

As delivered

## WHO IS AN INDIAN?: A NATION OF MINORITIES

*The National Minorities Lecture*

*Dr Shashi Tharoor, M.P.*

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Shri Wajahat Habibullah, Dr Sangliana, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Friends,

Thank you for your warm welcome despite my delayed arrival from the airport. [explain] It is a privilege to follow in the distinguished footsteps of such illustrious lecturers as Justice Ahmadi and the Dalai Lama. It gives me great pleasure to be with you this morning to share a few thoughts with you about who is an Indian and the challenges of diversity in our nation of minorities.

At midnight on August 15th, 1947, independent India was born as its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, proclaimed "a trust with destiny -- a moment which comes but rarely in history, when we pass from the old to the new, when an age ends and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance". With those words he launched India on a remarkable experiment in governance. Remarkable because it was happening at all. "India," Winston Churchill once barked, "is merely a geographical expression. It is no more a single country than the Equator." Churchill was rarely right about India, but it is true that no other country in the world embraces the extraordinary mixture of ethnic groups, the profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, the varieties of topography and climate, the diversity of religions and cultural practices and the range of levels of economic development that India does.

And yet India is more than the sum of its contradictions. Just thinking about India makes clear the immensity of the challenge of

defining what it means to be an Indian. How can one approach this land of snow peaks and tropical jungles, with 23 major languages and 22,000 distinct "dialects" (including some spoken by more people than Danish or Norwegian), inhabited in the second decade of the twenty-first century by over a billion individuals of every ethnic extraction known to humanity? How does one come to terms with a country whose population is nearly 30% illiterate but which has educated the world's second-largest pool of trained scientists and engineers, whose teeming cities overflow while two out of three Indians scratch a living from the soil? What is the clue to understanding a country rife with despair and disrepair, which nonetheless moved a Mughal Emperor to declaim, "if on earth there be paradise of bliss, it is this, it is this, it is this..."? How does one gauge a culture which elevated non-violence to an effective moral principle, but whose freedom was born in blood and whose independence still soaks in it? How does one explain a land where peasant organizations and suspicious officials once attempted to close down Kentucky Fried Chicken as a threat to the nation, where a former Prime Minister once bitterly criticized the sale of Pepsi-Cola "in a country where villagers don't have clean drinking water", and which yet invents more sophisticated software for the planet's computer manufacturers than any other country in the world? How can one determine the future of an ageless civilization that was the birthplace of four major religions, a dozen different traditions of classical dance, eighty-five major political parties and three hundred ways of cooking the potato?

The short answer is that it can't be done - at least not to everyone's satisfaction. Any truism about India can be immediately contradicted by another truism about India. It is often jokingly said that "anything you can say about India, the opposite is also true". The country's national motto, emblazoned on its governmental crest, is "Satyameva Jayaté": Truth Alone Triumphs. The question remains,

however: whose truth? It is a question to which there are at least a billion answers - if the last census hasn't undercounted us again.

But that sort of an answer is no answer at all, and so another answer to those questions has to be sought. And this may lie in a simple insight: the singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in the plural. There are, in the hackneyed phrase, many Indias. Everything exists in countless variants. There is no single standard, no fixed stereotype, no "one way". This pluralism is acknowledged in the way India arranges its own affairs: all groups, faiths, tastes and ideologies survive and contend for their place in the sun. At a time when most developing countries opted for authoritarian models of government to promote nation-building and to direct development, India chose to be a multi-party democracy. And despite many stresses and strains, including twenty-two months of autocratic rule during the 1975 Emergency, a multi-party democracy -- freewheeling, rumbustious, corrupt and inefficient, perhaps, but nonetheless flourishing -- India has remained.

One result is that India strikes many as maddening, chaotic, inefficient and seemingly unpurposeful as it muddles its way through the second decade of the twenty-first century. Another, though, is that India is not just a country, it is an adventure, one in which all avenues are open and everything is possible. "India," wrote the British historian E.P. Thompson, "is perhaps the most important country for the future of the world. All the convergent influences of the world run through this society.... There is not a thought that is being thought in the West or East that is not active in some Indian mind."

