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Indian Democracy and Development: Hermeneutic Challenges to the Incomplete Portraits

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Abstract: India, with a rich tradition and history of more than 5000 years is still a vibrant democracy, where freedom is very much cherished, if not always realised. The modern India that is progressing is truly a story of living contradictions and creative paradoxes. In this article, I want to show that only debate and dialogue can make India a viable player in the globalized world of today, where democracy is cherished, development is furthered and freedom iw realized.

In the first part, the author highlights the contribution of Amartya Sen, who equates genuine freedom with enabling development and fostering capabilities. Later he reflects on the present state of political freedom and democratic polity in India following the analysis of *Mukulika Banerjee*. This takes him to the burning problem of corruption in India and the sad, ambivalent and unending story of Anna Hazare movement. These issues point to the need to carry on dialoging with adversaries of different sorts, an imperative to foster development and freedom. In the concluding part, basing on the novel *The White Tiger*, the author takes up some of the contradictions inherent in our vibrant India, which makes it an incomplete story, a dynamic and complex movement. The author hopes that we can move towards "completing" the story of progress and development only be emphasizing respectful and on-going dialogue with all players that constitute the larger or entangled stories that the emerging India is: something to be achieved by reinterpreting and appropriating the weakest individual man or woman in India!

Keywords: vibrant democracy, discourse, Indian story, Incomplete portrait, Anna movement, Indian elections.

Introduction

One of the worst tragedies of modern India is the Gujarat violence in 2002. It was a series of incidents including the Godhra train burning and the subsequent communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat. On 27 February 2002, the Sabarmati Express train was allegedly attacked at Godhra by a Muslim mob. 58 Hindu pilgrims, including 25 women and 15 children, returning from Ayodhya, were killed. This in turn prompted retaliatory attacks against Muslims and general communal riots on a large scale across the state, in which 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus were ultimately killed and 223 more people were reported missing. 523 places of worship were damaged: 298 dargahs,[1] 205 mosques, 17 temples, and 3 churches. Muslim-owned businesses suffered the bulk of the damage. 61,000 Muslims and 10,000 Hindus fled their homes. Preventive arrests of at least 17,947 Hindus and 3,616 Muslims were made.[2]

The nature of these events remains politically controversial in India. Some commentators have characterized the deaths of thousands of human beings as a genocide with alleged state complicity.[3] It was only after ten years that Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, who is alleged to be involved in these riots was interviewed by former MP Shahid Siddiqui, a Muslim and the editor of Urdu weekly *NaiDuniya*. Commenting on this interview, Sudheendra Kulkarni, columnist and former strategist for the right-wing political leader L.K. Advani holds: "India's democracy is a demanding teacher and, as all good teachers are, very fair and unfailingly helpful. Its lessons are meant for both people and politicians. Those who learn are rewarded. Those who don't, suffer" (Kulkarni 2012). He adds: "One of the lessons that democracy teaches, with the persistence of a devoted teacher, is the virtue of dialogue. Especially, dialogue between adversaries for the sake of the larger good of the nation" (Kulkarni 2012). It is this dialogical dimension of Indian existence with its necessary freedom and development that I want to focus in this article.

India, with a rich tradition and history of more than 5000 years is still vibrant democracy, where freedom is very much cherished, if not always realised.[4] The modern India that is progressing is truly a story of living contradictions and creative paradoxes. In this article, I want to show that only debate and dialogue can make India a viable player in the globalized world of today, where democracy is cherished, development is furthered and freedom is realized.

In the first part, I want to highlight the contribution of Amartya Sen, who equates genuine freedom with development and capabilities. Later I want to reflect on the present state of political freedom and democratic polity in India following the analysis of Mukulika Banerjee. This takes us to the burning problem of corruption in India and the sad, ambivalent and unending story of Anna Hazare movement. These issues point to the need to carry on dialoging with adversaries of different sorts, an imperative to foster development and freedom. In the concluding part, basing on the novel *The White Tiger*, I take up the contradictions inherent in our vibrant India, which makes it an incomplete story, a dynamic and complex movement. I believe that we can move towards "completing" the story of progress and development only be emphasizing respectful and on-going dialogue with all players that constitute the larger or entangled stories that the emerging India is: something to be achieved by reinterpreting and appropriating the weakest individual woman in India!

1. Development as Freedom: Amartya Sen's Capability Approach

The seminal work, "Development as freedom," by Amartya Sen (1999), a Nobel Laureate in Economics, constitutes a comprehensive challenge to the classical theories of development that have dominated economics and economic theory during the last 20 years. For this section I am indebted to the good review article by Firoze Manji (Manji 2010), a Kenyan-born author and activist.

