

# IDEOLOGICAL PREFERENCES VERSUS NATIONAL INTEGRATION OF INDIA

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India is not only diverse in its geographical features, lifestyles of its people and visible symbols, but also in terms of innumerable ideologies and philosophies that have originated in this nation from time immemorial. It can be said that India lives in the minds of its people rather than in its physical boundaries and these varied minds gave birth to a lot of contradictory ideologies and philosophies. When every ideology originated, it had to go through various phases of criticism and, in turn, some other ideologies originated to counter the same. It was the attitude of tolerance that the Indian society showed towards each new trend of thought that made this nation think more and produce more. It is that spirit of tolerance which produced great scholars and philosophers of this country. Tolerance of diversity is hailed as the biggest virtue of India. But as the years go by, a major question arises as to whether India is losing her spirit of unity and tolerance in an era in which she needs to safeguard this spirit with utmost intensity and care? If the answer to this question is 'yes', then India is in terrible danger and her future is quite bleak. This problem becomes graver, especially as India is striving towards its goal of being a developed nation and aspires to be the world leader very soon. To attain development in any area and to offer international leadership, national cohesion and internal integrity are indeed essential.

The problem of intolerance occurs because of the irrational radical elements of the society which strives to eliminate every other ideology and philosophy in the society other than the one that they stand for. The ways they adopt for this purpose are more powerful and dangerous than the enormous contradictory ideologies and philosophies that successive generations of this country had produced. These radical elements succumbing to fundamentalist tendencies undertake mythical constructions to substantiate their ideologies, glorification of ideology, manipulative writings to establish one ideology as a heavenly truth, etc., to establish their exclusive claims that they and only they are true. These activities have dangerous implications for our society. Each activity aimed at

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glorification of one ideology and outright rejection of all others takes a subversive turn, leading to subsequent problems adversely affecting the integrated spirit of its people on which this nation survived for hundreds of years; for, projecting one ideology as the exclusive ‘heavenly’ truth limits the possibilities of further discourses and arguments.

It is a fact that all human societies are influenced by some kind of myths. Especially in the context of nation states, myths tend to assume central importance. Myths concern us not only for the part that they played in primitive, illiterate, tribal or non-urban cultures – making them one of the main objects of anthropological interest – but also because of human enduring insistence on carrying quasi-mythical modes of thought, expression and communication into a supposedly scientific age.<sup>1</sup>

History is most often used as tool to create and substantiate a myth. Because it is considered that past is the most efficient standard to measure the quality of present day arrangements in society – be it social, political, economic, or cultural – in spite of the fact that modern day societies are relatively different from those of the past. It helps legitimizing the present in connection with the past. For centuries, history was generally accepted as a morally exemplary tale, a feature of nation’s identity and values that were of political worth.<sup>2</sup> When associated with history, myths assume greater importance and esteem. History which is a record of unique events in the life of humankind is the stir and vibration of life and it performs the function of not only conserving and understanding of what has happened in the past, but is also a completion of what has been going on at present.<sup>3</sup> History, it must be said, is more often misused and abused rather than being properly used.<sup>4</sup> Creation of myths can be cited as an important example of abuse or misuse of history.

Influence of myths is seen prominently in the societal or national level rather than at the personal level. A national myth is an inspiring narrative or anecdote about a nation’s past. Such myths often serve as important national symbols and affirm a set of national values. National myths can also be explained as ideas which get generated on a superfluous

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<sup>1</sup>G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

<sup>2</sup>Jeremy Black and Donald M. MacRaid, *Studying History*, New Delhi: Macmillan 2000; Michael Freeden, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>3</sup>B. Sheik Ali, *History: Its Theory and Method*, New Delhi: Macmillan, 1981.

<sup>4</sup>N. Jayapalan, *Historiography*, New Delhi: Atlantic, 2002.

or shaky basis. It may be a legend or fictionalised narrative, which has been elevated to serious mythological, symbolical, and esteemed levels. Every country has its own versions of heroic history, interpreted to suit the spirit of the nation or, apparently, certain needs of one or other segment of the population in a given historical context.<sup>5</sup> National myths usually revolve around their people's struggle for independence or their war against colonialism and, in some other places, they may be spiritual in their nature and may refer to mythological stories of nation being founded directly or indirectly by gods or rulers who are entrusted with the task of governing the state on a divine authority.