[I'm glad a Brit said that, and not an Indian.] That Indian mind has been shaped by remarkably diverse forces: ancient Hindu tradition, myth and scripture; the impact of Islam and Christianity; and two centuries of British colonial rule. The result is unique. Many

observers have been astonished by India's survival as a pluralist state. But India could hardly have survived as anything else. Pluralism is a reality that emerges from the very nature of the country; it is a choice made inevitable by India's geography and reaffirmed by its history.

India's is a civilization that, over millennia, has offered refuge and, more important, religious and cultural freedom, to Jews, Parsis, several varieties of Christians, and of course Muslims. Jews came to Kerala centuries before Christ, with the destruction by the Babylonians of their First Temple, and they knew no persecution on Indian soil until the Portuguese arrived in the 16th century to inflict it. Christianity arrived on Indian soil with St. Thomas the Apostle (Doubting Thomas), who came to the Kerala coast some time before 52 A.D. and was welcomed on shore by a flute-playing Jewish girl. He made many converts, so there are Indians today whose ancestors were Christian well before any Europeans discovered Christianity. In Kerala, where Islam came through traders, travellers and missionaries rather than by the sword, the Zamorin of Calicut was so impressed by the seafaring skills of this community that he issued a decree obliging each fisherman's family to bring up one son as a Muslim to man his all-Muslim navy! This is India, a land whose heritage of diversity means that in the Calcutta neighbourhood where I lived during my high school years, the wail of the muezzin calling the Islamic faithful to prayer routinely blends with the chant of mantras and the tinkling of bells at the local Shiva temple, accompanied by the Sikh gurudwara's reading of verses from the Guru Granth Sahib, with St Paul's cathedral just round the corner.

So the first challenge is that we cannot generalize about India. One of the few generalizations that can safely be made about India is that nothing can be taken for granted about the country. Not even its name: for the word India comes from the river Indus, which flows in Pakistan. That anomaly is easily explained, for we know that

Pakistan was hacked off the stooped shoulders of India by the departing British in 1947. (Yet each explanation breeds another anomaly. Pakistan was created as a homeland for India's Muslims, but -- at least till very recently -- there were more Muslims in India than in Pakistan.)

So if we can't generalize, we must ask the question: who, then, is an Indian?

In our six and a half decades of independence, many thoughtful observers have seen a country more conscious than ever of what divides it: religion, region, caste, language, ethnicity. What makes India, then, a nation?

To answer that, I'd like to take an Italian example -- not the one you imagine! Amidst the popular ferment that made an Italian nation out of a mosaic of principalities and statelets in the late 19th century, one Italian nationalist (Massimo Taparelli d'Azeglio) memorably wrote, "We have created Italy. Now all we need to do is to create Italians." Oddly enough, no Indian nationalist succumbed to the temptation to express the same thought -- "we have created India; now all we need to do is to create Indians."

Such a sentiment would not, in any case, have occurred to Nehru, that pre-eminent voice of Indian nationalism, because he believed in the existence of India and Indians for millennia before he gave words to their longings; he would never have spoken of "creating" India or Indians, merely of being the agent for the reassertion of what had always existed but had been long suppressed. Nonetheless, the India that was born in 1947 was in a very real sense a new creation: a state that had made fellow citizens of the Ladakhi and the Laccadivian for the first time, that divided Punjabi from Punjabi for the first time, that asked the Keralite peasant to feel allegiance to a Kashmiri Pandit ruling in Delhi, also

for the first time. Nehru would not have written of the challenge of "creating" Indians, but creating Indians was what, in fact, the nationalist movement did.

Let me illustrate what this means with a simple story. When India celebrated the 49th anniversary of its independence from British rule 15 years ago, our then Prime Minister, H.D. Deve Gowda, stood at the ramparts of Delhi's 17<sup>th</sup>-century Red Fort and delivered the traditional Independence Day address to the nation in Hindi, India's "national language". Eight other Prime Ministers had done exactly the same thing 48 times before him, but what was unusual this time was that Deve Gowda, a southerner from the state of Karnataka, spoke to the country in a language of which he did not know a word. Tradition and politics required a speech in Hindi, so he gave one – the words having been written out for him in his native Kannada script, in which they, of course, made no sense.