According to what has become the 'conventional wisdom' of economics, the most important function of economic policy is to safeguard the 'right' of a minority to accumulate profits at the highest rate possible (euphemistically referred to as 'growth'). Development, it is assumed, is possible only if there is such growth. Only when this freedom is unrestricted will others in society benefit from any associated spin-offs (the trickle-down effect). All other freedoms are only achievable if such growth occurs. The purpose of 'development' is, therefore, to guarantee 'growth' so that ultimately other freedoms can, at some indeterminate time in the future, be enjoyed (Manji 2010). State expenditure, according to this dogma, should be directed towards creating an enabling environment for 'growth', and not be 'wasted' on the provision of public services that, in any case, can ultimately be provided 'more efficiently' by private enterprise.

These are the assumptions that we will find in the various writings on economic development over the last 20 years – whether from the World Bank, IMF, WTO, or from bilateral development agencies in the North. This is the madness that, as Amartya Sen points out, "makes socially useful members of society such as school-teachers and health workers feel more threatened by conservative economic policies than do army generals." It is the madness that led to social calamities such as the genocide in Rwanda. In his important book, Amartya Sen tries to bring sense (and sanity) to bear on economics and development theory. For him, the well-being of humans is placed at centre stage. So the well-being of humans is placed as "both the goal and the means for development, not simply a spurious side effect" (Manji2010).

"Freedoms," he argues, "are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means." Therefore, he opines that development should be seen as a process of expanding freedoms. "If freedom is what development advances, then there is a major argument for concentrating on that overarching objective, rather than on some particular means, or some

chosen list of instruments." To achieve development, he argues, requires the removal of poverty, tyranny, lack of economic opportunities, social deprivation, neglect of public services, and the various means of repression. He challenges the conventional economists with gentleness and reason. There is both breadth in the scope of subjects considered and depth in the treatment of empirical data that he amasses as evidence for his conclusions.

He shows, for example, how high per capita income does not necessarily correlate with greater life expectancy – poor Afro-Americans have a lower life expectancy than the poor in the Indian state of Kerala where public services have long been accessible to the them. And further, he argues that the "solution of the problem of population growth (like the solution of so many other social and economic problems) can lie in expanding the freedom of the people whose interest are most directly affected by over frequent child-bearing and child-rearing. The solution of the population problem calls for more freedom, not less." Thus he is of the opinion that famines are not a product of absolute shortages of food; rather, "inequality has an important role in the development of famines and other severe crises ... [the latter] thrive on the basis of severe and sometimes suddenly increased inequality" (Manji 2010).

In this context he believes that nothing is "as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women. This is indeed a crucial aspect of 'development as freedom'" (Manji 2010). His concern is about human potential and capabilities and how they can be liberated both as means for improved economic performance and as the very purpose of economic and social activities.

Sen integrates ethics, values and development in his economic theory. "The formation of values and the emergence and evolution of social ethics are also part of the process of development." He argues that a variety of social institutions including those in-

volved in the operation of markets, administrations, legislatures, political parties, NGOs, the judiciary, the media and the 'community', all contribute to the process of development, and therefore an integrated analysis is needed of their respective roles.

Sen's *Development as Freedom* has contributed significantly to the larger debate on human development, freedom and respect for human dignity. It has the potential for influencing social and economic policy in the North and in the South– a potential that will be realised so long as we have the freedom to challenge prevailing dogmas, and so long as those in power have the capacity to listen. Not everyone will necessarily agree with his ideas. In fact, complete agreement is not what he is seeking for. The strength of this book lies in the reflections it provokes and the debates it will stimulate about issues that should concern us all. That debate is vital for, since "It is the customary fate of new truths to begin as heresies and to end as superstitions" (Manji 2010).

Thus for Sen development and freedom are intimately related. Developing or enhancing capabilities empowers citizens enabling them to life into one's own hands. This makes them responsible for their own life. Technology and common living, to the extent they foster such capabilities and freedom are genuine development. Keeping in mind these insights, in the next section we attempt a bird's eye-view of freedom and democracy in the political scenario in the complex Indian situation.

2. Vibrant Democracy and Festival of Freedom: Mukulika Benerjee's Portrait

As India is being hailed as the next superpower, we need to ask some uncomfortable questions in the political field. Is its record on governance and development up to the challenge of its newfound reputation? India has been a democracy for over six decades. Mukulika Banerjee of the London School of Economics, points out that India has achieved some remarkable successes but also failed in significant ways (Banerjee 2009). While economic

growth has been rapid over recent decades, this has not translated into greater welfare for the majority of the Indian population. Pulapre Balakrishnan, a noted economist, writes: "Despite overtaking Japan as the third largest economy, India has lost its leadership role in the continent because, unlike its eastern neighbours, it has ignored its poor" (Balakrishnan 2013)

