

## **HSS 239 – Book Review**

**Title** – The Idea of India

**Author** – Khilnani , Sunil

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Originally written on the occasion of India's 50th year of Independence in the late 1990s in a world still riding high on the hopes of an intensive globalization process in a new unipolar world, towing unitary definitions of nation, democracy, and political economy of state building, Sunil Khilnani in this book puts forth a contrasting picture of the idea in which India was conceived and developed in its post-colonial existence since its political independence in 1947. He establishes that India in its journey has not fallen prey to singular ideas of a nation- it has rejected authoritarianism, followed a balanced path between statist and market economy and avoided ambiguous alliances with other states. Through his lucid literary skills, he engrosses the reader into this journey by illustrating the themes of nature of democracy, urban space, economic development, national and socio-cultural identity.

The history of independent India can be visualized in terms of three perspectives . One as the history of state – a poor, large, extremely diverse creation . Two, as the adventure of a political idea – democracy . Third , as the confrontation of an ancient civilization . In the post independence years, the nationalist vision was dominated by Nehru , who wished to modernize India . Nehru's idea of India sought to coordinate within the form of a modern state, a variety of values: democracy, religious tolerance, economic development and cultural pluralism.

The founding of India was never simply a commitment to abstract ideas of plurality and democracy; rather it was rooted in the practical understanding of the compulsions and constraints of Indian politics . Of the many ideas of India , this one makes the case for one in particular, because it is the only one that can enable other ideas to emerge and allow them to learn alongside one another . The possibility that India could be united and the idea of India itself, was the wager of a modern urban elite who had no single clear definition of this idea and often entertained diverse contenting visions of India. The thread that runs through the book , and the four chapters that constitute it , is a concern with politics , manifested through democracy . Politics is at the heart of India's passage to and experience with modernity. India

does not merely have politics but is actually constituted by it . This is above all due to presence of democracy.

The first among the four chapters of the book is a trumpeting of democracy. He attributes its success to the complexities and diversities of pre-colonial social structures held together by moral institutions. I feel that this requires a more critical research. Khilnani views the introduction of adult suffrage has worked out both as a boon and bane for the country. It mobilized millions to the idea of democracy but not as individuals but as caste, religious, community and pressure groups. This led to injustice towards many communities and instead of securing of universal rights led to favouritism and protectionism. Such a contradiction requires further analysis and research. Khilnani is quite uncritical of Nehru's policies of infrastructural development and promotes him as a larger than life figure in many parts of the book. For instance, his unchecked glorification of Nehru's 'Temples of the Future' – The Bhakra Nangal Dam and the Iron and Steel industries in the east is in contradiction to his earlier claims of Nehru not being paternalistic . The author has done minimum focus on the development of the scientific education sector which went hand in hand with infrastructural development. However, I am impressed by the analysis of the economic policies of the Five Year Plans and its central role in not only developing a methodical management of the economy but also in successfully experimenting a new alternative to the competing Cold War economic orders. I opine that this boosted India's gravity in the Non-Alignment Movement and emerge as a role model for the newly decolonising nations of Asia and Africa.

The third chapter in the book is probably the most fascinating where Khilnani traces the journey of a few of India's cities and how each of them came to define the complex postcolonial urban space and emerged with an idea of India. New Delhi, built as an imperial fantasy, came to be the center of India's political and intellectual elite after Independence where the fate of the Union was decided, maneuvered and manipulated. I would comment that it also stood as a symbol of non-aligned power. Chandigarh, on the other hand, was built as a project of Nehru's idea of modernity. However, over the years it turned out to be a failure in its cause. The illustrations of Bombay and Bangalore are markers of this chapter. Bombay, which was the poster city of cosmopolitanism has ended up being ruled under the exclusionist and communal politics of the Shiv Sena. Its global image is heavily negotiated by deep-rooted local politics. It will be an interesting research to define this phenomenon in terms of glocalization. Bangalore on the other hand, developed from a colonial cantonment

town and retiring home for the administrative and judicial elite to a hub for scientific, technological and digital corporations, institutions, and enterprises. It became by the 1990s, a launch pad to the globalized markets for the young professionals. Both cities, as Khilnani argues, act as the stop gate to the concept of an 'Indian' nationalist imagination.

In the last sections of the book, Khilnani once again places Nehru in the driver's seat to illustrate the Indian national identity. Drawing on the idealism of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, Nehru set forth to define the pluralist, culturally diverse and socially intricate Indian. Though he admits that this project was filled with illusions and concoction of historical narratives to fit the State narrative of a modern nation-state, his general tendency to equate Nehruvian idealism and Congress Party political appropriation with the Indian State blinds the reader to alternative or newer definitions of the Indianness promoted by JP Narayan, Atal Behari Vajpayee or the leaders of the Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu. All these 'other' intellectual developments in various parts of the country have had seminal consequences on the political history of the country up to the 1990s.

The 'garb of modernity' is not static or unilateral, as Khilnani indicates. It does not begin and end with Nehru or Nehruvian socialism. I would argue that it is a constant process of re and deterritorialization, as seen so explicitly throughout the 1980s and 1990s in the Indian political scene with the shifts in the Congress Party, the checks, and balances created by the regional parties, and the swift rise of the BJP and the Hindu Right. I further argue that this spatial flux is maintained by new claimants to the democratic process who have been affected and have responded to various degrees to the process of neo-liberal globalization. I, however, would agree with Sunil Khilnani's conclusion that the viability and legitimacy of Indian democracy and its ideals would be dependent on diversity. I further argue that the constitutional right to vote is of utmost importance in maintaining this diversity as it is the most powerful weapon to check authoritarianism by perilous cultural or ideological forces. This can be extrapolated to the global scale in order to counter-balance monstrous reterritorializing agendas of global capital in both the global north and the global south.

India's experience reveals the ordinariness of democracy – untidy, massively complex, unsatisfying but vital to the sense of human life today. It establishes that historical and cultural innocence do not exclude Asian cultures from the idea of democracy. These cultures are not tailor-made for democracy. It will always be a wary struggle, but for advocates of democracy, democracy's persistence in India is a basis of hope. Khilnani reflects on the

book's striking relevance to the country's recent developments from the rise of a new billionaire class to the election of a government with a more exclusivist conception of Indian identity. Throughout, he provokes readers and illuminates a fundamental question as urgent now as ever: Can the original idea of India survive its own successes? While describing these things the author could have been more neutral instead of sticking with a particular ideology. He heaped lavish praise on Jawaharlal Nehru for his thoughts, comfortably ignoring his few deeds such as the Sino-Indian war in 1962. Concluding , I would like to say that this book is an interesting read and is the most perceptive book I have read , written and presented in a very easy to understand style , which focusses on how India as a nation and society evolved post independence.