Myths differ according to their purpose such as, social, political or economical. In monarchical systems, many a time the leader may be given a mythical supernatural life history in order to make him or her supra powerful. Legitimising the absolute power of the state and state sponsored propaganda are the functions of myths within a totalitarian regime. In liberal regimes, they can serve the purpose of inspiring civic virtue or self sacrifice, or publicising the power of the dominant groups and legitimising their rule. In short, it can be said that the primary motive behind a mythical creation and its propaganda is legitimising. In such mythical writings, in spite of the discontinuities of the present, society claims to have continuity with the past. The reason for this activity being the reverence to the past, it is continued despite the technological developments that have happened in the world. Vested interests that are aware of this character of society create myths with the help of the past and use it to their own advantage with the intention of legitimising their power or achieving their goals. Adolf Hitler, for example, successfully constructed the myth of Aryan supremacy, using history as a tool and employed it for legitimizing his idea of a world Germanic empire. In Nazi Germany, history was utilised as a tool of social control, as an attempt to sharpen the masculine, heroic history of the fatherland and of the German *Volk*, evil cede in the propaganda of Joseph Goebbels, one of Hitler's henchmen.<sup>6</sup> The past is an inheritance that we all share, but its interpretation varies as to how it is viewed in terms of political and social utility.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Black and MacRaid, *Studying History*, 8.

<sup>5</sup>Freeden, *Ideology*.

<sup>6</sup>Black and MacRaid, *Studying History*, 11.

<sup>7</sup>Black and MacRaid, *Studying History*, 10.

<sup>7</sup>Freeden, *Ideology*.

Especially in a multicultural entity like India, a myth assumes greater importance. The process of national integration is most often influenced by myths, for which its creators resort to actions such as over-dramatizing of events, omitting important historical details or adding facts for which there is no proof or which cannot be substantiated with the support of scientific or historical data. These kind of unwarranted actions give rise to a lot of problems in writing of the past as well as in the society, which may not be properly equipped to distinguish between what reality is and what myth is.

There is a set of widely ranging but connected problems concerning myths.<sup>8</sup> History indicates that national myths time and again hinder the process of national integration. It disallows a society or a nation to acknowledge the discontinuities of the present in relation to the past.

In fact, in India, for example, we find history being misused by political parties to serve their vested interests.<sup>9</sup> When the Congress party led UPA government put forward a proposal for Sethusamudram shipping canal project linking Indian waters with that of Sri Lanka, it was met with stiff opposition from different quarters including political parties and politically aligned religious groups within the country. The argument of the opposing parties was that, in the course of realizing this project, it would result in the destruction of a bridge believed to have been constructed by Lord Rama. The Archaeological Survey of India, however, initially stated that there is no scientific evidence to prove the existence of either Lord Rama or a bridge constructed by him. The central government of India filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court to the same effect. The advantage of the project realization is said to be a cost effective mode of transport. That is, when Sethusamudram is in place, ships sailing from the west to the east coast of India will no more need to circumnavigate around Sri Lanka. The substantial benefits will accrue to the national and regional economy.<sup>10</sup> All these arguments, however, were not enough to satisfy the Hindutva hardliners opposing the project, with BJP leading them from the front, with its interest in the vote bank of the Hindu majority.

The Congress Party led UPA does not want to stall the project and upset its coalition partner from Tamil Nadu, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which entertains high hopes on the political gains from the project. Meanwhile, the BJP and its extremist allies want to

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<sup>8</sup>Kirk, *Myth*, 2.

<sup>9</sup>Jayapalan, *Historiography*.

<sup>10</sup>[www.sethusamudram.gov.in](http://www.sethusamudram.gov.in)

sensationalize the issue and arouse religious and communal feelings in order to make gains in the upcoming parliamentary general elections. In the question related to the existence of the mythological deity, Lord Rama, and the bridge believed by many to have been constructed by him, scientific investigation and human rationality take a backseat. It is interesting to note that this is happening in a country whose Constitution lays insists on developing scientific temper as one of the fundamental duties of its citizens.<sup>11</sup>

It is naïve, for example, simply to see history as an accumulation of facts and figures, or as a series of colourful little stories which enliven human knowledge. Instead political suppositions have played a major role in their development.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, political parties, if they win their case, have a lot to gain from this kind of myths. History is used to legitimize these myths, as “the past has considerable political leverage.”<sup>13</sup> The Interpretation of a myth is based on its political and social utility in a particular place or period.