Despite being severely critical of its politicians, the electorate however remains enthusiastic in its political participation, especially at elections. In 1947, when India gained her independence from colonial rule, the choice of parliamentary democracy and a universal franchise for such a poor, vast and largely illiterate nation was considered foolhardy by many observers. Nevertheless the first general election was held with great rigour, enthusiasm and success in 1952. In the meantime, a Constitution reflecting the political and ideological goals of the new nation had been adopted. It was authored by the Constituent Assembly made up of 299 members who represented the enormous class, religious and linguistic diversity of India's population and who after much debate and deliberation set out the framework for India's future as a republic and parliamentary democracy. "Enshrined within it were the principles of the separation of powers, a universal Indian citizen with constitutional rights, equality before the law, the separation of civil and military powers, and the necessity for political competition. The press remains as free as any in the world and contributes to a lively and highly contested public sphere. So according to the democratic checklist of institutional arrangements, India's democratic system is in a reasonable, if not excellent, shape," asserts Mukulika Benerjee (Banerjee 2009).

a. Civil Society: Vigorous and Vibrant

Banerjee asks about India's record on democratic ideas: the participation of citizens, rule of law, and the responsibility of the state in ensuring basic freedoms, material security and education. It is evident that India's heterodox policy of a mixed economy of planned economic development and liberalization has put it at

the high table of emergent powers in the world. She concedes that the positive effects of this are yet to reach the majority of Indians, in particular the poorest citizens. Many of those in power have severely abused their position, transgressing trust and probity, as scandals of corruption, bribes and kickbacks are revealed daily. While some of this corruption is widely regarded as inevitable transactional costs, the more serious consequences have been felt by what has been called an 'economy of influence,' namely the nexus of corporations, politicians and the press who have colluded to strengthen entrenched interests and weaken institutions (Banerjee 2009). This has been acutely felt, for instance, in the state's policy on India's natural resources, which has consistently ignored the rights of indigenous populations (tribals) whose lands contain these resources in deference to corporate interests who seek to exploit them commercially. This neglect, on the back of an abysmal human development record among the same populations, has led to violent insurgency movements in some districts, whose ideologues disavow the democratic state and its institutions

The state in turn has not held back in its violent suppression of these movements. Elsewhere too, India's civil society remains vigorous as ecological, feminist, religious and justice-based social movements continually challenge the status quo. The national body politic has developed a vast repertoire of protest and persuasion, drawn on the techniques developed during the anti-colonial struggles and those from the twenty-first century, to bring pressure on governments to be responsive to popular demands. These movements at once utilize and challenge the freedoms and liberties within the purview of democratic institutions and sometimes outside of it.

b. The Elections: With Flair and Festivity

At the heart of India's democratic system have been the regular elections that now see the participation of over a hundred political parties and the largest electorate in the world (now c.715

million – larger than all the potential voters in North America, Europe and Australia combined). Recent voter turnout rates in India have been comparable to other major democracies (about 60 percent) but are still trending upwards, unlike in the older democracies where rates are generally falling amid growing voter apathy. Even more surprisingly, the most enthusiastic voters in Indian elections are not the well-educated urban middle classes but those who are the poorest, most discriminated against, and least educated, mainly living in villages and small towns. Turnout rates at elections in these areas can be well over 80 percent. Further, the more local the election, the higher the turnout, which goes against global trends. Contrary to what many predicted in 1947, notes Banerjee, poverty and illiteracy have not hampered the functioning of Indian democracy.

She asks: "Why do large parts of the country's electorate cast their votes enthusiastically (and support a democratic mode of government over any other), despite the sustained failure of the Indian state to improve the living standards of its poorest citizens?" (Banerjee 2009). Is it because the poor are ignorant and don't know what they are doing? Are they gullible and vulnerable to vote buying and empty campaign promises?

According to her, one important factor in the faith that people have in elections is the performance of the Election Commission of India (ECI). Set up in 1950 to manage and conduct elections, unlike many of its counterparts in other democracies, the ECI is an autonomous and constitutional body, which through its sixty-year old life has evolved into a responsive and efficient public body. Only the Supreme Court of India shares this level of popular respect. The voting process, the successful adoption of electronic voting machines, the maintenance of electoral registers, the security provided to voters and political actors, and the standards of probity among the two million election officials who conduct the elections have all emerged as enviably efficient features in a country where much else goes wrong. During elections,

the Election Commission is given wide-ranging powers to create greater transparency and accountability, and politicians and governments are governed by the strict rules of a Model Code of Conduct imposed by the Election Commissioner of India (Banerjee 2009). So, in general the Indian electorate trusts the Election Commission of India much more than the politicians

These redefined political styles play out in the Indian Parliament, which has emerged as an arena for loud, gestural statements alongside debate and deliberation. In recent years, it has become routine for Parliamentary proceedings to be frequently disrupted by members aiming to capture the attention of a hungry media that relishes the transgression of parliamentary norms (Banerjee 2009). In turn, the airtime gained by politicians has proved to be an invaluable tool to reach out to their mass followings.

