Ideas from India

Devesh Kapur Unleashing potential in innovation and creativity

Stephen P. Cohen The foreign policy of an emerging power

Ashutosh Varshney The wonder of Indian democracy

Ashima Goyal Policy and potential economic growth

Barbara Nelson & Assa Doron A churning democracy

and more . . .
India is a paradox. On the one hand, the country’s high growth rate has led to its international profile reaching new heights. The world’s largest democracy now features a burgeoning middle class, whose newly found economic and social freedoms are light years away from the old developmental state with its bureaucratic straitjacket that bound the economy. This middle class, however loosely defined, displays an insatiable appetite for consumer goods, thereby realising its hope of participating in the global economy as its most enthusiastic entrant. On the other hand, about a third of the population still lives below the poverty line. Suggestions that the adventurous Indian middle class will act as an engine propelling the country on to the world stage downplay the enormous challenges that lie ahead.

While the contributors to this issue are very conscious of India’s rise to prominence, they are equally concerned about the implications and challenges involved. Many of the essays, though not all, are based on papers presented in November 2011 at the ‘Ideas from India’ symposium, which formed the year’s signature event at the Australian National University’s Research School of Asia and the Pacific. Some essays focus on the strategic implications of India’s growing dominance—and its potential to provide stability—in this otherwise volatile region. Others focus inwardly, illuminating India’s struggle to cope with enduring forms of social and economic inequality. The struggles and challenges lie not only in improving the country’s decaying infrastructure and mammoth, but stagnant, public service. They also lie in initiating new policy measures and state-led interventions aimed at addressing acute problems of poverty, malnutrition and gender imbalance, and infusing the education sector with dynamic ideas and practices. These, in turn, must be designed to enhance skill formation in order to capitalise on the so-called demographic dividend—the foundation for India’s future.

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COVER: A street vendor offers balloons to passersby in Hyderabad. PICTURE: Noah Seelam / AFP Photo / AAP.

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A churning democracy: future directions

INDIAN democracy continues to puzzle many foreign observers. But for most Indians, democracy—however imperfect—is a matter of practice, something they grow up with. Indian democracy may not be perfect—which democracy is?—but it would be safe to say that debates that raged until at least the 1980s about whether it would survive are now firmly in the rearview mirror. Millions are going to the polls this year as elections in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Goa, Uttarakhand and Manipur begin this January. Most attention is focused on the poll in Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state and the sixth-largest in the world, a state so large that the logistics of ensuring security for voters affects the election; the poll must be conducted in seven distinct phases.

That India has survived as a democratic nation since independence in 1947 has, until recently, remained an anomaly to social scientists. According to the view that democracy requires economic development, a common culture and high levels of literacy, India’s claim to be democratic has rested largely on the fact that it holds elections, has universal suffrage, and that transfer of power occurs without trouble. Rather than viewing India as an anomaly, democratic theory now accounts more comprehensively for the Indian case.

While political parties jostle for position in the states, the Indian National Congress (INC) maintains its dominance at the federal level, forming the major party in the ruling coalition, the United Progressive Alliance. The INC receives strong support from among the poor, who continue to participate enthusiastically in voting at both state and federal levels, despite missing out on an equitable share of India’s growth. And while the old developmental state espoused by Nehru failed to alleviate poverty and misery among the masses of dispossessed, the glitzy malls and buzzing consumer economy of neoliberal India mean the poor are all too aware that India’s new shine does not reflect upon them.

Yet the INC continues to champion ‘economic growth with social justice’ as the central mantra of its manifesto. Indira Gandhi was voted out of office in 1977, not because she failed to fulfil her promise to ‘abolish poverty’ (garibi hatao), but because she curtailed political freedom. Will the poor continue to be content with voting, or will they also want to see evidence that they too might get their fair share?

Alongside such lofty promises, the INC’s manifesto consistently claims to have ‘maintained India’s unity while celebrating her many diversities’. It is tempting to dismiss such a claim as another tired cliché, yet behind it lie some worthy ideas. The cynic may find that India’s ‘unity’ consists of a diversity of chronic ills: poverty, inequality, decaying infrastructure and endemic corruption—‘unity in adversity’, perhaps. But it is equally important to recognise India’s remarkable achievements, especially in the face of such adversities. These achievements include regular elections, facilitated by an impressive Election Commission; a robust constitution; critical media; and a vibrant public sphere with many civil society institutions. Nevertheless, some aspects of unity are under threat, with the south and west becoming noticeably more prosperous than the north and east, for example, and the middle classes looking more to global values than to Indian ones.

