

Social Scientist

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Source: *Social Scientist*, Vol. 33, No. 11/12 (Nov. - Dec., 2005), pp. 3-13

Published by: Social Scientist

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3518062>

Accessed: 20/02/2009 16:56

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The Making of India

Aijaz Ahmad

When I was given the title, 'The Making of India'* , I was first intrigued by the word 'making', because it is not a noun but a verb and therefore refers to human action and intention; and it is a verb of *process*, referring not an origin or a result but something ongoing and therefore unfinished. Which moment in this long process of making should I address in this brief exposition? But then I got intrigued by the other word, which was not a verb but a noun, India. I was struck by the ambiguity of it because it refers, simultaneously, to a geographical *space* which has waxed and waned over time; to a *civilization* that is admittedly very old; a *society* that is by any sociological criteria the most diverse and heterogeneous in the world; but also a *nation-state* which is very young, younger than me in fact. I could not figure out what to do with this whole range of meanings in the two words, so I just started typing; and the mosaic of fragments that came out is what I should now want to share with you.

We could begin by reflecting, for example, upon the very prolonged and highly complex processes of material productions and cultural formations, over great many centuries, that have gone into the making of a singular *civilization* which is recognisably *Indian* even though it is held together neither by a common language nor a shared religion nor a primordial racial myth. Elite theories tend to think of India's civilizational *unity* in terms of a 'Great Tradition' whose essence resides in the Brahminical underpinnings of the trans-Indic Hindu social order and the normative texts of Sanskrit classicism. And, these elite theories think of *diversity* within this civilization as infinite play of so many 'little traditions' which are seen as local, transient and mutually discontinuous. This idealised image, so common in Orientalist scholarship and upper-caste Indology, thinks of this 'Great Tradition' as calmly hegemonic throughout early and early medieval India, commanding broad social acceptance, powerful enough to fight off all major dissents and yet benign enough to accommodate the local variants of the plethora of 'little traditions'. A corollary of this argument

*Revised version of the paper presented at a seminar at Asian College of Journalism, Chennai (2003)

is that while the 'Great Tradition' could accommodate dissents that arose within India, from Buddhism to Sikhism, religious belief systems that came from outside India, notably Islam and Christianity, could not be reconciled with this 'Great Tradition' and would thus always remain foreign elements in Indian society. As one can see, this idealised notion of the 'Great Tradition' can easily narrow itself into a modern communalist position.

Even in relation to early and early medieval India, much modern scholarship seems to challenge this idea of a broad acceptance and seamless hegemony of the Brahminical social order and Sanskrit classicism. A remarkable feature of this civilization, from the earliest times, seems to have been the level and persistence of protest against the dominant systems of spiritual hegemony. The ideological underpinnings for *varnashram*, so crucial to the Brahminical metaphysic, seems to have had a hold mainly among the dominant Brahmin and Kshatriya units of society in early India. Numerous strata of artisans and cultivators as well as pastoral and tribal groups seem to have persisted below those privileged classes, and their sacred world view was shaped by quite different belief systems, and who therefore seem to have been more responsive to the kind of materialist philosophies represented by the *Lokayatas* about which, unfortunately, we know much too little. We do know enough about the historical conditions for the rise of Buddhism, however, to conjecture credibly that whatever some of its teachings may have shared with some aspects of Brahminism, such as the notions of *karma* and transmigration of souls, its radical rejection of *varnashram* was possibly part of a head-on collision between the tribals and the *shudra-atishudras* on the one hand, and, on the other, the faltering hegemony of Brahminism which served at the time as the legitimising ideology of the division of labour required by a tribute-gathering personalised kingship. As we think more carefully about what might account for the unity of a civilization which attaches so much value to diversity, we may find that this peculiar willingness to provide space for non-hegemonic forms of power may well be owed to the role of radical dissent – the persistence and multiplicity of resistance – the will and action of various kinds of the *shudraatishudras* who simply refuse to walk out of a history which has been made at their cost.

Something similar can perhaps be said of the social reach of Sanskrit classicism. For all the achievements and power of Sanskrit classics in domains spiritual as well as profane, one can say that prohibition of the study of the *vedas*, hence of Sanskrit, by the women and the *shudras* meant that Sanskrit was no one's mother tongue and that it was even the father-tongue only for the dominant castes. It is thus significant that women and the *shudras* speak in prakrits even inside the tradition of Sanskrit drama itself. The rise and magisterial history of the Bhakti-Sufi-Sant tradition, which begins in Tamil Nadu in the sixth century or so and culminates in upper north India about a

millennium later seems crucial in this regard. In one region after another, across much of India, this tradition accounted, in the first place, for the rise and consolidation of the various mother-tongues as the legitimate languages of sense and sensibility, song and belief, replacing the father-tongue of the upper castes while taking from the father-tongue whatever was found useful and combining that with elements of the unauthorised and forbidden. But these mother-tongues were also the universal tongues of the lower and middle castes, hence repositories of a variety of suppressed knowledges and belief systems, closer to speech than to the authorised text, closer also to the tribal past, the pastoral community, the artisanal guild, the female experience, and closer even to the original forms of the great dissenting systems of Buddhism and Jainism.