Elections in India are a big festival. As pointed out by Mukulika Banerjee, it is at this time that "the two political domains of the demonic/demotic that remain largely separate for the most part are forced to collide and confront each other" (Banerjee 2009). It is during election campaigns that the politicians have to account for their neglect of their constituencies and beg a second chance. During long and exhausting election campaigns in large and diverse constituencies the "laundered clothes of rich politicians are sullied by dusty road journeys, their arrogant heads have to be bent entering modest huts of the poor, and their hands have to be folded in a plea for votes. It is no wonder that elections in India have a carnival air as people delight in this leveling effect of campaigns, as the ordinary voter suddenly becomes the object of attention of the powerful" (Banerjee 2009).

But the voters also feel some pressure to play their own role in making the correct choice, which is always open to the influence of a caste group, kin or community. At the most fundamental level, there is tremendous pressure to not waste a vote. One of the ways in which this pressure is created is by a simple procedure carried out by the Election Commissioner of India. In any Indian

election, each voter has their left index finger marked by a short vertical line in indelible black ink just before they approach the electronic voting machine. While this procedure is carried out to ward off repeat voting, it has also had the unintended consequence of making it impossible to lie about *whether* one had voted. It therefore generates tremendous peer pressure among people to go and take the trouble to vote, for not to do so causes the discomfort of constant questions and suspicions about one's motivations for abstaining. The importance of not losing face in front of others, whether they are kin or party workers, is thus an important motivation for voting and results in high turnout rates (Banerjee 2009).

A further motivation for voting is "the actual visceral experience" people get from it (Banerjee 2009). The culture of a polling station fosters an order, disciplined queues, respect for the ordinary person of whatever social background, efficiency of process and trust in the system – rare qualities in Indian public life. In addition, at a polling station, the only relevant identity of a person is his Electoral Photo Identity Card that records nothing apart from the most basic information. As people arrive to vote, they have to queue in the order in which they arrive and no preferences are made on the basis of wealth, status or any other social marker. For those who are routinely discriminated against on the basis of caste, colour, class and religion in everyday life, this extraordinary glimpse of egalitarianism is valued. Further, people often pointed out that the knowledge that each vote is of equal to any other heightens its importance even more. "By turning up to vote, by queuing patiently at polling stations, by punishing arrogance and complacency in their choice of leader, they thereby consider themselves as participating in the most basic act of democracy that enshrines political equality and popular sovereignty" (Banerjee 2009).

After her elaborate analysis Mukulika Banerjee sums up India's record on democracy as "reasonably consistent"(Banerjee

2009). She adds: "Her institutions have been mostly robust though they have also increasingly come under threat by personal greed and the collusion of powerful actors who seek to undermine the principles and robustness of these institutions. Yet, at the same time, in the wider society, ideas about democratic participation, the role of the electorate and the importance of a shared duty of citizenship are also vigorously articulated. In the end, it will be the challenges posed by this latter demotic politics of hope, mobilization, participation and justice that will need to overcome the demonic world of greed and power" (Banerjee 2009).

India's experiments of democracy have taught the world a number of lessons: the successful workings of coalition governments, the unpredictability of voter behavior, the importance of an autonomous and responsive electoral commission, and above all the possibility of political sophistication among the poorest people. It remains to be seen whether India can redistribute the fruits of its economic growth to the wider society and thereby serve as a unique model among the rising powers of combining economic democracy with a robust political one (Banerjee 2009).

It is precisely in this connection that we study the sad or disappointing story of Anna Movement for a "corruption-free India" in the next section.

3. The Unending Discourse: Lessons from Anna Hazare's Movement

a. The Ambiguous Story of Anna Movement

Kisan Baburao Hazare (born 15 June 1937), popularly known as Anna Hazare is social activist who led movements to promote rural development, increase government transparency, and investigate official corruption. In addition to organizing and encouraging grassroots movements, Hazare frequently conducted hunger strikes to further his causes—a tactic reminiscent, to many, of the work of Mohandas K. Gandhi.[5]

Anna Hazare started an indefinite hunger strike on 5 April 2011 to exert pressure on the Indian government to enact a stringent anti-corruption law, The Lokpal Bill, 2011 as envisaged in the Jan Lokpal Bill, for the institution of an ombudsman with the power to deal with corruption in public places.[6] The fast led to nation-wide protests in his support. The fast ended on 9 April 2011, a day after the government accepted Hazare's demands. The government issued a gazette notification on the formation of a joint committee, consisting of government and civil society representatives, to draft the legislation.