Such an episode is almost inconceivable elsewhere, but it represents the best of the oddities that help make India. Only in India could a country be ruled by a man who does not understand its "national language"; only in India, for that matter, is there a "national language" which half the population does not understand; and only in India could this particular solution be found to enable the Prime Minister to address his people. One of Indian cinema's finest "playback singers," the Keralite K.J. Yesudas, sang his way to the top of the Hindi music charts with lyrics in that language written in the Malayalam script for him, but to see the same practice elevated to the Prime Ministerial address on Independence Day was a startling affirmation of Indian pluralism.

For, you see, we are all minorities in India. A typical Indian stepping off a train, a Hindi speaking Hindu male from the Gangetic plain state of Uttar Pradesh, might cherish the illusion that he represents the "majority community," to use an expression much

favoured by the less industrious of our journalists. But he does not. As a Hindu he belongs to the faith adhered to by some 81% of the population, but a majority of the country does not speak Hindi; a majority does not hail from Uttar Pradesh; and if he were visiting, say, Kerala, he would discover that a majority there is not even male. Worse, our archetypal UP Hindu has only to mingle with the polyglot, multi-coloured crowds (and I'm referring to the colour of their skins, not their clothes) thronging any of India's major railway stations to realize how much of a minority he really is. Even his Hinduism is no guarantee of majorityhood, because his caste automatically places him in a minority as well: if he is a Brahmin, 90% of his fellow Indians are not; if he is a Yadav, a "backward class", 85% of Indians are not, and so on.

Or take language. The Constitution of India recognizes 23 today [rupee note], but in fact, there are 35 Indian languages which are spoken by more than a million people – and these are languages, with their own scripts, grammatical structures and cultural assumptions, not just dialects (and if we were to count dialects within these languages, there are more than 22,000). Each of the native speakers of these languages is in a linguistic minority, for none enjoys majority status in India. Thanks in part to the popularity of Bombay's Hindi cinema, Hindi is understood, if not always well spoken, by nearly half the population of India, but it is in no sense the language of the majority; indeed, its locutions, gender rules and script are unfamiliar to most Indians in the south or north-east.

Ethnicity further complicates the notion of a majority community. Most of the time, an Indian's name immediately reveals where he is from and what his mother tongue is; when we introduce ourselves we are advertising our origins. Despite some inter-marriage at the elite levels in the cities, Indians still largely remain endogamous, and a Bengali is easily distinguished from a Punjabi. The difference this reflects is often more apparent than the elements

of commonality. A Karnataka Brahmin shares his Hindu faith with a Bihari Kurmi, but feels little identity with him in respect of appearance, dress, customs, tastes, language or political objectives. At the same time a Tamil Hindu would feel that he has far more in common with a Tamil Christian or Muslim than with, say, a Haryanvi Jat with whom he formally shares a religion.

Why do I harp on these differences? Only to make the point that Indian nationalism is a rare animal indeed. [reminds me of the American and French diplomats in the Security Council arguing about a problem: “it may work in practice, but will it work in theory?”] It is not based on language (since we have at least 23 or 35, depending on whether you follow the Constitution or the ethnolinguists). It is not based on geography (the “natural” geography of the subcontinent – framed by the mountains and the sea – has been hacked by the partition of 1947). It is not based on ethnicity (the “Indian” accommodates a diversity of racial types in which many Indians have more in common with foreigners than with other Indians – Indian Punjabis and Bengalis, for instance, have more in common with Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, respectively, than they do with Poonawalas or Bangaloreans). And it is not based on religion (we are home to every faith known to mankind, with the possible exception of Shintoism, and Hinduism – a faith without a national organization, no established church or ecclesiastical hierarchy, no Hindu Pope, no Hindu Mecca, no uniform beliefs or modes of worship – exemplifies as much our diversity as it does our common cultural heritage). Indian nationalism is the nationalism of an idea, the idea of an ever-ever land – emerging from an ancient civilization, united by a shared history, sustained by pluralist democracy.

This land imposes no narrow conformities on its citizens: you can be many things and one thing. You can be a good Muslim, a good Keralite and a good Indian all at once. [Yugoslavia civil war example]



Where Freudians note the distinctions that arise out of “the narcissism of minor differences”, in India we celebrate the commonality of major differences. To stand Michael Ignatieff’s famous phrase on its head, we are a land of belonging rather than of blood.