On the one hand, the unity of the Indian state certainly offers economic opportunities, and with less upheaval and insecurity than would otherwise be experienced on a continent of many nations, rather than a federation. On the other hand, the fear of giving in to
any separatist movement, especially in the Maoist belt and Kashmir, has led to instability and much suffering.

Can such diversity withstand the onslaught of industrial growth and global capitalism? And for the poor to benefit from ‘trickle-down’ development, must India become homogenous? For instance, one of the arguments in favour of foreign direct investment (FDI) in multi-brand retailing is that it would lead to a markedly improved supply chain, better infrastructure and less wastage, ultimately leading to a reduced farm-to-fork price ratio. But those opposing the move fear loss of choice and opportunity for people dependent on the unorganised retail sector. Can the diversity of the retail sector survive FDI? The homogenising imperatives of globalisation may prove easier to manage, but they must also contend with the unruly nature of Indian democracy.

The type of nationalism based on one language, one religion and one culture—often promoted by the Bharatiya Janata Party—is another, extremely misguided, attempt to iron out the differences of what remains a highly heterogeneous society. But India’s diversity goes beyond the usual points of reference: ethnicity, language, culture, religion. Diversity includes being able to hold multiple identities, multiple concepts of citizenship, multiple languages, and commitment to both individual and group rights without feeling compelled to adopt a single, unifying model.

The democratic models developed outside India often jar with the Indian one, compelling us to rethink our own views of democracy as universally applicable, as long as one follows the European path. The Indian case poses multiple challenges to these ‘grand theories’ of democracy and one-size-fits-all models. In hitching its wagon to European models of nationalism and market capitalism—models that are facing crises in the region where they first emerged—India may neglect its home-grown potential for solving the country’s problems. Rather than letting others dictate its future trajectory, India may be better served by allowing its ‘million mutinies’ to continue churning its society and polity; perhaps these will offer original directions down alternative paths for the future.
While India’s economic transformation and growth have received much attention in recent years, what is less well known is the great progress made on many social fronts, with declining fertility rates, expanded schooling, and efforts to bridge the gender gap in schooling, especially at primary and lower-secondary levels. But there are two areas of human development in which India has not fared particularly well: child malnutrition and the population’s gender balance.

Child malnutrition rates in India are extraordinarily high—among the highest in the world—with nearly one-half of children under the age of three being either underweight or stunted. Further, the incidence of child malnutrition has remained stubbornly high even after nearly two decades of post-reform growth and prosperity. Child malnutrition in India seems to bear little correlation with a family’s income, with research suggesting that a quarter of children whose mother possesses 10 or more years of schooling—and an equivalent proportion of children from the top income quintile—are also underweight. These children are very unlikely to face food insecurity. Even in a relatively prosperous and dynamic state like Gujarat, child malnutrition rates have remained static over the past decade.
Still more surprising is the persistence of child malnutrition rates in the face of declining infant and child mortality. This disparity is difficult to understand, as most factors associated with low rates of infant and child mortality (like safe deliveries and the utilisation of high-quality health services, high female literacy, and good environmental hygiene) typically also improve child nutrition.

This phenomenon, which is true more generally of the entire South Asian region, has been referred to as the ‘Asian enigma’. Commentators point to the fact that child malnutrition is much higher in South Asia than in sub-Saharan Africa, even though infant and child mortality is lower in South Asia. The Asian enigma throws up many interesting questions: is it culture and dietary habits (India has extensive vegetarianism) that account for high child malnutrition in South Asia? Is it the poor nutritional status of mothers and their low weight gain during pregnancy that leads to babies with low birth-weights who then become malnourished children? The high rate of child malnutrition does not bode well for India’s future. There is compelling evidence from around the world that early-life malnutrition has significant adverse impacts on cognitive development, human capital formation and labour-market productivity in adulthood.