The creators and perpetrators of myths go any extent to protect and perpetuate their myth, as legitimacy of their idea as well as their sustenance, many a time, depends entirely on that particular myth to which they adamantly adhere themselves. Once in the realm of myth making, we perhaps approach an ideological treatment of the past.<sup>14</sup> History as an activity of creating myths, on the one hand, might lead to the construction of ‘heroic histories’ of certain individuals or groups of a society and, on the other, may completely ignore the existence of certain weaker sections and deny their fundamental rights.

Myths are, in fact, used to make the ideologies of the dominant class of a society appear as the interests of all. Under the influence of ideology, many twisted and manipulated accounts of past are produced which are, in turn, used to legitimize the claims of vested interests of powerful parties. Politicians and leaders in any country have a vested interest in the past.<sup>15</sup> Whether driven by a self serving or narcissistic desire to connect themselves, it is to glorify their predecessors in high office, or to revive

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<sup>11</sup>*Constitution of India*, Article 51 a.

<sup>12</sup>Black and MacRaid, *Studying History*, 10.

<sup>13</sup>Black and MacRaid, *Studying History*, 10.

<sup>14</sup>Black and MacRaid, *Studying History*, 11.

<sup>15</sup>Black and MacRaid, *Studying History*, 12.

and mould the national spirit to their advantage.<sup>16</sup> The Hindutva ideologists of India have espoused the taboo of cow slaughter as a national issue and they insist on legislations to include cow protection as one of the fundamental rights of Indian Constitution. In order to give apparent authenticity to their claim, some of the Hindutva ideologues created a myth that beef eating in India started with foreign domination, i.e., the Muslims started it and the Europeans continued it. Here, they completely negate the possibility of historical developments to have occurred in any other manner. This myth, however, is strongly contradicted by some historians who disprove it with substantial evidence. According to them, much before the advent of Islam, beef had been associated with Indian culinary practices and contrary to popular belief even today a large number of Indians, the indigenous people in particular and other communities in general, consume beef unmindful of the threats from the forces of Hindutva ideology. It must also be state at this juncture that these historians had to face a lot of opposition, including threat to life, primarily from the Hindu extremist groups.

The insistence of ban on cow slaughter is a typical case of politicizing religious issues. Here the Hindutva ideology manipulates and creates confusion between the image of cow being a religious symbol for the Hindus and the image of cow being a symbol of national identity. The Hindutva ideology tends to provoke communal feelings and religious sentiments among people belonging to one particular religious affinity and mobilize them for their own political gains. While the religious sentiments of a community have to be respected, considering culinary diets of society as a symbol of national identity doesn't seem to be very encouraging. Maybe it is high time that we do a rethinking about what we consider as a nation: What is India as a nation? Does the lifestyle dictated by a particular ideology prevalent within the society determine its spirit of nationalism? Or, is it their spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood that makes a nation strong?

Ideologies attempt to control the world of politics and force us into a rut of indoctrination and manipulative conduct.<sup>17</sup> Ideology based on conservative nationalism is also a hindrance to the intellectual growth of our nation. It affects the thought process of a society and the freedom of expression, which is guaranteed by the Indian Constitution as a

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<sup>16</sup> Black and MacRaild, *Studying History*, 12.

<sup>17</sup>Freedden, *Ideology*.

fundamental right.<sup>18</sup> The communalist forces of Hindutva ideology, for example, put forward an illogical line of reasoning to oppose M. F. Hussain’s painting depicting ‘Bharat Mata’ as a nude woman. Neither the motivation behind the painting nor its complexities was taken into consideration. The explanations given by the artist were neglected without giving him a fair chance to defend his artistic work. The opposition to the painting was so strong that the artist had to face a threat to his life and had, unfortunately, to live in exile in another country. A case was also filed against him in the court of law, but the court acquitted him of all the charges.

When a fundamental right is denied, citizens feel alienated from the nation. One will not have an intense feeling of belonging towards one’s nation. This, in turn, affects the national unity and various processes culminating in national integration. This kind of conservative (and destructive) nationalism arises in the mind of people who put forward themselves as the guardians of a nation’s culture. They decide what ‘culture’ is to a nation based on their own ideology and set their own standards to determine as to what actions amount to causing disgrace to this ‘national culture’. It is indeed chauvinistic to insist on the understanding that one ideology determines the culture of a nation. The followers of a particular ideology do not realize (although sometimes it happens with their knowledge also) that ideologies are neither right nor wrong, but only a wide ranging structural arrangement that attributes meaning to a range of mutually defining political concepts.<sup>19</sup> Considering and promoting one single ideology as the only true one is a fairy-tale-way of understanding with no amount of rationality involved.

