

8. Reimagining India for the 21st Century

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Introduction:

The post Independent India has accomplished significantly on many fronts and yet it remains largely cut off from the lofty ideals of equality, justice, and fraternity on one hand and the other a secular and democratic framework that was set in motion by the framers and founders of India's constitution. Today we are increasingly beleaguered by the falling indices that not only have repeatedly exposed India's 'development bottlenecks' of inequality, hunger, poverty, and malnutrition but have also strangled the complete development and advancement of this great nation that is 75 years old. What is even more puzzling is that these issues and problems that are embarrassing us on the world stage, are not prioritized to be solved and eliminated and instead, disproportionate attention is attached to trivial issues like what people wear and eat. The emotive issues like religion, language, and caste have taken precedence over the real issues like unemployment, inequality and the basics like water, food, and housing.

Contemporary India is plagued by five fault lines as observed by Ramchandra Guha, that have pushed this country away from the path of development and progress. These fault lines include deepening religious polarization; persisting social inequalities; growing environmental degradation; declining credibility of public institutions; and the rise of authoritarianism and the creation of the cult of personality.

One of the fastest growing economies that India is, sadly constrained by jobless growth and the great progress that we have made has not reached all the corners of India. As noted by Vikram Patel, 'it is too bad that our idea of modernization does not include basics like clean toilets, decent housing, drinking water and nutritious food.'

In the recent years the phrase #NewIndia has been popularized by the ruling government. However, this new India that is promoted does not seem to be premised on an inclusive roadmap or a 'welfare of all' perspective. Instead, it has been usurped by a Majoritarian mindset to ridicule and mistreat the minority communities, at the cost of constitutional safeguards, and by a homogenizing complex that is bent on misusing power and authority to uniformise peoples and politics, cultures and religions, beliefs and ideas, thought processes and art expressions.

In this context, how do we, as social scientists, reimagine an India of 21st century that is inclusive, just and in sync with the Constitutional values? How do we envision a new India, not the one that is presently promoted on a majoritarian mindset, but one that is constitutionally led, and inspired by the constitutional values of justice, equality and

fraternity? How do we creatively imagine an India that is increasingly enriched by its pluralism in cultures and religions, diversity in its dress and food habits, while at the same time being bound together by belonging to one common identity, togetherness and citizenry? How do we collectively work towards improving India's indicators and indices on health, education, democracy, equality, freedom etc and put India back on world stage, to be admired and respected as a shining example, one that is devoid of the fault lines that are plaguing us today?

In this article, I juxtapose the stark difference between rhetoric and reality in India's socio-political and economic landscape. By scrutinizing data, the truth will emerge, revealing the gaps between the lofty promises and the actual ground realities. The sole intention is to let the truth prevail, thereby providing a chance for India to align with the vision of its founding stalwarts, as articulated by the Constituent Assembly and revered sages of our country.

This vision is of a nation where equality, justice, and inclusivity are not mere ideals but lived realities, and where development transcends regional, religious, and social divides. As we examine the counter-narratives to illiberal ideologies, the comparative development models of Gujarat and Kerala, the ideological conflict between constitutional nationalism and Hindutva nationalism, the challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the development asymmetries across states and districts, it becomes imperative to confront the uncomfortable truths. Only through such critical reflection can we hope to dissolve the domestic walls that divide us and create an India that truly embodies the principles of democracy, secularism, and sustainable development envisioned by our forebears.

1. Counter-Narratives to Illiberal Ideologies:

India, the world's largest democracy, is facing significant challenges from rising illiberal ideologies that threaten its foundational principles of democracy and secularism. Majoritarianism, which prioritizes the interests of the majority community while marginalizing others, undermines the pluralistic ethos that has been central to India's identity. To counter this trend, it is imperative to develop robust counter-narratives rooted in democratic and secular ideologies.

Reinforcing Constitutional Values:

The Indian Constitution is a living document that enshrines the principles of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. These values must be emphasized as non-negotiable foundations of the Indian state. Educational curricula should be designed to highlight the importance of these principles, and public discourse should be steered towards celebrating the constitutional vision of a diverse and inclusive India.

Civil society organizations, educators, and the media can play a crucial role in reinforcing these values by creating awareness and fostering a culture of constitutional patriotism.