For the year 2011 Foreign Policy magazine named him among top 100 global thinkers. Also in 2011 Anna was ranked as the most influential person in Mumbai by a national daily newspaper. He has faced criticism for his authoritarian views on justice, including plea for death as punishment for corrupt public officials.

Gradually Anna Hazare's fight against corruption movement began to fizzle out, partly due to his own doings. If one studies the whole event, one may conclude that right from the beginning Anna started committing blunders after blunders. In fact he claimed to have monopoly over civil society in his fight against corruption and began shifting his goal at random. So the three-day fast by Anna Hazare against the government's version of Lokpal Bill in Mumbai starting on December 27, 2011 drew lukewarm response, unlike his earlier fast (Totanawala 2011).[7]

Again Anna Hazare proceeded on 28 July 2012 his fast-unto-death on the Lokpal issue in Delhi. He stated that country's future is not safe in the hands of the two major political umbrellas: Congress and BJP. He hoped to campaign in the coming elections for those with clean background. On the third day of his indefinite fast, Anna stated that he will not talk even to the Prime Minister till his demands are met. But this time the response of the masses and the mass-media were very discouraging. The government refused to negotiate with Team Anna. On 2 August 2012 Anna said

that there was nothing wrong in forming a new political party but, he would neither join the party nor contest elections.

In this context Team Anna decided to end their indefinite fast on 3 August 2012 after which the team announced their decision to enter party politics, a move opposed by many of the followers of Anna. To make matter still complex, August 7, 2012, Anna Hazare disbanded Team Anna that formed the core committee of the "India Against Corruption" movement and assumed the role of a patron to a proposed formation that would provide the nation with a political alternative (Parsai 2012).

On his blog, Mr. Hazare said that the core committee (or Team Anna) was formed to facilitate talks with the government on the Jan Lokpal Bill.[8] But the government was not listening to it, so it decided not to talk to the government any more. "We observed fast [for four times] to make ourselves heard, but the government is not interested in bringing in a strong law against corruption. The movement launched to ask the government to set up an effective Lokpal has been withdrawn, but the movement for coming up with an alternative and finding the right people will go on," he added. The activist insisted that the movement would continue as long as it was dedicated to the cause of the people. "The day I find that members of the alternative party have allowed power or money to go to their head, I will withdraw the movement," he warned (Parsai 2012).[9]

b. The Debate Goes on: Tavleen Singh's Critique

Tavleen Singh, a popular Indian columnist and political reporter, who is herself critical of Team Anna, wishes well for Anna Hazare. Writing in her regular column, she hopes that the team who has decided to join politics, "realizes the fundamental principle of democracy is debate." She confesses that among the things that "put me off Anna, and his movement, from the start was its totalitarian nature. Its apparent inability to accept that neither Anna nor his team have all the answers." She was apprehensive

of "their inability to comprehend the power of debate and the meaning of dissent" (Singh 2012).

She holds that the strength of democracy lies in its institutions and in the rule of law (Singh 2012). So even as someone who has no respect for Anna Hazare and "his very unsavory team mates," she welcomes their entry into electoral politics. "If they can find a new way, tread a new path and bring people into the Lok Sabha [Parliament] who have a genuine interest in public service, then they would have done this country a real service" (Singh 2012).

Amartya Sen, the author of *The Argumentative Indian*, (Sen 2005) also holds similar, though not identical views. "I believe that their reading of corruption or what causes corruption or how it can removed is wrong," Sen said while rejecting the notion of using indefinite fast as a tool to eradicate corruption (Sen 2012). "The system needs changing but that's not a question of changing a minister or doing dharna or having someone tied up at a tree. It's a question of changing a system and looking at the incentives the system gives on corruption," he added (Sen 2012).[10]

"You have to mobilise the political system because you know democracy is meant to be governed by discussion instead of that what we've ended up in India is the government by pressure groups and the pressure groups are very sour," he asserted (Sen 2012).

The story of Anna is not ended. The narrative goes on either through Anna, or Ramdev or others. It has not ended or reached its closure.

4. Development and Freedom: Two Contemporary Stories

Thus what will happen to the Anna movement is uncertain at the moment. But we can very well be confident that freedom and democracy in India, which this movement hoped to purify and strengthen is in safe hands, in spite of its many weaknesses. Such

freedom and democracy is closed tied up to a humane understanding of development, as Amartya Sen holds.

In the same news item referred earlier, touching upon issue of economic growth, Sen said there is need to use benefits from growth for healthcare, education and physical infrastructure. "Chasing fast growth alone is stupid," he said. "That doesn't make me anti-growth because growth helps, certainly. But a kind of single-minded worship of growth is no way of getting to the things which we really care about namely what is good for the Indian people," he added (Sen 2012).Can India debate and dialogue with itself? That is the greatest challenge that the Indian democracy faces: a challenge from within!

