of communal life. When these differences become publicly politicised, they become red flags for hostile confrontation threatening to fracture Indian society irretrievably. What does this politicisation mean? It means bringing to the fore these differences and treating them as intolerable from the perspective of your own Idea of the true and the good. The Idea of India cannot overturn these lived customary forms of communal identification. At least, this has been the case in our history so far. When played out as explicit chauvinism and irreconcilable public political opposition, they seem insurmountable obstacles to the Idea of India as a nation.

> The questions are: Can a monolithic idea of India or Bharat express the Absolute? Would it be a perfect form of India in its history?

What are the possibilities of the emergence of an Idea of India as a nation within a set of communities animated by Ideas which have their own laws, penalties, rewards and punishments that oppose each other? No doubt there are several answers to this question already. But I will propose that this formal secularism, which negates the particularities (of religion, caste, community, etc.) as abstractions from the problem of national growth and development will be hard put to succeed. This is because as Partha Chatterjee has brilliantly observed, the universal (here secular) perspective of the development state is reduced to that of one player in the politics of the nation where it's "universal will" is reduced to one among many particular wills fighting for superiority (Chatterjee 1991). It is the seesawing battle between the universal and the particular that constitute the Idea of India as a nation-state.

The twist, however, is that the "particular will" Chatterjee analysed in abstract terms 35 or so years ago is now a concrete reality and the major player contesting this is Hindutva, with others, even the secular guard, fighting for their survival. Hindutva would like to impose its Idea of India (or Bharat) on this actually existing contradictory unity. The pendulum has swung and what the development state of the 20th century has striven to establish as a negative secularism is challenged by Hindutva's Hinduism first particularist agenda.

The questions are: Can a monolithic idea of India or Bharat express the Absolute? Would it be a perfect form of India in its history? Should a Ramarajya be imagined as this completely harmonious, golden utopia that is a timeless and perfect norm? There is no doubt in my mind with complete reverence for Ramarajya and our memory of it, that this would be a catastrophic blunder. For the formal reason that this imagination simply masks a modern monolithic idea that is an exact reproduction of many straitjacketed Western norms of nationalism; and this for the real reason that such an idea militates against the plurality within Hinduism, between Hinduism and other forms of community life, and within these other forms too. As Michel Foucault has argued in a different context, ideas of utopia can only be implemented through the reality of oppression, coercion and violence to suppress difference ("Panopticon" in Foucault 1977).

To speak for Hinduism, there is a difference between the diverse practices that constitute it today (and whatever the term's history and provenance may be, it does exist as a unity) and what Hindutva would like it to be. Indeed, careful observation of different events shows that these contradictions play out as schisms within Hindutva itself (for example between Narendra Modi's *pranaprathishta* of the Ram temple at Ayodhya and the criticism of the Shankaracharya of Puri). The questions for us are: How do we find the courage to

allow these contradictions within Hinduism to play out? How do we find the security to embrace the contradictions that are integral to the Idea of India? How do we trust our history? Can we, in the brilliant allegory of Salman Rushdie, embrace our land of *gup* rather than crave a land of *chup*?

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