

TIF - Why I'm Losing Hope in India

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Education, the only avenue of mobility for the underprivileged, is fatally being undermined by the government
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It is not the economy that makes one worried for India. It is the flattening of diversity, the undermining of education that gave mobility to so many, and the entire 'banality of evil' around us that makes me lose hope. A young Indian responds to another.

A few weeks ago many people on Twitter approvingly shared an essay titled “Why I’m Losing Hope in India” by columnist Andy Mukherjee. I took note, and after seeing more people sharing it day after day, I felt happy imagining that finally someone had written with eloquence on just how disappointing, toxic, and self-defeating India’s social and cultural milieu has become of late.

Eventually when I read the article, I was left quite unsatisfied. The essay talked about several valid issues and challenges, but many issues that I believe are fundamental, did not appear or played a minuscule role in Mukherjee’s argumentation. It became obvious that true to our country’s awesome diversity, there is diversity even in why people are losing hope in it. This essay thus aims to represent what people like me feel about India’s current state of affairs — fully aware that my perspective is still only one of many that can make the case for why the nation has spectacularly failed in the last six to seven years, or even prior to that.

We the people

Mukherjee discusses several political economic challenges of the 1970s and 1980s and then says “all this ended” after the 1991 reforms. I am sure even he realizes the generalization involved in those words.

Many commentators have argued that 1991 was not as sharp a break as has popularly been portrayed. Besides, while folks from some Indian families landed jobs in big cities with multinational companies, bringing home “shiny red push-button telephones,” families like mine continued to live our same old telephone-less (and fridge-less and motorbike-less etc.) lives, in chawls with a community latrine the path to which would often be flooded and occupied by snakes and mongooses during the Konkan monsoons. The year 1991 did not change that for us. My father used to work in a textile mill in the 1980s, but after hundreds of mills closed down around the time of liberalization, he took to plying an auto-rickshaw — and remained in that occupation even as his sons graduated and got decent jobs in the 2010s, with one of them going to Harvard after finishing an MBBS degree in Pune.

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We lived in a noisy chawl complex in the 1990s, some versions of which the rest of India has seen in Bollywood movies like *Vaastav* (I specifically remember *Vaastav* because as a kid that was the only film I saw which showed a superstar living in the kind of place where I lived). More than 200 ragtag souls lived in three separate structures, each family in a little 2-room section of it. When the kids played cricket, we represented a richer diversity than the national cricket team itself. I grew up sharing, regularly and not on just special occasions, games and fights and *modaks* and *sheer kurma* with children from all the major communities that form India. As a kid I didn't even register that I was buddies with Muslims and Dalits and Christians until much later when I realized that for many other Indians, labels were far more important than individuals.

What trickled down to us was not the jobs and the wealth of liberalization, but its glitter and its rhetoric.

Despite the cultural diversity, we chawl-dwellers shared the socio-economic label of “marginalized” or “underprivileged” Indians. When “jobs were created in telecom, media, technology, finance and newly denationalized aviation industries” after the 1991 reforms, our parents were not among those eligible, or even if technically eligible, they didn't have the financial wherewithal and the social capital to go grab these new jobs. The rickshaw-wallahs remained rickshaw-wallahs, the sweepers stayed sweepers, and the labourers continued to labour. Though 1991 did not change our lives, it did change the world around us. What trickled down to us was not the jobs and the wealth of liberalization, but its glitter and its rhetoric. Our grainy black-and-white TVs showed us the lives of luckier Indians who were buying cars, shopping in Dubai, vacationing in Mauritius, and going to Delhi from Mumbai on a plane. We experienced liberalization alright, but indirectly through the lives of other Indians.

Socialist

Most of the kids I grew up with have decent jobs now. That is, we did not lose out on social and economic mobility even though 1991 had not trickled down to us. To use the cliched Salim-Javed line, *Humare paas MA thi*:

we had family, and we had education (the “MA” representative of the once-popular B.A. and M.A. degrees). Parents of most of the kids around me sincerely followed Bhimrao Ambedkar’s advice that education — *shikshan* — was our saviour. It seemed as if they had just one ambition in life: provide the best possible education to their kids. We all went to school. We all studied hard for exams. We all even heard each others’ parents warn “somebody gonna get hurt real bad” — in Marathi and in slightly different words of course — when we wouldn’t study.

Once when I bagged an important scholarship award, a woman from the chawl rushed to our house absolutely delighted, and as she congratulated me, I could see her eyes getting moist and her voice breaking. She felt proud that a boy in her little community was doing well at school. She perhaps imagined a good, fine future for me and my parents. She knew that education was the only way for us to have better lives.