In this concluding section we take up the emergent and entrepreneuring India in the globalized scenario. I want to reflect through the prism of two dynamic and enterprising writers of the contemporary Indian scenario: Aravind Adiga and Akash Kapur.

a. Aravind Adiga: The White Tiger

Aravind Adiga (2008) is the well-known author of *The White Tiger*.[11] It was first published in 2008 and won the 40th Man Booker Prize in the same year. The novel provides a darkly humorous perspective of India's class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from Balram Halwai, a village boy. In detailing Balram's journey first to Delhi, where he works as a chauffeur to a rich landlord, and then to Bangalore, the place to which he flees after killing his master and stealing his money, the novel examines issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty in India. Ultimately, Balram transcends his sweet-maker caste and becomes a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service. In a nation proudly shedding a history of poverty and underdevelopment, he represents, as he himself says, "tomorrow."

The novel has been well-received, making the *New York Times* best-seller list in addition to winning the Man Booker

Prize. Aravind Adiga, 33 at the time, was the second youngest writer as well as the fourth debut writer to win the prize in 2008. Adiga says his novel "attempt[s] to catch the voice of the men you meet as you travel through India — the voice of the colossal underclass." According to Adiga, the exigency for *The White Tiger* was to capture the unspoken voice of people from "the Darkness" – the impoverished areas of rural India, and he "wanted to do so without sentimentality or portraying them as mirthless humorless weaklings as they are usually" (The White Tiger 2013).

The locale of *The White Tiger* is the dynamic and modern day India. The novel's protagonist, Balram Halwai is born in Laxmangarh, Bihar, a rural village in "the Darkness." Balram narrates the novel as a letter, which he wrote in seven consecutive nights and addressed to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao who is visiting India. In his letter, Balram explains how he, the son of rickshaw puller, escaped a life of servitude to become a successful businessman, describing himself as a successful entrepreneur. Balram begins the novel by describing his life in Laxamangarh. There he lived with his grandmother, parents and brother and extended family. He is a smart child. But he is forced to quit school in order to help pay for his cousin's dowry. He begins to work in a teashop with his brother in Dhanbad. While working in the teashop he begins to learn about India's government and economy from the customers' conversations. Balram describes himself as a bad servant and decides that he wants to become a driver.

Balram learns how to drive and gets a job driving Ashok, the son of the local landlord. During a trip back to his village Balram disrespects his grandmother and tells the reader and the Chinese Premier that in the next eight months he intends to kill his boss. Balram moves to New Delhi with his boss Ashok and his wife Miss Pinky Madam. Throughout their time in New Delhi, Balram is exposed to the extensive corruption of India's government.

In New Delhi the separation between India's poor and wealthy becomes even more evident by the juxtaposition of the wealthy with poor city dwellers.

One night Pinky decides to drive the car by herself and hits something. She is worried that it was a child and the family eventually decides to frame Balram for the hit and run. The police tell them that no one reported a child missing. Gradually Ashok becomes increasingly involved with the corrupt government. Balram then decides that the only way that he will be able to escape India's "Rooster Coop" will be by killing and robbing Ashok (The White Tiger 2013). One raining day he murders Ashok by bludgeoning him with a broken liquor bottle. Balram then managed to flee to Bangalore with his younger brother. There he bribes the police in order to help start his own driving service. When one of his drivers kills a bike messenger Balram pays off the family and police. Balram explains that his family was almost certainly killed as retribution for Ashok's murder. At the end of the novel Balram rationalizes his actions by saying that his freedom is worth the lives of Ashok and his family and the monetary success of his new taxi company.

The White Tiger takes place in the modern day world where increased technology has led to globalization. In the past decade, India has had one of the fastest booming economies. Specifically Americanization in India has played its role in the plot, since it provides an outlet for Balram to alter his caste. To satisfy Pinky's want for American culture, Ashok, Pinky, and Balram simply move to Gurgaon instead of back to America. Globalization has assisted in the creation of an American atmosphere in India. Ashok justifies this move by explaining, "Today it's the modernist suburb of Delhi. American Express, Microsoft, all the big American companies have offices there. The main road is full of shopping malls - each mall has a cinema inside! So if Pinky Madam missed America, this was the best place to bring her." By blackmailing Ram Bahadur, the other driver, Balram is promoted

and drives Ashok and Pinky to their new home (The White Tiger 2013).

India is now compared to the rest of the world's superpowers, including countries like the United States of America and China. "There are so many more things I could do here than in New York now...The way things are changing in India now, this place is going to be like America in ten years." Balram notices the rapid growth as well. From the beginning of his story he knows that in order to rise above his caste he should become an entrepreneur. Although his taxi service is not an international business, Balram plans to keep up with the pace of globalization and change his trade when need be. "I'm always a man who sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today'" (The White Tiger 2013). Balram's recognition of the increasing competition resulting from globalization contributes to his corruption.