One cannot say that every strand of this very complex Bhakti-Sufi-Sant tradition was, or remained, equally oppositional or defiant in relation to the dominant Brahminical order; many were prone to otherworldly quietism and even conservatism, some reconciled themselves quite substantially with the myths and preachings of that order. Some aspects, though, became permanent. The shift from the language of the fathers to the mother tongues proved irreversible, as did a certain implacable hostility toward the *varnashram*. In sharp contrast to the traditions of 'High Brahminism', traditions of the anti-caste devotional theism which arose from inside Hinduism opened up themselves, profoundly, to strands of transgressive devotionalism in certain dissents within Islam; *advaita* resonated rather well with *vahdat-al-vajood* and the Sufi's hatred of the *sharia* seemed familiar to the anti-Brahminical sant, so that historically novel kinds of syncretism were born out of that encounter. Unlike Sanskrit, which had the status of a singular classical language on a trans-Indic plain, in literature or philosophy as much as in normative religious texts, the maintenance of a multiplicity of languages was intrinsic to the Bhakti-Sufi tradition, the bulk of which sought neither a doctrinal unity nor a normative conduct nor the imposition of any one language above the rest. Yet, the tradition itself had arisen in opposition to a fairly unified system of cultural and religious dominance; it therefore acquired not a doctrinal unity but a broadly shared culture of sense and sensibility, song and dance, belief and practice, across the various languages. As this tradition spread through these various languages, helping them consolidate themselves, the cultural communities associated with these various languages also acquired a shared idiom, a system of mutual recognitions, without sharing either a common language or a common doctrine. It is in this sense that the Bhakti-Sufi tradition seems to have played a large, trans-Indic role in the making of a certain world-view, a certain culture, which one could now call *Indian*, rather than something that was particular to this or that region or religion.

Thus, what we know as the diversity of India, despite the cruelties and

rigidities of the caste system, is thus not an attribute of the dominant upper caste culture but is owed, rather, to the permanence of dissent among the oppressed strata and the failure of Brahminism to ever become hegemonic and transform itself successfully into a Universal Church on the model of Catholic Christendom.

II

That is one way of reflecting upon certain, earlier moments of our cultural history. We could reflect, equally, on 'The Making of India' into a modern nation. There are different ways of thinking about that too. The British-administrators as well as scholars – claimed that it was only the Raj itself that had unified India for the first time in its history, which was otherwise an exasperating mosaic of conflicting communities, religions, sects and "races." We would argue, in stead, that it was the anti-colonial movement, rather than the fact of colonial occupation, which put into motion the process through which a pre-modern civilization could make a transition to modern nationhood. As we look back upon even the earliest phase in the embryonic development of the national movement, from the 1880s onwards, when it was far from being a movement for national independence and was still very much an upper class phenomenon, two features stand out.

One is struck, first, by an early and abiding concern that the national movement, in order to be truly national, had to be as inclusive as possible, taking into its fold people from different religions, regions and linguistic backgrounds—i.e., a unified national movement which was nevertheless internally accommodative and heterogenous. Secularism was an inherent tendency in this nationalism, even when commitment to it was not clearly articulated as an ideological position, precisely because the society that was sought to be transformed into a modern nation was religiously and denominationally so very heterogenous. One of the very many ill effects of the Partition of India is that one forgets that Muslims in pre-Partition India constituted roughly a quarter of the population and were the majority in India's two largest provinces, namely Bengal and Punjab. The ideology of secularism, or at least multi-denominational tolerance, arose in India as an intrinsic part of the ideology of nationalism itself; and the idea of secularism arose also as a mechanism of fundamental defence against varieties of communalism within society itself, as well as against the imperialist policies of Divide and Rule. This was an objective requirement, independent of any particular leader's personal predilections, be it the agnostic and 'socialistic' Mr. Nehru, or the Sanatani Mahatma Gandhi, or the pietistic Maulana Azad, or the rightwing Sardar Patel whose personal political culture was not far from that of Hindu communalism. So, between the founding of the national movement toward the end of the nineteenth century and (let us say) the 1970s when decline of the Indian National Congress begins, ideas