India’s gender balance is the second human development indicator that raises concern. Robust economic growth in recent decades has been associated with a significant deterioration in the population’s gender balance—and India is already quite unusual in having more males than females. The problem is particularly severe among the young population: the child sex ratio has declined from 964 females per 1000 males in 1971 to 927 per 1000 in 2001. India, like China and some other East Asian countries, has one of the lowest sex ratios at birth in the world.

While for biological reasons many countries around the world have a small imbalance in their juvenile sex ratios, India’s imbalance is acute, and is most likely the reflection of three major behavioural factors: prenatal sex-selection by parents (with parents choosing to abort female foetuses based on prenatal ultrasounds), excess female infant and child mortality due to parental neglect, and differential contraceptive use depending upon the existing sex composition of children (including the use of contraceptives only after a son has been born).

Much of the literature on Indian sex ratios has focused on a north–south dichotomy, arguing that the country’s northern and western regions not only have more rigid norms of female seclusion—particularly related to participation in economic activities outside the home—but also have marriage customs, such as large dowry payments, that make female children economic burdens. In contrast, women in the south and the east enjoy greater autonomy and higher social status within the family.

These cultural differences manifest themselves in the form of lower sex ratios at birth in the northern and western states than in the southern and eastern states. The data is broadly consistent with these predicted patterns, but the picture is more nuanced. For instance, the phenomenon of low juvenile sex ratios has become more pervasive over time, and has spread to states in the south and east. States which had more balanced sex ratios—Orissa, Gujarat, Maharashtra and even Tamil Nadu—than the northern states have recently seen large declines in their juvenile sex ratios. In fact, every major state in the country, other than Kerala, saw its juvenile sex ratio decline between 1991 and 2001.

India’s low and declining sex ratio at birth is a matter of grave policy concern, not only because it violates the human rights of unborn and infant girls, but also because it deprives India of the potential economic and social contribution that these ‘missing women’ could have otherwise made. Some estimates put the number of India’s ‘missing females’—the number of unborn or prematurely dead girls—as high as 50 million. It is almost impossible to place a value on the economic output foregone by the loss of these women, but it is likely to be very large. Although women still earn less than men in labour markets, there is increasing evidence that the pecuniary returns of female schooling are in fact greater than those of male schooling

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and schooling among women are associated with a worsening of the sex ratio at birth, possibly because educated women tend to have fewer children than less-educated women and, in the context of a strong son-preference culture, the lower levels of fertility lead to greater pressure on couples to have boys instead of girls. Likewise, micro-level data suggest that urbanisation and a greater availability of quality health services in rural areas are also associated with India’s deteriorating sex ratio at birth. Thus many of the factors associated with economic and social progress actually seem to have perverse effects on gender balance.

How effective are laws against prenatal sex diagnosis and selection? While the Indian government passed the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostics Techniques (PNDT) (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act in 1994, the popular press does not seem to believe it has been particularly effective, as the government has not enforced the law strongly. But some research suggests the legislation was indeed successful in reducing what might have been an even greater increase in gender imbalance, arguing that in the possible absence of the PNDT Act, India’s child sex ratio would have declined by another 13–20 points.

Both the persistence of child malnutrition in India and the country’s deteriorating gender balance highlight the importance of culture in development. They reflect the fact that not all social indicators necessarily move in unison with economic indicators. Indeed, because of cultural and contextual factors, economic and social ‘progress’, like the expansion of female literacy and education, could even promote socially undesirable behaviour and outcomes.

CREATING HUMAN CAPITAL

Reconciling growth with equity

SUGATA MARJIT

‘GROWTH versus equity’ is a theme that continues to occupy most of the policy debates in India, particularly after two decades of experimenting with economic reform. The outcome of the reform process has been mixed: India’s commendable trend rate of economic growth is unfortunately accompanied by a sustained and increasing degree of inequality. New debates on official poverty estimates have flared up, and so have concerns about uncontrolled inflation, though the intensity has subsided a bit in the recent past.

The coexistence of prosperity, poverty and inequality is not specific to India. Rich countries such as the US have experienced very little growth in recent times owing to serious financial crisis-led recession, and inequality in various forms has been on the rise there as well. In a way, growth or no growth, the world has become a more unequal place—a feeling shared by experts and non-experts alike. Equity should be a contentious issue, and far more so than it is usually allowed to be.