No ideology can be regarded as an irrefutable truth as it exists along with a number of parallel ideologies and, therefore, it cannot be forcefully imposed on an individual, a nation, or the society at large. If a general citizen is not aware of the problems of ideology in a society, he or she will not be able to understand the ideological manipulation of reality behind various events. Thus, he or she will not be able to take an unbiased stand regarding the events that are happening in the society. Many will end up losing their own individuality as the perpetrators of ideology interpret the events to the intellectually unequipped citizens based on their own

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<sup>18</sup> *Constitution of India*, “Right to Freedom,” Part III, Article 19.

<sup>19</sup> Freedon, *Ideology*.

ideology and claim that their interpretation is an absolute truth which cannot be challenged, no matter how much of evidence can be brought against their particular argument. Citizens with good intellectual capacity, equipped by their own individuality and effective reasoning capacity, are an asset to the nation-building process and amalgamation of different ideas for successfully building up a spirit of unity among the citizens of nation. Unwillingness to accept the presence of different ideas and inability to tolerate them will lead to the collapse of national unity.

Thinkers and writers are usually the perpetrators of ideologies. They legitimize their own preferred ideology by making use of history. They create a number of national myths and glorious narratives on the basis of their preferred ideologies. Later, these biased narratives enter educational curriculum and mainstream academic thinking. Individual writers misuse history to serve their needs and interests.<sup>20</sup> They distort history because of fear, bias and opportunism.<sup>21</sup> The hold of an idea can solely depend on the ability of the writer to substantiate his writing. Kancha Ilaiah, a Dalit professor at Osmania University, in his work *Why I Am Not a Hindu?* launches a scathing, blatant criticism of Hindu religion and calls the religion as being fascist. He terms the original Aryan settlers as responsible for the mass extermination of Dalit bahiyans. According to him, in Hinduism, “All gods and goddesses are institutionalized, modified and contextualized in a most brazen anti dalitbahujan mode.”<sup>22</sup> He goes to the extent of saying that Hindu religion deliberately uses violence as a control mechanism against the Dalits. Here the author is expressing ideological bias against the Hindu religion and in favour of the Dalits. Kancha Ilaiah’s attack on Hinduism is based on his beliefs and experiences without any scientific evidence to support his argument. Certain features of the Hindu religion have been manipulated in order to serve the purpose of legitimizing his ideology, which has been presented as heavenly truths without any scope of being subjected to the prospect of analysis and scrutiny. In this book, a religion per se is termed as the reason for oppression of Dalits without giving much importance to the social and economic reasons behind this oppression. His call to ‘Dalitize India’<sup>23</sup> in

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<sup>20</sup>Jayapalan, *Historiography*.

<sup>21</sup>Jayapalan, *Historiography*.

<sup>22</sup>Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, Calcutta: Samya, 1996, 72.

<sup>23</sup>Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, 132.

response to the demand of upper class Hindus to ‘Hinduize India’<sup>24</sup> is equally dangerous. He further says: “We must shout, we hate Hinduism, we hate Brahmanism, we love our culture and more than anything we love ourselves.”<sup>25</sup> The feeling of ‘belonging to India’ becomes less important to Kancha Ilaiah when compared to the feeling of ‘being a Dalit’. He says: “If the Brahminvaada represents the ideal for them [for the Hindus], the Dalitvaada should be the ideal for us [for the Dalits].”<sup>26</sup> While he criticizes the Hindu religion of being extremist and fanatic, he is also committing the same mistake of refusing to accept the presence of different voices in our Indian society. He ultimately turns one group of our society against another and encourages the same level of extremism, only the parties are different. How would such a stand enhance our national unity and integrity?

Independence was expected to make India more developed and liberal in various areas such as political, social, economical, cultural, and educational. In terms of tolerance of different ideas are we progressing or digressing? There is increased presence of extremism in Indian society. Once again, it is in the same minds in which this nation lives and remains in the lime light; this time, however, as we witness inability to accept the presence of differences and discontinuities in our society, it is the duty of every Indian citizen to protect the integrity of our country which was acquired by the sacrifices of many a great minds. If India were to attain freedom from all external forces, first of all it needs to be freed from its own radical and communalist elements which are holding her fast to slavish but fundamentalist tendencies. It is, then, necessary to exercise a sense of caution while expressing one’s own ideas and also while looking at and interpreting others. This prudence will help us strengthen the social fabric, harmony, and brotherhood in our society and will make India a country living the dictum “unity in diversity” in its true sense.

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<sup>24</sup>Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, 132.

<sup>25</sup>Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, 132.

<sup>26</sup>Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, 132.