In an interview Aravind Adiga asserts that "The White Tiger" was a book about a person's quest for freedom. Balram, the protagonist in the novel, worked his way out of his low social caste (often referred to as "the Darkness") and overcame the social obstacles that limited his family in the past. Climbing up the social ladder, Balram sheds the weights and limits of his past and overcomes the social obstacles that keep him from living life to the fullest that he can. In the book, Balram talks about how he was in a rooster coop and how he broke free from his coop. The novel is somewhat of a memoir of his journey to finding his freedom in India's modern day capitalist society. Towards the beginning of the novel, Balram cites a poem from the Muslim poet Iqbal where he talks about slaves and says, "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world." Balram sees himself embodying the poem and being the one who sees the world and takes it as he rises through the ranks of society, and in doing so finds his freedom (Adiga 2008).

But its unflattering portrait of India as a society racked by corruption and servitude, exposing the country's dark side has expectedly caused a storm in India.

b. Akash Kapur: An Incomplete Portrait

In "The New York Times," Akash Kapur, another young and creative author, called Adiga's book "simplistic" and "an incomplete portrait of a nation and a people grappling with the ambiguities of modernity" (Powers 2012).

What are some of the ambiguities of modernity in India today? In the "Sunday Money" section from the "New York Times" published May 6, 2012, Tyler Cowen writes "Never Mind Europe. Worry about India." Cowen thinks though India is "likely to end up as the world's largest economy by the next century" that the decline in the economic growth rate in contemporary India is unevenly distributed, "with the greatest burden falling on the poor." He is afraid that if this trend doesn't reverse itself that "millions of Indians, for another generation, will fail to rise above extreme penury and want." So he complains that "the economic slowdown in India is one of the world's biggest economic stories, but it is commanding only a modicum of attention in the United States" (Powers 2012).

Ironically, that same Indian writer, Akash Kapur who criticized Adiga's portrait of India in "The White Tiger," has later published *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India* in which he states that upon his return to South India in 2003, after receiving an education at an American boarding school and at Harvard, that every other person he met seemed to be an "entrepreneur," reminding one of Balram.

Kapur adds that in today's India "for the first time in my life, but arguably in India's history too, people dared to imagine an existence for themselves that was unburdened by the past and tradition." He confirms, "India, I felt, had started to dream" (Powers 2012).

Kapur married and settled down to live in his "new" India, was appalled by what he at first admired about his re-found country. Kapur points out that over 300 million of India's people—roughly the population of the United States he was educated in—live in abject poverty, on merely a dollar a day or less. More than half India's surface water is polluted, and almost 50% of its land has eroded. And India's air is considered by some to be the most polluted on the planet.

In the book Kapur describes the millions of young people in India today who have left their small country towns behind to move closer to jobs in India's large urban centers such as Delhi, Calcutta and Mumbai, all of them contributing in part to the immense ecological problems that face the country as the Indian middle class grows (Powers 2012).

So two books dealing with the ambiguities of modern India! How then does Aravind Adiga's novel, this "incomplete portrait of a nation," compare with Kapur's new non-fiction book, *India Becoming: A Portrait of Modern India?* (Powers 2012 & Kapur 2012). Kapur sets out to tell two parallel stories: "One is a story of progress," he writes, the other, "of the destruction and disruptions caused by the same process of development." Kapur's own feelings about his native country tend to get overwhelmed by bland nostalgia, but fortunately, to make his point, Kapur focuses on recounting the stories of a wide range of characters he encountered during his research. As his influence and status wanes, Sathy, a rural landowner, wants simply to hold on to comforting rhythms of the old India (much to the annoyance of his progressive wife, who runs her own consulting business in Bangalore). Hari, a high-flying young IT worker, flourishes in the city but struggles with his homosexuality; Selvi, a small-town girl who moved to the city to take a call center job finds her views of Americans changing as she interacts with brusque customers; and Veena, an ambitious divorcee, must balance her aspirations for a career and independence with her desire for a family. Their

entangled stories are what give the book its texture and insight, and make it a valuable investigation of the effects of India's fast-paced change on the land and its people (Powers 2012).

3. Conclusion: Sandhya Devi's Challenge

Finally, we may hold that Akash Kapur was right in his criticism when he said that "The White Tiger" by Aravind Adiga is an incomplete portrait of modern Indian. That is the novel's strength, because a complete portrait would be a series of graphs and charts and statistics, not a novel that is filled with living ambiguities and paradoxes. Kapur's *India Becoming* also point to these ambiguous realities. Such is the India of today: prosperous and poor, beautiful and ugly. Truly a paradox!