of secularism and inter-faith toleration became *more and more* a constituent element in the ideology of Indian nationalism. I do not at all mean that bourgeois nationalism in India was always true to these ideas or that the main nationalist organisations, such as the Congress, were free of communal elements even among its leaders. I actually think that the main reason why the national movement failed to prevent the Partition and the creation of Pakistan was that it had within its own ranks a very substantial rightwing which was itself much too implicated in the politics of Hindu communalism, and was so perceived by large sections of the politically active Muslims. What I do mean, however, is that the leading core of the national movement always thought of secularism as a necessary ingredient in the making of a modern nationhood for India, and that this core perceived the lack of secularism among many of its own ranks as a weakness and a deficit in the power and legitimacy of the movement as a whole.

Multi-lingual and multi-regional character of the national movement likewise arose out of the objectively perceptible historical and civilizational character of India. Unlike Africa or the Arab world, which colonialism had chopped up into numerous states, large and small, India had been integrated into a vast colony that spoke in numerous tongues. Most provinces of British India were larger than most countries of Europe. Speakers of Bengali in pre-Partition India were as numerous as speakers of French in Europe, and they understood as little of Tamil as the French might have understood of Serbo-Croatian, while Tamil was older—by far—than any of the modern European languages, including English and French. This multiplicity of consolidated languages, hence of cultural attributes that grow alongside each particular language, was intrinsic to the very nature of Indian society long before colonialism ever arrived on our shores, so that, in this concrete historical context, a modern Indian nation had to be fundamentally different, internally much more diversified, than the kind of mono-lingual, mono-cultural nation which is so typical of Europe and of advanced capitalism in general. The upshot was that English undoubtedly became a link language among the literate sections of the various regions, and there were of course moments of unbearable zeal and stupidity when Hindi was sought to be imposed as a ‘national language’—the so-called *rashtra bhasha*—upon all the peoples of India, but retreat from that latter position was also quick and there was, most of the time, a perfect recognition of the obvious fact that the ‘Indian nation’ whose unity was so ardently sought shall continue to speak in a couple of dozen tongues in its larger units, and many more tongues, in fact, beyond the larger ones.

This recognition surely corresponded to an objective fact, but the wide acceptance of this fact was owed, I believe, to the much older civilizational fact that we had been speaking a large number of languages through all those pre-national centuries in which something resembling a civilizational unity had come

into being. This easy acceptance of a multi-lingual nationhood was remarkable enough. What was even more remarkable, considering that ethnicity and language has been so central in the history of the great majority of nationalisms, especially in Europe, is that India has displayed an astonishing lack of ethno-linguistic nationalisms. At no point in the course of the anti-colonial nationalism did there develop in India a powerful linguistically-based separatist movement, on the model, say, of the communally-based separatist movement that led to the creation of Pakistan. In stead, we have seen large number of movements for the creation of linguistically-based states within the Union. Multiplicity of languages, hence cultural diversity, is something that is simply taken for granted. This fact does not seem very remarkable to us only because we have grown up in a social milieu and a civilizational space that has given rise to this fact. We could, however, compare this situation with a country like the United States, the most resourceful in the world, where the citizenry consists of migrants (and children of former slaves) who originally belonged to some two hundred different linguistic groups but who are then required to forget those languages and are subjected to the mono-lingual dictatorship of the English language, which refuses to concede any constitutional status to any other language in the life of that uniglot nation.

III

This recognition of the great diversity of religions, denominations, languages and regional cultures was one major aspect of the anti-colonial movement. One is equally struck by the great preoccupation with reform of Indian society itself and the virtual explosion of movements for many kinds of reform— of the upper caste society itself in Bengal, among Muslims in northern India, in pursuit of social justice for the oppressed castes in Maharashtra, and so on. One could even say that movements for social reform actually preceded, by several decades, the rise of the anti-colonial movement, in the proper sense of that word. There was a prolonged period of gestation, spanning much of the nineteenth century, when the colonial authority itself was frequently seen as the agency through which reform and modernization of Indian society was to be achieved. As the colonial state made clear that it was less than eager to introduce reforms that would offend the upper castes and the property-holding classes, there was a prolonged period, spanning (roughly) the last quarter of the 19th century and the first quarter of the twentieth, when the 'national movement' saw itself as essentially a pressure group for persuading the colonial state to reform its own policies so as to more effectively reform the Indian society that it ruled. Meanwhile, throughout the nineteenth century and right up to Independence in the middle of the twentieth century, we also witness the rise of countless movements and organisations that were devoted to obtaining social reform rather than political liberty.