Promoting Secularism and Pluralism:

Secularism in India is not merely the separation of religion and state but the equal respect for all religions. This principle should be vigorously defended against attempts to promote a singular religious or cultural identity. Promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding is crucial. Community leaders, religious scholars, and cultural icons can collaborate to organize events and platforms that celebrate India's religious and cultural diversity. Highlighting the contributions of various communities to India's composite culture can also strengthen secular and pluralistic values.

Strengthening Civil Society and Media:

A vibrant civil society is essential for the health of any democracy. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advocacy groups, and grassroots movements can act as watchdogs, holding the government accountable and ensuring that minority rights are protected. These organizations should be supported and empowered to carry out their functions effectively. Additionally, a free and independent media is crucial in providing unbiased information, countering misinformation, and facilitating informed public debate. Journalistic integrity and media literacy among citizens must be promoted to resist the manipulation of information for majoritarian ends.

Fostering Inclusive Economic Development:

Economic disenfranchisement often fuels social and political alienation, which can be exploited by illiberal ideologies. Inclusive economic policies that address the needs of marginalized communities are essential. Initiatives such as affirmative action, skill development programs, and equitable access to resources can help in reducing economic disparities. Ensuring that economic growth benefits all sections of society will reduce the appeal of divisive ideologies that thrive on economic grievances.

Engaging in Grassroots Political Mobilization:

Grassroots political mobilization is vital in countering majoritarian narratives. Political parties committed to democratic and secular values should engage with citizens at the grassroots level, understanding their concerns and aspirations. This engagement should focus on issues of common interest such as health, education, employment, and infrastructure rather than divisive identity politics. Building alliances across communities and fostering a sense of common purpose can help in creating a broad-based movement against majoritarianism.

Leveraging social media and Digital Platforms:

Social media and digital platforms have become powerful tools for shaping public opinion. They can be leveraged to spread counter-narratives that challenge illiberal ideologies.

Creating and disseminating content that highlights stories of communal harmony, social justice, and democratic values can counter the spread of hate and misinformation. Digital campaigns that engage young people, who are often the most active online, can be particularly effective in promoting inclusive and democratic ideals.

Encouraging Judicial Activism:

The judiciary in India has historically played a crucial role in protecting democratic values and minority rights. Encouraging judicial activism and ensuring the independence of the judiciary is essential. Public interest litigations (PILs) and legal advocacy can be used to challenge unconstitutional laws and policies that promote majoritarianism. A vigilant judiciary can act as a bulwark against the erosion of democratic and secular values.

2. Inclusive and Sustainable Models of Development: Gujarat Vs Kerala:

India's diverse states present varied models of development, with Gujarat and Kerala often cited as distinct examples. Gujarat is renowned for its rapid industrial growth and infrastructure development, while Kerala is celebrated for its high human development indicators and social progress. This comparison elucidates the strengths and weaknesses of both models in terms of inclusivity and sustainability.

Gujarat: Industrial Growth and Infrastructure:

Gujarat's development model, often termed as the "Gujarat Model," emphasizes economic growth through industrialization, infrastructure development, and investment-friendly policies. Over the past few decades, Gujarat has witnessed impressive economic growth rates, driven by robust industrial activity and infrastructure projects.

Economic Growth and Industrialization:

Gujarat's Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) growth rate has consistently outpaced the national average, with significant contributions from sectors such as manufacturing, petrochemicals, and pharmaceuticals.

The state has created a conducive environment for business, marked by efficient regulatory frameworks and proactive governance.

Infrastructure Development:

The state boasts well-developed infrastructure, including extensive road networks, ports, and power supply systems. Projects like the Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT City) exemplify the state's focus on creating world-class infrastructure.

Challenges in Inclusivity:

However, Gujarat's development model has faced criticism for not being inclusive enough. Despite high economic growth, social indicators such as literacy rates and health outcomes lag those of other states. The benefits of industrial growth have not uniformly reached all sections of society, with rural and marginalized communities often left behind.

Kerala: Human Development and Social Progress:

Kerala's development approach, often referred to as the "Kerala Model," emphasizes social equity, public health, and education. Unlike Gujarat, Kerala's development trajectory has focused more on improving human development indicators rather than solely economic growth.

Human Development:

Kerala consistently ranks high on human development indices, with remarkable achievements in literacy, life expectancy, and healthcare. The state's literacy rate is the highest in India, and its healthcare system is often considered a model for other states. Public policies in Kerala prioritize education and health, resulting in widespread social benefits.