Rising inequality does not often find its solution in rising subsidies. Targeting India’s poor, needy and underprivileged and showering them with state resources, for example, has not yielded the desired results, as unintended beneficiaries corner a large part of the allocated resources. Pretext at fairness and equity has led to a tremendous concentration of benefits among particular segments of the underprivileged, which have now effectively ceased to be underprivileged. A false sense of equity in India has also meant equal salaries in universities for the most incompetent and the most qualified alike, while at the same time Indians are beginning to lean toward fee-paying private institutions to achieve global standards. A misunderstanding pervades the country: it is not the failure of the market that cripples India’s development across social groups and classes, it is India’s inability to allow markets to operate independent of manipulation by various influential groups. But debates on these issues seldom make headlines.

There are two critical economic issues—the problems of skill formation and appropriate policy targeting—that have far-reaching implications for growth and equity in India. These problems, though disconnected, are critical for developmental breakthroughs.

First, greater skill formation through education has the potential to transform India’s high levels of unskilled manpower into an efficient stock of human capital and to help
India take advantage of the so-called demographic dividend. It is well recognised that India’s sustained rates of high economic growth over the last decade owe a lot to growth in the services sector and its share in India’s GDP. India’s trump card right now seems to be its available stock of relatively inexpensive skilled manpower, especially when compared to rich industrialised nations. But India’s supply of skilled manpower cannot grow at the desired rate if investment in quality manpower is constrained by a lack of capital and a declining supply of potential skill from below. The performance record of pre-tertiary education continues to be poor, which in turn points to the abysmal pass rate and significant drop-out rates in school education. Credit markets and capital in general must be mobilised to support human capital investment so that India’s poor but talented students do not suffer and languish in the poverty trap. Since technological progress often implies jobless growth in the manufacturing sector, the key policy concern must be to promote entrepreneurship, keeping in mind the idea that contemporary advances in technology are likely to help only those who can already help themselves.

Second, India must also focus on the problem of targeting policies and employing appropriate mechanisms to ensure that a policy’s intended beneficiaries do receive government-provided support. Millions of rupees in subsidies are regularly wasted because the government cannot effectively target those living below the poverty line. Many Indians who receive subsidies should not, and those who need them most are regularly overlooked. Increasing the amount of subsidies without also looking at who gets to spend them is a mistake of the highest order. A reluctance to conduct impact-evaluation studies is another gross error that India has been committing for a long time. The government is constantly leaving behind old, half-baked and half-executed policies and jumping quickly to the next policy solution without properly analysing the merits and reach of particular policies.

India needs more careful policy design to target subsidies effectively. A false sense of justice and equity blurs the country’s vision. It seems that Indians are more interested in preventing unintended beneficiaries from grabbing the subsidies than improving the absolute intake of the targeted group. But such a principle ultimately excludes many eligible beneficiaries as well. For example, in places with a more than 70 to 80 per cent incidence of poverty, we know that the poor definitely benefit if everyone gets the subsidy. It does not matter if 20 per cent of the beneficiary group is rich. But if we insist on the below-poverty-line target group, anomalies will creep in, and in the end maybe 30 per cent of the poor will benefit. True, this does not solve the problem as a whole, but in areas where poverty incidence is of a very high order, blanket subsidisation rather than targeted policy is a better deal. The Indian government must think of such innovative strategies for reconciling growth with equity.
It has long been recognised that innovation is a critical driver of long-term economic growth. Although indigenous technology development is a major goal of post-independence India, the record is modest. Anaemic economic growth weakened the demand links and incentives that spur innovation; and after the initial flush of idealism that created a host of dynamic institutions, the heavy hand of the Indian state rendered many of them plodding bureaucratic sloths.

For a country with one of the largest concentrations of scientists and engineers, India does poorly on conventional indicators for measuring the level of innovation in a country. China has clearly outstripped India in patent filings, but even Australia, with just 2 per cent of India’s population, files more patent applications in the United States than India.

India’s performance is somewhat better when it comes to publications in science and engineering in international refereed journals. The pace of research activity in India has picked up, with emerging leadership in several research areas, especially chemistry and, to a lesser extent, engineering biology and biotechnology.

Of course quantity is not quality. Most patents see little activity and only a fraction of journal articles make a significant contribution. While in quantitative terms India’s performance pales behind the scorching pace set by China, India does considerably better than China in quality terms (as measured by citations per article). The rate of improvement has been limited by a decline in the number of Indians doing doctoral work in science and engineering in the most demanding market—the United States.