Because of sarkari and “aided” educational institutions, our parents could feed and clothe us and take us to the rare ice-cream shop visit, without having to worry too much about how to educate us.

Education indeed has helped the kids I grew up with live better lives today. The year 1991 did not give us education — 1947 and 1950 did. For us the underprivileged, it was the socially-financed and community-backed nature of Indian schools and colleges (which Mukherjee terms “heavily state-subsidized”) that gifted us the much-needed bridge to our aspirations. Because of sarkari and “aided” educational institutions, our parents could feed and clothe us and take us to the rare ice-cream shop visit, without having to worry too much about how to educate us. This spectacular bridge of public education existed as a result of the socialist objectives and ideas that permeated our Constitution as well as the beliefs of our founders. Mukherjee calls it “idealistic socialism,” but I prefer Nehru’s more accurate description: an ambitious “socialist pattern of society” that considered education and healthcare as unquestionably basic necessities to be made available to all without anyone having to undergo financial stress.

Economists like to talk a lot about how the 1991 market reforms purportedly “lifted” tens of thousands out of poverty. I wish they also focused on how socialized education since independence has elevated millions of Indians out of financial poverty and intellectual darkness, and even made millionaires out of a good number of IITians and AIIMSonians.

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That brings me to one of the main reasons I am losing hope in India. Under the current government, education is horribly being commercialized, fees are obscenely being raised, and opportunities to the underprivileged are cruelly being denied. For example, despite evidence that the World Bank’s privatized education schemes in many countries are “freezing out poorer children – especially girls – and don’t improve education quality,” the Government of India recently signed an agreement with them. The ridiculous obsession to emulate the private education model of Ivy League institutions—most of which were established in the 1700s and can hardly be compared with any university in India—has led to Indian public universities receiving less and less funding each year. Policymakers are also conveniently ignoring the enormous debts that commercialized education could put young Indians in, as has happened in the US. Besides, the central government is enabling delays, reductions, and scrapping of scholarships for caste-underprivileged students. Caste-based reservations, which too have arguably

lifted more people out of poverty than any free market reform, are being diluted year after year.

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On top of these are the day-to-day microaggressions and even assaults against students from marginalized communities, and students nurturing progressive ideas. Rohith Vemula—whose institutional murder in 2016 rocked the nation—was not given his rightful grant money by his university for months, while the ABVP members like Komal Sharma who allegedly assaulted JNU students in January 2020 are yet to be arrested and punished. Then there are Muslim school children like the girl who, as Mukherjee mentions, is “reminded by her classmates that she’s different from the Hindu majority.” All of this applies of course to individuals who manage to go to schools and colleges. But there’s a huge chunk of kids who don’t even get to do that, like the children of Adivasis whose lands and livelihoods continue to forcibly be upended by the state for the benefit of businesspersons.

I’m losing hope in India because education — the only avenue of mobility for the underprivileged — is fatally being undermined by this government. At the same time regressive, hateful ideas which in the past were restricted to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) shakhas and schools, are now surfacing in thousands of schools and colleges. In fact, there seems to be an active effort by the Sangh Parivar to overthrow the inclusive educational ideals which fueled our collective cultural and intellectual growth until recently. Educationist Anil Sadgopal, while commenting on the current government’s National Education Policy, says: “RSS-allied organisations have been for long advocating that the most effective way of preparing Hindu Rashtra cadre is to instill Hindutva ideas and ‘ethical’ values (read myths, prejudices and superstitions) in the subconscious mind of the 3-6 year age group.”

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I’m losing hope in India because, well, the country is forcibly being turned into one giant Sanghi shakha. If things continue this way, a tremendous number of underprivileged young Indians will lose out on education and on the best opportunity to improve their and their families’ lives. At the same time, the kind of education that will be available for those fortunate enough to receive it, will be heavily compromised in both moral strength and intellectual rigour. To top all that, the rapidity with which the government is undermining both environmental protection laws and the natural environment will end up injecting additional stresses into the lives of the coming generations of Indians.

Secular

Kids today are also being exposed to an enormously greater amount of social toxicity than arguably any previous generation was. I’m reminded of the title of the 1973 film *Garam Hawa*, which portrayed how the lives of India’s Muslims post-1947 were often charred by the prevailing *garam hawa* of distrust, suspicion, and hatred. Contemporary India, on the other hand, is characterized by a toxic, *zahreeli hawa* that is corrupting the beliefs

and attitudes of millions of Indians.