Social Equity:

Kerala's development model is inclusive, aiming to reduce social inequalities. The state's policies ensure access to basic services for all, including marginalized communities. Social welfare programs and effective public distribution systems have played a significant role in reducing poverty and ensuring food security.

Sustainable Development:

Kerala's approach also aligns with principles of sustainable development. The state has focused on preserving its natural resources, promoting tourism, and encouraging sustainable agricultural practices.

Kerala's emphasis on sustainable development is evident in its policies geared towards environmental conservation and renewable energy.

Economic Challenges:

While Kerala excels in social development, it faces economic challenges, such as lower industrial growth and higher unemployment rates compared to states like Gujarat. The state's reliance on remittances from the Gulf region also poses economic vulnerabilities.

Comparative Analysis:

Inclusivity:

Kerala's model is more inclusive, with policies that ensure broad-based social welfare and human development. In contrast, Gujarat's rapid industrial growth has not equally benefited all societal segments, leading to disparities.

Sustainability:

Kerala's development approach is more sustainable, with a strong focus on environmental conservation and social equity. Gujarat, while economically dynamic, needs to address the environmental impacts of industrialization and ensure that growth benefits are more evenly distributed.

Holistic Development:

An ideal development model might integrate the strengths of both states: Gujarat's economic dynamism and Kerala's social inclusivity and sustainability. Policymakers could learn from Gujarat's infrastructure and industrial strategies while adopting Kerala's focus on social development and environmental sustainability.

In conclusion, the development models of Gujarat and Kerala offer valuable lessons. Gujarat demonstrates the potential of rapid economic growth through industrialization, while Kerala highlights the importance of human development and social equity. Balancing these approaches could lead to a more inclusive and sustainable development trajectory for India as a whole.

3. Constitutional Nationalism Vs Hindutva Nationalism:

India's political landscape is marked by an ongoing debate between two distinct forms of nationalism: constitutional nationalism and Hindutva nationalism. These ideologies represent divergent visions for the nation's identity, values, and governance.

Understanding their differences is crucial for comprehending the current socio-political dynamics in India.

Constitutional Nationalism:

Foundational Principles:

Constitutional nationalism is rooted in the principles enshrined in the Indian Constitution, which was adopted on January 26, 1950. This form of nationalism is inclusive, pluralistic, and secular, emphasizing justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity.

The Constitution reflects the vision of the founding fathers, who aimed to create a democratic and inclusive nation-state.

Inclusive and Pluralistic:

Constitutional nationalism celebrates India's diversity, advocating for the coexistence of various religions, languages, cultures, and ethnicities. It promotes secularism, where the state treats all religions equally and does not favour any religion. This approach aims to protect the rights of all citizens, regardless of their background.

Legal and Institutional Framework:

The Indian Constitution provides a robust legal and institutional framework to uphold democratic values. It includes provisions for fundamental rights, which guarantee civil liberties to all citizens. Institutions such as the judiciary, Election Commission, and various constitutional bodies are designed to ensure the rule of law and protect minority rights.

Current Challenges:

Despite its strong foundations, constitutional nationalism faces challenges. There are concerns about the erosion of democratic norms, increasing intolerance, and attempts to undermine secularism. Critics argue that the state's actions sometimes contradict the constitutional ethos, threatening the inclusivity that defines India.

Hindutva Nationalism:

Ideological Basis:

Hindutva nationalism, propagated by organizations like the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and political parties such as the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), envisions India primarily as a Hindu nation.

This ideology, rooted in the works of V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar, seeks to establish cultural hegemony by promoting Hindu values and traditions.

Majoritarian Focus:

Unlike constitutional nationalism, Hindutva nationalism is majoritarian, prioritizing the interests and identity of the Hindu majority. It often views India's history and culture through a Hindu-centric lens, which can marginalize religious and cultural minorities. This ideology seeks to redefine national identity based on Hindu cultural dominance.

Political Manifestations:

Hindutva nationalism has gained significant political traction, especially since the BJP's rise to power. Policies and rhetoric under this ideology often emphasize Hindu cultural symbols and practices. For instance, initiatives like cow protection, the promotion of Sanskrit, and the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya are emblematic of this approach.

Controversies and Criticisms:

Hindutva nationalism has been criticized for fostering divisiveness and intolerance. Incidents of communal violence, lynching over beef consumption, and the vilification of religious minorities are often linked to this ideology. Critics argue that Hindutva nationalism undermines the secular and inclusive fabric of India, leading to social polarization.