A lack of innovative dynamism has also been noted with regard to the absence of genuinely new global products introduced by Indian companies. Few Indian companies are perceived to have the capacity to innovate disruptive technologies.

In contrast to India’s lacklustre performance in conventional measures, other sources are almost breathless about the seemingly boundless creative energy in India. Headlines like ‘India the world’s secret silicon valley’ and ‘India’s innovation stimulus’ herald a new type of innovative activity popularised variously as ‘frugal innovation’ or ‘Gandhian innovation.’

These statements point to a certain dynamism and creativity that is distinct from conventional measures such as publications and patents. What is the nature of this creativity and innovation and what are its sources? Why is India doing well on some (less conventional) indicators of creativity but worse on more conventional measures?

One hypothesis that reconciles this discrepancy is that the nature of innovation has changed. As companies move away from having one large research and development (R&D) centre in their home country to a more distributed global model, India
is emerging as a global innovation hub. Multinational corporations have established more than 600 captive R&D centres across India. These include not only centres for information technology firms such as Google and Microsoft which are drawn to India’s specialised knowledge, but also engineering firms such as General Electric and Philips, and increasingly pharmaceutical firms. The reason why India is not ‘visible’ as the source of this R&D is that these India-based R&D centres are part of an intra-firm R&D supply chain that is visible only to other business units of the firm.

India’s emergence as an important R&D hub for many leading global firms stems from the increased availability of high-quality talent, both within India as well as the greater willingness of overseas Indians to move back to India if the re-entry mechanism is a cutting-edge R&D centre of a leading company.

While much of India’s R&D is for products serving the global market, there is also a burgeoning branch of innovation focused on modifying global research to Indian conditions. India’s agriculture is a good example.

With the productivity gains of the Green Revolution technologies waning and increasing stress on soils and water, Indian farmers are desperate for new technologies. But the travails of India’s agricultural universities and the virtual collapse of the public sector extension system mean that, unlike in the 1960s and 1970s, farmers have to look to the private sector. The most significant productivity improvements in the performance of the agricultural sector have come from yield increases brought about by new production technologies, with Bt transgenics in cotton and single-cross hybrids in maize the most visible examples.

These advances occurred despite weak support from the Indian state and fierce opposition from Indian non-government organisations (mostly urban).

However, conventional state-led entities like the Indian Council of Agricultural Research and agricultural universities are playing a much weaker role. Public research and extension systems are increasingly unable to address farmers’ needs. Instead, creative responses come from the private sector. Both multinational corporations and a host of local entrepreneurs respond to farmers seeking solutions. One example is using cell phones to offer illiterate farmers farm advisory services.

The poor quality of public services is leading to a range of delivery-model innovations. In drinking water, for instance, in place of a traditional water utility with complex capital-intensive infrastructure such as pipelines, metering and billing systems, attempts are being made to meet the needs of people in India’s villages using ‘micro-utilities’, often operating as franchise models. These distribute water over short distances and above ground where quality is easily monitored and drinking water separated from water for other household uses.

There are several forces shaping creativity and innovation in contemporary India. First, the sheer heterogeneity and diversity of Indian society makes it a fertile ground for ideas and creativity.

A second powerful force is demographic: the combination of a huge population, half of which is under 25; the entry of newly empowered socially marginalised communities into the mainstream of Indian economic, social and political life; and dramatic changes in the aspirations of India’s young, empowered by new media technologies.

The third driver is rapid changes in technology. This is allowing even those Indians with modest resources to leapfrog technologies by leveraging free open-source software such as Skype, cloud computing and cloud-based office tools. The ubiquity of cell-phone ownership means that it has emerged as one of most egalitarian technologies, sparking creative, low-cost solutions for a range of challenges India faces.

Last but not least is the Indian state. Regrettably, its poor performance puts greater pressure for ideas and innovation on issues that it should be addressing but is unwilling or unable to do so. Where the state retains its monopolies—in defence, security, land allocation, urban utilities and mining—there is considerably less innovation unless new entities are created outside the traditional government apparatus (exemplified by the recent success of the Delhi Metro and possibly the Unique ID project).