So the “idea of India”, to use Tagore’s famous phrase, is of one land embracing many. It is the idea that a nation may endure differences of caste, creed, color, culture, cuisine, conviction, costume and custom, and still rally around a democratic consensus. That consensus is around the simple principle that in a democracy you don’t really need to agree – except on the ground rules of how you will disagree. The reason India has survived all the stresses and strains that have beset it for sixty-five years, and that led so many observers in the 1950s and 1960s to predict its imminent disintegration, is that it maintained consensus on how to manage without consensus.

My generation grew up in an India where our sense of nationhood lay in the slogan, “unity in diversity”. We were brought up to take pluralism for granted, and to reject the communalism that had partitioned the nation when the British left. In rejecting the case for Pakistan, Indian nationalism also rejected the very idea that religion should be a determinant of nationhood. We never fell into the insidious trap of agreeing that, since Partition had established a state for Muslims, what remained was a state for Hindus. To accept the idea of India you had to spurn the logic that had divided the country.

This was what that much-abused term, “secularism”, meant for us. Western dictionaries defined “secularism” as the absence of religion, but Indian secularism meant a profusion of religions; the state engaged with all of them but privileged none. Secularism in India did not mean irreligiousness, which even avowedly atheist

parties like the Communists or the southern DMK party found unpopular amongst their voters; indeed, in Calcutta's annual Durga Puja, the Communist parties compete with each other to put up the most lavish Puja pandals, pavilions to the goddess Durga. Rather, secularism meant, in the Indian tradition, multi-religiousness. The Calcutta neighbourhood I described earlier epitomized this India.

Throughout the decades after Independence, the political culture of the country reflected these "secular" assumptions and attitudes. Though the Indian population is 81% Hindu and the country had been partitioned as a result of a demand for a separate Muslim homeland, three of India's thirteen Presidents have been Muslims; so were innumerable Governors, Cabinet Ministers, Chief Ministers of states, Ambassadors, Generals, and Supreme Court Justices (including the next Chief Justice). During the war with Pakistan in 1971, the Indian Air Force in the northern sector was commanded by a Muslim [Lateef]; the Army Commander was a Parsi [Manekshaw], the General Officer Commanding the forces that marched into Bangladesh was a Sikh [Aurora], and the General flown in to negotiate the surrender of the Pakistani forces in East Bengal was Jewish [Jacob]. That is India.

Not all agree with this vision of India. There are those who wish it to become a Hindu Rashtra, a land of and for the Hindu majority; they have made gains in the elections of the 1990s and in the politics of the street. Secularism is established in India's constitution, but they ask why India should not, like many other Third World countries, find refuge in the assertion of what they call its own religious identity. We have all seen the outcome of this view in the horrors that have cost perhaps 2000 lives in Gujarat a decade ago.

I am the father of twin sons, born in June 1984. Though they first entered the world in Singapore, and though the circumstances of my life have seen them grow up in Switzerland and then the United States, and they have lived in Hong Kong and London, it is India they have always identified with. Ask them what they are, and that's what they'll tell you: they're Indian. Not "Hindu", not "Malayali," not "Nair", not "Calcuttan", though they could claim all those labels too. Their mother is herself half-Bengali, half-Kashmiri, which gives them further permutative possibilities. They desire none. They are just Indian.

Yet in recent years they have seen an India in which that answer no longer seems enough. Political contention has erupted in violence: one can cite the destruction in December 1992 of the Babri Masjid, by a howling, chanting mob of Hindu fanatics, and the massacre of perhaps 2000 innocents, mainly Muslim, across Gujarat in early 2002, and most recently the inter-communal riots in Assam, as emblematic of this tragedy. Headlines spoke of riots and killing, Hindu against Muslim, of men being slaughtered because of the mark on a forehead or the absence of a foreskin. This is not the India I had wanted my sons to lay claim to.