Comparative Analysis:

Inclusivity vs. Exclusivity:

Constitutional nationalism is inherently inclusive, seeking to integrate diverse communities within a common national framework. Hindutva nationalism, on the other hand, is exclusive, often marginalizing non-Hindu communities and promoting a homogeneous cultural identity.

Secularism vs. Majoritarianism:

Constitutional nationalism upholds secularism, ensuring that the state remains neutral in religious matters. Hindutva nationalism promotes majoritarianism, where Hindu values and beliefs are given primacy, potentially leading to state bias in favour of the majority religion.

Democratic Values vs. Cultural Nationalism:

Constitutional nationalism is deeply rooted in democratic values, emphasizing individual rights and freedoms. Hindutva nationalism focuses more on cultural nationalism, which can conflict with individual rights when cultural conformity is enforced.

4. SDGs: Poverty, Hunger, Health, Education, Sanitation, Housing:

India's progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlights both achievements and significant challenges. This analysis focuses on key SDGs: poverty (SDG 1), hunger (SDG 2), health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), sanitation (SDG 6), and housing (SDG 11), elucidating the primary obstacles that impede further progress.

SDG 1: No Poverty

Challenges:

India has experienced a substantial reduction in poverty over recent decades. According to the World Bank, the poverty rate fell from 21.2% in 2011 to an estimated 10% in 2019. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted this progress, potentially pushing millions back into poverty. Significant regional disparities remain, with higher poverty rates in states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand. The informal economy dominates the labor market, leaving many workers without social security and vulnerable to economic shocks. Structural inequalities, including caste discrimination and gender inequality, further entrench poverty, particularly among marginalized communities.

SDG 2: Zero Hunger

Challenges:

India ranks 107th out of 121 countries on the Global Hunger Index 2022, indicating serious levels of hunger. Child malnutrition remains a critical issue, with high rates of stunting (34.7% in 2019-21) and wasting (19.3%). Inefficiencies in the Public Distribution System (PDS) and food wastage impede food security efforts. The agricultural sector struggles with low productivity, fragmented landholdings, and the adverse effects of climate change. Economic barriers limit access to nutritious food, particularly for marginalized populations.

SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being

Challenges:

India's healthcare system faces numerous challenges, despite improvements in life expectancy and reductions in maternal and child mortality rates. Access to quality healthcare is uneven, particularly in rural areas, where there is a shortage of medical professionals and inadequate infrastructure. The rising burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes and heart disease, adds to the existing challenges of infectious diseases.

Financial barriers remain significant, with out-of-pocket expenses leading to economic hardship for many families. Public health spending is relatively low, limiting the resources available for comprehensive healthcare interventions.

SDG 4: Quality Education

Challenges:

While near-universal enrolment has been achieved at the primary level, the quality of education is a major concern. Learning outcomes are poor, with many students lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2021, only about 50% of fifth graders could read a text meant for second graders. High dropout rates among marginalized communities exacerbate educational inequalities. The education system suffers from inadequate infrastructure, such as insufficient classrooms and poor sanitation facilities. Teacher training and recruitment are also inadequate, leading to significant variations in teaching quality.

SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

Challenges:

Access to clean water and sanitation has improved, but quality and sustainability issues persist. Rural areas face challenges in ensuring consistent and safe water supply, while urban areas struggle with water pollution and waste management. The depletion of groundwater resources and contamination due to over-extraction and pollution pose serious threats. Disparities in access to clean water and sanitation facilities are stark, with marginalized communities frequently lacking reliable services. Ensuring the long-term sustainability of water and sanitation improvements is a significant challenge.

SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities (Housing)

Challenges:

Rapid urbanization in India presents significant challenges for achieving sustainable development. Housing shortages and inadequate infrastructure are major issues, leading to the proliferation of informal settlements and slums. Urban planning and governance need substantial improvements to manage the growing urban population sustainably. The urban poor often lack access to basic services such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity. Environmental sustainability is another critical concern, with urban areas facing challenges such as air pollution, waste management, and climate change impacts. The affordability of housing remains a significant barrier, preventing many from accessing decent living conditions.

5. Development Asymmetries Across the States/Districts:

India's development trajectory is characterized by significant asymmetries across its states and districts. These disparities are evident in various socio-economic indicators, reflecting the diverse regional contexts and governance models. This analysis examines the factors contributing to development asymmetries in India, drawing on data and studies from various sources.