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The worst cerebral torture that we as kids were exposed to was TV shows like Smriti Irani's *Kyunki saas bhi kabhi bahu thi* that frequently glamourized regressive ideas. But compared to what kids today are hearing from the Arnabs and the Anjanas, *Kyunki* seems as innocent as Doordarshan's *Surabhi*. And then there are Whatsapp and Twitter, with the gargantuan amount of hatred and disinformation that is introduced and shared there every minute. It is an open secret that many—though not all—folks around us, including members of our families and old friends, have internalized this toxic discourse and seem not to mind the abuses, brutalities, and atrocities being committed by the Indian state and its multifarious agents day in and day out. What else can explain the bloodcurdling silence of most of us on the injustices that Kashmiri people are daily going through?

It is the “banality of evil” that makes people like me feel most hopeless about India today. But Mukherjee's essay gave me the impression that in some people's analysis, as long as “growth” happens, everything else can be ignored. He perhaps does have a more nuanced take on this, but the essay unfortunately did not provide any glimpse of that. He cautions, for example, that “turning a 14% Muslim population into second-class citizens is hardly a recipe for peace and prosperity.” However, one is left wondering if Muslims deserve equal treatment for the sake of India's macroeconomic prosperity or for the sake of their own dignity and rights as human beings. One also wonders if, for the sake of “growth,” some might even think it okay for Muslims to be forced into second-class citizenship if they had been a miniscule 1.4% of the population instead of a substantial 14%.

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In other words, even if a government somehow improves some macro indicators of “growth” but at the same time continues to unjustly brutalize many of its people and disrupt social harmony, it is immoral to be okay with it in any way. Nevertheless, I'm afraid there are commentators who'll positively change their evaluation of the BJP government if in future it caters to some of their suggestions on economic policy. I am here to ask them to hold their statistical horses, and to please think more about humans and less about Homo economicus in their analyses. I also want to warn people who read such analyses that there is something called the “tyranny” of economists, who notoriously have “reduced a question that dogged political philosophers for centuries—about how much harm is acceptable in a society—to a math problem.” The BJP's and RSS's antisocial, antihuman policies need to strongly be condemned not because they are “bad for growth and GDP,” but because they are simply immoral and inhumane. There should be no doubt that morals and ethics need to be factors as important as any mathematical model when analyzing politics and policy: humans have been social and individual beings long before they were forced to be the Economic Man.

Democratic

In his essay, Mukherjee also wrote about wanting India to learn from China's perceived successes: “the national dream of emulating China's rapid growth is receding.” I was struck by the phrase “national dream”: it is pretty bold to project the hopes of a tiny section of privileged Indians as a national dream. I was reminded of the hopes

of yet another section of privileged Indians, the Sangh Parivar, for whom the “national dream” seems to be to emulate Israel.

It is frightening that the thrust of the Indian state and India’s elite today is to flatten all of our awe-inspiring diversity into misguided “one nation one system” absurdities.

Anyone who understands and admires India knows that there can never be a “national dream.” It is frightening that the thrust of the Indian state and India’s elite today is to flatten all of our awe-inspiring diversity into misguided “one nation one system” absurdities. And it is unfortunate that well-meaning analysts like Mukherjee seem not to mind such flattening, and are in particular dismissive of India’s fascinating rainbow of political parties and coalition politics: “we wanted to trade some of our democratic chaos for a little bit more growth [through ‘muscular leadership’].”

Instead of looking up to the apparently efficient uniformities of China and Israel, it is high time we looked at our own people and realized that we are a unique nation. We are noisy and messy and argumentative and chaotic. This is no orientalist exoticization, it’s just reality. I believe we’ll do far better if we proudly embraced this chaos of our country instead of timidly trading it away for some chimeric developmental utopia, or making absurd assertions like “We’re too much of a democracy”! Our founders too had embraced the chaos with elan, which is in fact how we got such a detailed, voluminous, comprehensive Constitution.

The way I see it, if we do away with our colours and chaos, we do away with our Indianness itself.

The debate over whether India should continue with its unique democratic chaos or opt for muscular leadership (aka authoritarianism) is not new. One gets a glimpse of it in two interesting persons featured in the first episode of Saeed Akhtar Mirza’s remarkable 1997 documentary, *A Tryst with the People of India*. One of them sincerely bats for a dictatorial leader and the other vehemently champions democracy and its exhilarating messiness. I obviously was impressed with the latter take. When asked how India can manage the limitations of democracy in its chaotic context, he simply quoted the fiercely patriotic Krishna Menon: “We’ll muddle through.”

The way I see it, if we do away with our colours and chaos, we do away with our Indianness itself. The resultant “rashtra” will be neither China-like nor Israel-like. It will simply be, as we are beginning to see in some ways even today, a monochromatic mongrel of Gorakhpur and Antilia.

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