The consciousness of minorityhood has sadly resulted in horrific violence – sometimes by one minority group against another – and resulted in internal displacement. We are, as a result, home to the world's 11th largest population of 'Internally Displaced People' (IDPs). Unlike refugees, IDPs have not crossed an international border and are thus still live in, and are the responsibility of, the country to which they belong. There are a variety of factors which cause internal displacement: armed conflict between the state (government) and non-state actors (armed militant groups); natural disasters such as a cyclone, a flood or an earthquake; and violence between ethnic groups and religious minorities, often due to

contention over issues such as land rights and mineral resources. Fleeing such problems, IDPs are forced out of their homes fearing for their lives. While this phenomenon is common in conflict-racked societies and civil war situations, it shames us as a prospering democracy that we have so many IDPs. Of the 12 nations which have suffered the forced migration of a million or more people within their countries, only two are classified as 'stable' countries -- India and Turkey.

Though numbers are not entirely reliable, we have some from the IDP database created by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), which tracks IDPs around the world on behalf of the UN. With about 5 lakh IDPs, India's northeast has witnessed the biggest exodus of people who were forced to leave their homes. In 2010 along the Assam-Meghalaya frontier, 4,000 Nepali-speaking people were displaced by violent clashes in which their community was targeted by members of the Khasi tribe. In 2011, at least 50,000 people lost their homes after inter-tribal clashes between the Rabha and Garo people in Assam and Meghalaya, and this year the violence between Bodos and Muslims has driven lakhs into camps and shelters.

The Kashmiri Pandit diaspora, estimated at 2.5 lakh, constitutes India's second largest IDP group. My own wife's family is amongst them; their ancestral home was burned down in 1989-90 by terrorists. (We visited the ruins just two weekends ago; nothing remains but memories.) They were amongst those fortunate enough to find new homes and lives in Jammu, but many tens of thousands still languish in camps that were meant to be temporary but within which an entire generation has grown up. Some 59,000 Kashmiri Pandits are estimated to have moved outside the state – indeed the Home Ministry estimates there are only 808 Kashmiri Pandit families left living in the Kashmir Valley. The homes and temples of many of the rest have been destroyed so that they have nothing to come back to. This is a curious case of a community belonging to what is called the

national majority but which finds itself a minority in one part of the country -- and suffers the disabilities of vulnerability that can imply.

There are other cases. The communal carnage in Gujarat in 2002 displaced a lakh and a half within the state. Some of that displacement seems likely to be permanent, as people of a particular community hesitate to return to mixed areas where they were once victimized. Naxalite violence, sometimes linked to clashes over land and tribal rights but quite often simple banditry, and the subsequent government operations against the insurgents, have also caused the forced displacement of about 1.5 lakh people in Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh. Communal riots in Orissa in 2007 and 2008 forced thousands to leave their homes. Many of these IDPs have been obliged to take shelter in camps, particularly in the northeast where some camps go back as far as the Nellie massacre of Bangladeshi migrants in the 1980s.

I mentioned that an entire generation of our fellow Indians has grown up in IDP camps. But many internally displaced people live outside camps too, and it is all but impossible to estimate exactly how many of them there are. The fact is that at least a million of our countrymen and women are displaced inside our country. Some of the clashes that caused their displacement have pitched two minorities against each other (two different tribes, for instance); sometimes it is two different kinds of minorities -- a religious minority against a visible ethnic minority, as happened in Khokrajhar, in Assam. Last month we saw panic-stricken northeasterners fleeing a number of Indian cities where they had been living and working, because of alleged threats of reprisal attacks on them retaliating for the anti-Muslim violence in Assam. Whether the threats were real or fake -- designed merely to intimidate and cause fear -- there is no doubt that they had an effect on many thousands of people. Special trains had to be laid on from Bangalore to accommodate the demand. Some of those who fled may come back

as things quieten down, but their temporary displacement raises hard questions about what it means to be a certain kind of Indian in India. Northeasterners have often complained of discrimination and harassment based purely on their visible difference from the people they are living amongst. Such incidents are a betrayal of the acceptance of difference that lies at the heart of Indian civilization.