Not all social reform movements were progressive or modernizing, however. Great many of them were deeply conservative, communal and sectarian; in some, 'modern' education was deeply connected with social conservatism, caste and religious identity; and quite a few fed powerfully into the rise of a variety of communalisms, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh; even the RSS considers itself a reform movement. Here, I am reminded of Antonio Gramsci's observation that 'reform' frequently meant 'restoration' in ideologies of bourgeois nationalism in late nineteenth century Italy. So, one need not lump together all 'reform' movements as being uniformly progressive. Two things can be said, however. One is that the early history of Indian communism is replete with instances of people who abandoned bourgeois nationalism and joined the then developing communist movement because they were disaffected with the inconsistencies of that kind of nationalism as regards the question of radical redistribution of economic power and social prestige that could truly benefit the oppressed castes and classes. In other words, the pursuit of reform took not only liberal and conservative forms but also led to radical and revolutionary politics. Secondly, it needs also to be said that among the more progressive elements in Indian bourgeois nationalism there was a common perception that India could not really become a modern nation without profoundly changing itself and renouncing some of the worst aspects of its own past, and that the battle of modern nationhood for India was a battle not only against the colonial oppressors but also against the anachronisms and cruelties of many of its own social structures and practices. One positive result of this commitment to progressive reform was that, unlike so many colonies oppressed by the arrogance and racism of colonial rulers, revivalist tendencies never became dominant in the anti-colonial movement.

It is quite remarkable how uneasy the reformist and nationalist consciences were on the question of caste, and how sharp the perception that a society so profoundly divided along the lines of caste division can hardly call itself a nation, which presumes at least a horizontal social equality among members of a nation. Witness Vivekananda's famous quip that a Hinduism in which Hindus of different castes could not even eat together was, as he put it, merely a "kitchen religion." Or Tagore's observation, in his *Lectures on Nationalism*, that where people are free neither to dine together nor marry freely into each other's families can hardly be called a nation. Or Gandhi's declaration, on the eve of his Poona Pact with Ambedkar, that he would rather wish that Hinduism dies than that caste may live.

The centrality of caste among the countless projects of reform during the colonial period is undeniable. Why so? The first reason of course is that the question of caste has been the great unresolved question— but also the irrepressible question— in the history of Indian civilization and society since the

grand confrontation between Brahminism and the Buddha. That the question has never been resolved, despite struggles ranging over millenia, testifies to the force of the Brahminical order and the systems of power and property associated with that order. But that the question has been irrepressible across millennia and constantly erupts into great social crises, testifies to the fact that regardless of the brute power of the dominant order, broad popular acceptance of that order breaks down constantly, so that the repressed returns punctually, refusing to be repressed, and the finest, the most progressive elements in our society have kept that question alive. My own sense is that the Bhakti-Sufi tradition, with its ideology of anti-caste social egalitarianism spreading over virtually every region and language in India, has contributed a great deal to aggravating that crisis of belief in the dominant social order and its justifications for itself. This past— with its history of oppression, but also its history of protest and opposition— weighed on the conscience of the principal reformers within the national movement, quite in addition to their perception that a really unified nation cannot possibly arise out of a caste-based society. But what made caste so central in the politics of the age was neither the inheritance of the traditions of protest nor the guilty conscience of the nationalist leadership but the actual fact of the rise of the anti-caste movements of the modern type, which arose much before the ‘national movement’ (Phule’s *Satyashodhak Samaj* was established in 1873, virtually a generation before the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885). The nationalist simply could not evade this question.

As the national movement became truly a mass movement from 1919 onward and gradually transformed itself into a clear-cut anti-imperialist movement over the next decade or so, both those emphases— that the national movement be culturally composite and denominationally inclusive; and that virtually every aspect of Indian society needed to be reformed in pursuit of a more unified and egalitarian India— were to be greatly strengthened. This essentially liberal make-up of the national movement of course provoked a right-wing backlash, notably from such organisations as the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha, but this right-wing remained a very marginal element in Indian society throughout the anti-colonial struggle. Far more significant was increase in working class militancy and the rise of the communist movement, from the 1920s onwards. Whereas the RSS etc were known for their fascist sympathies and collaborated actively with the colonial authorities, the notable feature of the communist movement in India was that it attracted many militant sections of Indian society which were disillusioned by the limitations of liberal nationalism, and that it arose in the perspective of a world-wide anti-fascist struggle as well as a rising anti-colonial movement within the country of which it remained an intrinsic part. This accounts for the fact that whereas the far right remained utterly isolated in Indian politics in the early decades of the Republic after

Independence, the communist left was widely perceived as the main ideological alternative to liberal bourgeois nationalism at that time, while, at the same time, the communist left and the Nehruvian state shared the secular and democratic values of the Indian Constitution.

