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What does India think?

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There is no one “India” that thinks. There are several Indias, each of which has its own separate consciousness. Indeed, if there is any culture or civilisation that has rejected monism for pluralism, it is the ancient Hindu culture. Hinduism is not a religion in the Abrahamic sense. It has no creed, no single orthodoxy, nor a prescribed formula for affirming religious faith. There are many gods and there is no god – only a single disembodied essence, the *Brahman*, which permeates the universe.

But modern India is not just a Hindu civilisation. It has multiple religions – all the various sects of Islam and of Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism – and its people often subscribe to more than one. There are also many languages – perhaps as many as 700, though only 22 are recognised officially, and a couple of thousand dialects. Geographically, India is comparable to Europe, minus European Russia, and many of its regions are larger than some European nations. Indeed, India is in a way a collection of nations.

Even so, there have been attempts through the last 200 years to fashion a single India, with a single identity. The struggle to throw off the British yoke led the elite to fashion stories of why India was a nation, in order to counter British jibes that India was no more a reality than the equator, as Winston Churchill once said. Thus Indians fashioned a story of nationhood.

Indeed, they fashioned more than one story. The idea of India as a single nation was countered by the idea of two nations: Hindu and Muslim. This led to India’s division into two nation states, India and Pakistan. One constant in Indian thinking since then is the notion of Pakistan as the Other, if not the Enemy. After Partition, a revised idea of India emerged, thanks to Jawaharlal Nehru, its first prime minister. India was to be a secular nation in which there was equal respect for all religions, but with special attention to the Muslims who had stayed behind rather than migrating to Pakistan.

The hegemony of the Nehruvian idea of India was bolstered by the near-monopoly of his Congress Party and the dynastic succession of Nehru's daughter and grandson as prime ministers. His grandson's widow will now be succeeded by his great-grandson. In the 68 years since independence, Congress has been in office for 55 and the dynasty in control for all but seven.

Rival ideas of India

The Nehruvian idea of India is facing a challenge not only because Congress lost power in 2014 but also because a rival party, the Indian People's Party (Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP) – commonly labelled as Hindu nationalist – has won a majority to form India's first non-coalition government in 30 years. Rival ideas of India are in the air. The hegemony of the Congress idea of secularism is being challenged and the idea of Indian nationhood is being debated anew. If Pakistan was born out of the idea of two nations and it is the Muslim nation, then why isn't India the Hindu nation?

The notion of two nations produced two nation states, but both nations were split between them, albeit unequally. There were Hindus and Muslims in both India and Pakistan. However, Muslims were divided much more evenly between the two than Hindus. Pakistan was itself divided between the territories of modern-day Pakistan to the west and Bangladesh to the east – not on grounds of religion but of language. Nations are not defined by religion alone – language counts, as does a common history.

The tension between this pluralist multi-faith society and the search for a single identity or idea of nationhood has moved to the forefront since the victory of the BJP. But the other, equally urgent desire is for economic growth, poverty eradication, and secure livelihoods for all. India had a moderate rate of GDP growth in the first 30 years after independence, which picked up somewhat in the next ten. But it was in the 1990s that India adopted a radical reform strategy, and since then growth has taken off. Even so, in terms of human development, India is a laggard. Poverty is still a serious problem, and the challenge of making India prosperous enough for a decent standard of living is the other issue occupying Indians, along with the question of identity. The new government was elected on the slogan of “inclusive growth”.

The previous Congress-led coalition government failed to achieve high growth or low inflation, and Indians lost their patience and took a bet on the BJP. The need for growth is urgent because India has a young and still-growing population,

three-quarters of which is aged under 30. Educating, skilling-up, and engaging millions of young people in viable employment is high on India's list of worries.

There are also other struggles that occupy Indians. Most recently, the safety of women from sexual harassment, and worse, has been a focus of debate. Young Indians, like others around the world, want equality for the LGBT population. Much more sensitive politically is the movement of the *Dalit* castes, which traditional Hindu society treats as “untouchables”, to achieve equality. There is some legislation, and progress has been made. Yet the hierarchical nature of the Hindu caste system itself has come under challenge by *Dalits* and “Other Backward Castes”. This is facilitated by India's democratic political system, whose electorate is alive to its responsibility to vote regularly, and insists that its demands be met by its representatives.

Indians are also becoming aware that they have a serious health issue, with a lack of sanitary facilities in rural as well as urban areas. The need to keep India clean and free of rubbish poses a huge problem, which has been highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Rivers are dirty, cities are filthy, and many people, while keeping their private space clean, treat public space as a waste bin.

There is an elite awareness of the issues of the environment and climate change, but this has not caught the public imagination. Successive governments have taken a distributive rather than an ecological stance towards international agreement on climate change, with economic growth as their priority. India is a low polluter in per capita terms, and the West must clean up first and compensate the rest to catch up, is the argument. It is unlikely that India will take the lead in hammering out a global compact on carbon emissions at the November 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris.

India and the world

While dealing with these internal challenges and struggles, India also aspires to be a substantial presence in the international arena, with the ambition of earning a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. It sees itself as a regional hegemon in South Asia – despite the challenge from Pakistan, a fellow nuclear power. The new government has turned India towards the east and begun to build strong relations with East Asia. China is much admired by Indians, but the two countries share a disputed border where there have been skirmishes. In the economic sphere, there is growing trade between India and China, and there is a genuine desire for China to be a friendly rival rather than an enemy.

India has always been a Western-oriented society, either due to the idea of a shared Indo-European heritage of related languages or the 500 years of Western presence after Vasco da Gama “discovered” India in 1498. Although India remained equidistant from the two blocs during the Cold War, its natural affinities are with the European civilisation. Most recently, Indo-US relations have flourished, with cooperation on the issue of nuclear fuel supply. The new government has deepened this cooperation by leveraging the successful diaspora community of Indians in the West. India and the US are joined in an implicit “just-in-case” alliance to hedge against the chance of either of them getting into a serious conflict with China.

Indians are many, as are their demands, aspirations, and ideas. But the fundamental achievement of Indians has been the construction of an open, liberal democracy that respects human rights, especially free speech. This guarantees that whatever challenges India may face, and however large the differences between Indians, they will solve them by leveraging the old traditions of debate and discussion rather than violence. Given the size of India, that alone should give the world reassurance that whatever India may be thinking, it will be all right.