There is a great deal we can do as a society and a state. Clearly protection for vulnerable minority groups must be a priority for local, state and central governments. This may require a national policy, though the lack of any legislation on IDPs remains a serious shortcoming. The world community has issued Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement which could go into the framing of a suitable law. The Kenyan Government has this year introduced an Internally Displaced Persons Bill, 2012, to alleviate the suffering of IDPs in that country, provide legal definitions, and allocate responsibilities to the Government and funds for the purpose. India could do something similar. We also need to evolve a policy on IDPs aiming to get them out of camps and into productive, normal lives either in their new environment or back home if the circumstances that prompted their displacement have changed. Displaced people must be specifically targeted by pro-poor schemes such as the Public Distribution System (PDS), the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), the Mahatma Gandhi national Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) and the Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC). To implement these better and to appreciate fully the dimensions of the problem, we need better data on IDPs. The statistics for IDPs living outside of camps are mostly unreliable. This data needs to be updated regularly and the situation of IDPs monitored. Field surveys must be conducted frequently, systematically and in a sustained manner. The creation of a central government monitoring agency for IDPs would also help.

Mr Chairman,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

India has survived the Aryans, the Mughals, the British; it has taken from each -- language, art, food, learning -- and grown with all of them. To be Indian is to be part of an elusive dream we all share, a dream that fills our minds with sounds, words, flavours from many sources that we cannot easily identify. Large, eclectic, agglomerative, the Hinduism that I know understands that faith is a matter of hearts and minds, not of bricks and stone. "Build Ram in your heart," the Hindu is enjoined; and if Ram is in your heart, it will little matter where else he is, or is not.

But the twentieth-century politics of deprivation has eroded our culture's confidence. Chauvinism and anti-minority violence has emerged from the competition for resources in a contentious democracy. Politicians of all faiths across India seek to mobilize voters by appealing to narrow identities; by seeking votes in the name of religion, caste and region, they have urged voters to define themselves on these lines. As religion, caste and region have come to dominate public discourse, to some it has become more important to be a Muslim, a Bodo or a Yadav than to be an Indian.

This is why the change in the public discourse about Indianness is so dangerous. The notion of majority and minority, as I have suggested, is fundamentally un-Indian and fails to reflect the real nature of our society. The suggestion that only a Hindu, and only a certain kind of Hindu, can be an authentic Indian, is an affront to the very premise of Indian nationalism. An India that denies itself to some of us could end up being denied to all of us.

The Gujarat riots of 2002 remain a searing blot on the country's conscience. Some of the Hindu zealots who torched Muslim homes and businesses, and killed and raped innocents, are finally behind bars since last week, though others talk defiantly of reviving their cause. As the past is used by some to haunt the present, the cycle of violence goes on, spawning new hostages to history, ensuring that future generations will be taught new wrongs to set right. We live, Octavio Paz once wrote, between oblivion and memory. Memory and oblivion: how one leads to the other, and back again, has been the concern of much of my fiction. As I pointed out in the last words of my novel Riot, history is not a web woven with innocent hands.

The reduction of any group of Indians to second-class status in their homeland is unthinkable. It would be a second Partition: and a partition in the Indian soul would be as bad as a partition in the Indian soil. For my sons, and for all the reasons that I have described, the only possible idea of India is that of a nation greater than the sum of its parts. That is the only India that will allow them to call themselves Indians.

And so the Indian identity that I want, in my turn, to give my sons imposes no pressure to conform. It celebrates diversity: if America is a melting-pot, then to me India is a thali, a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast.



A few years ago, I addressed the Wharton Business School's India Forum in the US on "realizing the Indian Dream". And I told them that the Indian dream must be a dream that can be dreamt in Gujarati or in Tamil, dreamt by a Muslim or a Parsi or a Khasi, dreamt by a Brahmin or a Bodo, dreamt on a charpoy or a luxury king bed. India's founding fathers wrote a constitution for their dreams; we have given passports to their ideals. Any narrower definition of Indianness would not just be pernicious: it would be an insult to Indian nationhood. An India that denies itself to some Indians would no longer be the India Mahatma Gandhi fought to free.