Economic Disparities:

Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP):

Economic disparities are stark across Indian states. States like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat boast high Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), driven by industrialization and services sectors. In contrast, states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh lag with lower GSDP, reflecting limited industrial activity and high dependence on agriculture.

Per Capita Income:

Per capita income levels vary significantly, highlighting the unequal economic development. For instance, as per the Economic Survey of India 2020-21, Goa had the highest per capita income, significantly outstripping states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, which are among the lowest. This disparity is a result of varying levels of industrialization, **infrastructure development, and investment climates.**

Employment Opportunities:

Employment opportunities also differ markedly across states. States with robust industrial and service sectors like Karnataka and Maharashtra offer more formal employment opportunities, whereas states with a predominant agricultural base like Odisha and Chhattisgarh have higher informal employment rates and lower income levels.

Social Indicators:

Education:

Education indicators such as literacy rates and school enrolment levels show significant regional variations. Kerala boasts a literacy rate of 96.2%, the highest in India, due to its longstanding focus on educational reforms and public investment in education. On the other hand, Bihar's literacy rate stands at 70.9%, one of the lowest, reflecting historical neglect and insufficient educational infrastructure (Census 2011).

Health:

Health outcomes also exhibit regional disparities. States like Kerala and Tamil Nadu have better health indicators, including lower infant mortality rates and higher life expectancy, due to better healthcare infrastructure and higher public health expenditure. Conversely, states like Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand struggle with higher infant and maternal mortality rates, reflecting inadequate healthcare services and poor health infrastructure (NFHS-5, 2019-21).

Poverty:

Poverty levels are uneven across India. According to the NITI Aayog's National Multidimensional Poverty Index 2021, states like Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh have the highest poverty rates, with significant portions of their populations living below the poverty line. In contrast, states like Kerala and Punjab have lower poverty rates, benefiting from better economic opportunities and social welfare schemes.

Infrastructure and Public Services:

Infrastructure Development:

Infrastructure development is another area with significant regional imbalances. States such as Gujarat and Maharashtra have well-developed infrastructure, including roads, ports, and industrial corridors, which facilitate economic activities. In contrast, northeastern states and parts of central India face infrastructural deficits, hindering economic growth and access to services.

Access to Basic Services:

Access to basic services such as electricity, clean water, and sanitation varies widely. Southern and western states generally have better access to these services due to proactive governance and investments. For instance, the Swachh Bharat Mission has led to substantial improvements in sanitation in many states, but the implementation and outcomes have been uneven, with some northern and eastern states lagging (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2021).

Governance and Policy Implementation:

Governance Quality:

The quality of governance significantly impacts development outcomes. States with effective governance structures, transparent administration, and robust policy implementation, like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, tend to perform better on development

indicators. Poor governance, corruption, and administrative inefficiencies plague states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, impeding development efforts.

Policy Implementation:

Policy implementation varies across states, affecting development outcomes. For instance, the implementation of central schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) shows varied success rates across states, reflecting differences in administrative efficiency and political will.

Conclusion:

India's socio-political and economic landscape is marked by intersecting challenges and opportunities, necessitating an integrated approach. The rise of illiberal ideologies like majoritarianism threatens India's democratic fabric, making counter-narratives emphasizing pluralism, tolerance, and inclusive governance crucial (Chatterjee, 2020). This ideological conflict is further reflected in the clash between constitutional nationalism, which upholds secularism and democratic values, and Hindutva nationalism, which envisions India as a Hindu nation (Bhargava, 2018). Additionally, contrasting development models in states like Gujarat and Kerala illustrate the need for balanced strategies that integrate economic growth with social equity and environmental sustainability. Kerala's emphasis on human development and Gujarat's industrial growth present lessons for crafting inclusive and sustainable policies (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India highlights both achievements and persistent challenges, such as poverty, malnutrition, inadequate healthcare, and poor educational outcomes (UNDP, 2020). These issues are exacerbated by significant regional disparities, with states like Maharashtra and Gujarat performing better economically compared to Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (NITI Aayog, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires strengthening democratic institutions, promoting inclusive development models, and ensuring equitable resource distribution. By adopting a comprehensive and integrated approach that focuses on enhancing policy implementation, increasing public investment, and fostering partnerships, India can work towards a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable future.

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