By definition, a paradox is never complete. It just is what it is. And in this case, it is a great work of modern art or a mosaic (Powers 2012). The Indian scenario is ambiguous, ambivalent, progressive, regressive and so creative and/or destructive. It is not linear, not deterministic. Much more chaotic and synergetic! It is through such scenarios that we, individually and collectively, realize our freedom and enable progress that is humane. Such a scenario calls for genuine dialogue.

Dialogue between politicians of differing or opposing ideologies, between hope and greed, between the poor and the rich. Still, can we foster a creative and respectful debate and dialogue between adversaries, "especially, dialogue between adversaries for the sake of the larger good of the nation" and of every human being. Thus the story continues to be narrated, the story of belongingness, freedom, development and progress. Such a story, complex, involved and multifaceted, goes on in contemporary India. Can we gently twist it and give it a humane face?

Yes, our country needs to listen (again?) to that old man's wisdom:[12]

> "I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away" (Cited in Brown & Parel 2011: 150).

Once again: "Recall the face of the poorest and weakest woman you have seen, and ask yourself if this step you contemplate is going to be any use to her."

It is here that we need to recognize the challenge posed by Sandhya Devi and her husband, Ashok Kumar. It was reported recently that Rajasthan state have arrested and bailed a couple suspected of selling their new-born baby boy for Rs 40,000 ($722) to pay for the treatment of their sick three-year-old son. The parents, Sandhya Devi and Ashok Kumar, allegedly sold the baby to a neighbouring couple, Vinod Agarwal and his wife Shakuntla, who have also been arrested and bailed.The baby was born on 31 July and handed sold to the couple on 3 August, 2012 (Bareth 2012). They were forced to sell the baby to take care of their other child!

The role of money, middle man and corruption is evident in the story of Sandhya Devi. The hermeneutic appropriation of the larger story of Indian democracy and development has to take account of such concrete and tragic cases.

If such incidents take place in some parts of India, what does it say of India's freedom and development? We need to interpret and appropriate the talisman proposed by Gandhi creatively.[13] We need collective and creative dialogue to move away from a culture of violence, exploitation and poverty. Then we pay heed to the wise counsels of SudheendraKulkarni, Amartya Sen, Aravind Adiga, Anna Hazare, Mukulika Banerjee, Akash Kapur

and Mahatma Gandhi. Can we dialogue with friends and foes to reach out aim of sustainable development and free India? True, it is a herculean challenge! But the "argumentative Indian" is capable of it.

Notes

1. A Dargah is a tomb of a Muslim saint or a Muslim shrine, which is very special for them.
2. All the details, including the number of causalities, cause and motives of violence, etc., given here are debatable, though the carnage as such is not. I have used the Wikipedia information for this section. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2002_Gujarat_violence
3. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2002_Gujarat_violence
4. In this article that long tradition and therefore, the rootedness, that is part of Indian heritage is ignored, for lack of space. But we do realize the need to trace our rootedness and to have creative fidelity to it.
5. Hazare also contributed to the development and structuring of Ralegan Siddhi, a village in Parnertaluka of Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra, India. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan—the third-highest civilian award—by the Government of India in 1992 for his efforts in establishing this village as a model for others.
6. Hazare initiated a Satyagraha movement for passing a stronger anti-corruption *Lokpal* (ombudsman) bill.
7. See http://firoztotanawala.blogspot.in/2011/05/rise-and-fall-of-movement-anna-hazares.html.
8. Jan *Lokpal* Bill is Peoples' ombudsman bill to check corruption. This bill was proposed by Anna Hazare and team, to distinguish from *Lokpal* (ombudsman)vBill, proposed by the government.
9. History.... Am Aadmi Party (AAP) ArvindKejriwal-led *AamAadmi Party* (AAP) has got its registration from the Election Commission. It was launched by anti-corruption activist ArvindKejriwal on 26 November 2012 at JantarMantar in Delhi.
10. Recently Sen has landed into controversy for asserting that "I don't want Narendra Modi as my PM" (Sen 2013).
11. For this section, I am indebted to good review of *The White Tiger* in Wikipedia (The White Tiger 2013).
12. This is a powerful quote from Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Na-

tion, who is both respected and reviled in modern India.

13. What are the ambiguities of modernity in India today? In the "Sunday Money" section from the "New York Times" published May 6, 2012, Tyler Cowen writes in "Never Mind Europe. Worry About India" that even though India is "likely to end up as the world's largest economy by the next century" that the decline in the economic growth rate in contemporary India is unevenly distributed, "with the greatest burden falling on the poor." He also states that if this trend doesn't reverse itself that "millions of Indians, for another generation, will fail to rise above extreme penury and want" (Powers 2012).

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