IV

Let me now turn to the character of that state as it arose out of Independence movement.

First, India became a secular republic, not a Hindu *Rashtra*, despite the communal holocaust that had enveloped the Partition itself, and in sharp contrast to neighbouring Pakistan.

Second, the Republic was conceived not as a unitary nation-state which has been the norm in Western Europe but as a 'union of nationalities'; state boundaries had been drawn during the colonial period for administrative convenience and were now re-drawn according to the principles of nationality.

Third, a 'union of nationalities' can only be a federation with considerable powers vested in the federating units.

Fourth, there was an effort to transform a highly exploited and impoverished colony into a modern industrializing society, a strong *national* state above the federating units, for long-term economic planning, for widespread social reform, balanced regional development, protection of the national economy against foreign capital, and so on.

Fifth, this orientation toward religious pluralism, regional diversity, radical social reform, commitment to science and modernity, and the curbing of private greed for the sake of common public good were in fact values that got written into the Constitution and a number of auxiliary documents of that period. Key terms – democracy, secularism, socialism and non-alignment – came to symbolize the aspirations of modern India as it arose out of colonialism.

One cannot say that all the state policies of that initial period – the first quarter century after independence, let us say – were actually formulated in light of those principles but so powerful was the articulation of principles, and so widespread the affiliation with them, that policies were nevertheless *judged* in the light of those principles. In other words, one is talking here not of a state that was consistent in its policies but of a widespread popular consciousness for which secularism, democracy, pluralism, redistributive justice and national independence became the *normative* aspirations of Indian polity.

This is not the place to analyze why and how these normative principles got increasingly dissociated from the actual state policies; the Congress itself contributed to that decline over the past at least three decades. However, it is only within the last decade or so, as the RSS–VHP–BJP combine went from strength to strength that *all* the normative principles of the republic have been abandoned.

Not just secularism but even the doctrinal plurality of Hindu creeds is sought to be dissolved through the invention of a very hysterical kind of trans-Indic religious consciousness, and the RSS is the first politico-religious movement in modern Indian history which seeks to be Church and State simultaneously. Its *parivar* constantly invents new kinds of trans-Indic rituals in an attempt to transform a highly segmented Hindu society into a monolith that it can control. Among *dalits* and *adivasis* its projects seek to undermine the anti-Brahminical movements, assimilate these victims of caste society into its own sanskritizing projects and, in deed, to use as many of them as possible as footsoldiers in program of the Muslim and Christian religious minorities. The threat that the RSS poses to the secular values of the republic is thus a threat to the entirety of Indian society, be it the religious pluralism of the liberal elements in Hindu society, or the anti-caste aspirations of *dalits* and *adivasis*, or the religious minorities, or, in deed, those of us who derive our secular and egalitarian values not from the world of religion and caste but from the modern revolutionary traditions.

The threat to norms of modern, rational life extends then to the undermining of public life in general. The most elementary protocols of academic research are abandoned in the writing of history textbooks and introduction of new syllabi across disciplines, as readily as elementary criterion of scientific investigation are abandoned in archeological investigations— in the service of the Hindutva project. The same motivation is now appearing with alarming frequency even in pronouncement from some benches of the judiciary, not to speak of the barbarisation of the electoral process itself, as witnessed in Gujarat and elsewhere.

This seachange in spheres of politics and society is supplemented then by equally gruesome policies of extreme neo-liberalism which is fast dismantling the public sector, and all protections for Indian industry, Indian farmers, even the great variety of species of the organic natural life in the country. In the process, India is fast becoming a client not just of the leading imperial power but also of second-order minor powers like Israel.

In conclusion, let me make two points. One is that we are faced today not just with a contest between secularism and communalism but also with a much wider, more fundamental conflict in which the ascendant forces of the far right have aligned themselves with external imperialism in a joint and comprehensive attack on the founding principles of the Indian republic. The India they wish to make shall un-make the India that had been made in the course of our struggle against colonialism. My second point is that in the making of our republic there was a certain structural relation among various principles of democracy, secularism, independent national economy and foreign policy, protection for religious minorities, and the right to historical redress for the oppressed castes

and classes. It is only logical that those who are opposed to any one aspect of that project are also opposed to the project as a whole, all parts of it. By the same token, then, we too need to build a broad unity in defence of that national project against domestic reaction and foreign imperialism alike. *That* will amount, in effect, to making a new India – not an India that we have glimpsed time and again at various points in our past history, but an India, really, that belongs to our common future — an India resembling the second installment of our incomplete national liberation movement.

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