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I have already transgressed on the time available to me this morning. We are all like Egyptian mummies, pressed for time! But I do want to say I have great hope for the survival and success of Indian pluralism. I believe no one identity can triumph in India. Both our country's diversity and the logic of the electoral marketplace make this impossible. And the sight in 2004, after the awe-inspiring experience of the world's largest exercise in democratic elections, of a woman leader of Roman Catholic background (Sonia Gandhi) making way for a Sikh (Manmohan Singh) to be sworn in as Prime Minister of India by a Muslim (President Abdul Kalam) has affirmed, as nothing else could have, the shining example of Indian pluralism. But even earlier, the previous NDA coalition government had already learned that any party with aspirations to rule India will have to reach out beyond a majoritarian identity to other groups, other interests, other minorities. After all, there are too many diversities in our land for any one version of reality to be imposed on all of us.

Equally, democracy is vital for India's future. For there is no easy way to cope with such diversity, but democracy is the only technique that can work to protect all our minorities. What is encouraging for the future of democracy is that India is unusual in that democracy is not an elite preoccupation, but matters most strongly to ordinary people. Whereas in the United States a majority of the poor do not vote, [in Harlem in the last Presidential elections, the turnout was 23%] in India the poor turn out in great numbers. It is not the privileged or even the middle-class who spend four hours in the hot sun to cast their vote, but the poor, because they know their votes make a difference. So the Indian revolution is a democratic one, sustained by a larger idea of India, an India which safeguards the common space available to each identity, an India that remains safe for diversity.

For observers of India across the world, wary of the endless multiplication of sovereignties, hesitant before the clamour for ethnic division and religious self-assertion echoing in a hundred remote corners of the globe, there may be something to think about in this idea of India. It's a deceptively simple idea— of a land where it doesn't (or shouldn't) matter what the colour of your skin is, the kind of food you eat, the sounds you make when you speak, the God you choose to worship (or not), so long as you want to play by the same rules as everybody else. If the overwhelming majority of a people share the political will for unity, if they wear the dust of a shared history on their foreheads and the mud of an uncertain future on their feet, and if they realize they are better off in Kozhikode or Kanpur dreaming the same dreams as those in Kohlapur or Kohima, a nation exists, celebrating diversity, pluralism -- and freedom. That is why India can face the future with confidence, if not with optimism. But then I define "optimism" as "regarding the future with uncertainty"; a pessimist says "everything will go wrong", whereas an optimist believes "everything might go right". I believe I have given you enough reasons to imagine that everything might go right.

We still have huge amounts of problems to overcome. Some claim we are a super power, but we are also super poor. We can't really be both of those. We have to overcome our poverty. We have to deal with the hardware of development, the ports, the roads, the airports, all the infrastructural progress we need to make, and the software of development, the human capital, the need for the ordinary person in India to be able to have a couple of square meals a day, to be able to send his or her children to a decent school, and to aspire to work a job that will give them opportunities in their lives to transform themselves.

But it's all taking place, this great adventure of conquering those challenges, those real challenges which none of us in India can pretend don't exist. And it's all taking place in an open society, in a rich and diverse and plural civilization, in one that is open to the contention of ideas and interests within it, unafraid of the prowess or the products of the outside world, wedded to the democratic pluralism that is India's greatest strength, and determined to liberate and fulfil the creative energies of all its people. That is the transformed India of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that's why Indianness, in today's world, is well worth celebrating.

Since you have been told I am an Indian writer, let me tell you an Indian story -- a tale from our ancient Puranas. It is a typical Indian story of a sage and his disciples. The sage asks his disciples, "when does the night end?" And the disciples say, "at dawn, of course." The sage says, "I know that. But when does the night end and the dawn begin?" The first disciple, who is from the tropical south of India where I come from, replies: "When the first glimmer of light across the sky reveals the palm fronds on the coconut trees swaying in the breeze, that is when the night ends and the dawn begins." The sage says "no," so the second disciple, who is from the cold north, ventures: "When the first streaks of sunshine make the snow gleam white on the mountaintops of the Himalayas, that is

when the night ends and the dawn begins." The sage says, "no, my sons. When two travellers from opposite ends of our land meet and embrace each other as brothers, and when they realize they sleep under the same sky, see the same stars and dream the same dreams -- that is when the night ends and the dawn begins."

There has been many a dark night for India in the century that has just passed. By preserving the diversity that is its essence, I believe India can ensure that all its people can enjoy a new dawn in the years to come.

Thank you very much. **Jai Hind!**