Sadly, one potential source of new ideas and innovation—universities—is severely underperforming. Innovations come from small, purposeful research centres, narrowly focused institutions and think tanks, but rarely from the hundreds of Indian universities.

Will the ideas, creativity and innovation emanating from India’s robust private sector and civil society translate into organisations capable of transformative action of sufficient scale to compensate for the manifold weaknesses of the Indian state? Or will the absence of complementary capabilities and action by the Indian state drag down the private sector and the burgeoning numbers of social entrepreneurs as well? That might well be the central question around which India’s future will hinge.
Rethinking science education: creating tomorrow’s researchers

K. P. MOHANAN

THE 21st century seems to have brought to India a new optimism, a confidence that it can become a global economic superpower alongside the US and China, and an eagerness to achieve this as quickly as possible. Government agencies in control of funds are aware that an important prerequisite to economic growth is innovation and leadership in science and technology. They are also aware that India has sufficient human resources to be channelled into knowledge production. Finally, they are aware that the key to becoming world leaders in science and technology lies in a drastic transformation in education. The time is ripe, then, to rethink and transform science education in India.

At present, there are three key features of the Indian scene that are highly valued in the field of science education. First, unlike many funding agencies, the Indian government recognises the value of pure science, without unduly worrying about its immediate application and the potential for short-term economic benefits. Second, it is aware that scientific talent should also be sought in rural and economically disadvantaged sections of Indian society. Third, many education circles are abuzz with discussions of the ‘scientific temper’—the spirit of rational inquiry in the pursuit of science. The Indian constitution explicitly states that Indian citizens have a responsibility to acquire the scientific temper as a prerequisite to collective nation building.

About five years ago, the government of India set up five Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research (IISERs)—at Bhopal, Kolkata, Mohali, Pune and Thiruvananthapuram—with a specific brief: to attract scientific talent from among the youth and to nurture them to become world-class researchers in science. The integrated five-year bachelor’s and master’s program at these institutions, along with the PhD program, is designed to guide students along the research path right from the beginning of their undergraduate education.

Despite the welcome attention, there are two major challenges with this approach. First, knowing how to select students with the potential to make important contributions to the growth of science. And second, implementing the kind of education that will develop and strengthen such potential, so that a significant subset of those students will become genuine scientific researchers.

The most difficult problem in identifying scientific talent is the enormous number of potential applicants to science programs. Currently, eligibility for application to the IISERs is determined by a ‘merit list’ consolidated from three channels: a joint entrance examination conducted by the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs); a test conducted by Kishore Vaigyanik Protsahan Yojana, a national scheme for encouraging scientific talent; and performance in the 12th-grade board examinations. But gathering a merit list from these channels has its own drawbacks. In particular, selection is based primarily on tests that assess students’ familiarity with knowledge concepts and their ability to apply these concepts to standard textbook scenarios. Consequently, scientific talent is equated with doing well in tests, while the qualities of mind needed for scientific research are not assessed. This process emits the wrong signals to society regarding the nature of scientific research and students are attracted who may not have the appropriate aptitude. It discourages and filters out students whose strengths may not lie with meaningless memorisation and mechanical application, but whose potential for scientific research would emerge if they were exposed to the excitement of scientific inquiry.

In addition to these limitations, the IIT joint entrance examination poses a problem insofar as it relies on the multiple-choice-question format, which students must complete at high speed. This effectively discourages the exercise, and therefore the assessment, of thinking abilities and
Students using the Akash computer tablet, the world's cheapest computer, at a lecture hall in New Delhi in October 2011.

creativity. Furthermore, the content’s unrealistically high difficulty level, combined with the odds of scoring well through trained guessing, has resulted in the mushrooming of ‘coaching factories’ that train students to do well in these exams without either understanding the content or possessing scientific ability.

There have been many voices—from leaders in industry, politicians and even from among IIT faculty and alumni—expressing concern about the serious flaws of these tests and the mind-numbing effects of their preparation for students. The government is aware of the problems, yet the tests continue without any change. One solution is to design entrance exams that test the students’ thinking ability and potential to develop scientific inquiry abilities. For example, enhanced multiple-choice questions could be designed, which require students to spend longer thinking about each question and where wrong answers are penalised. Although detailed critiques of the current entrance tests do exist, and alternatives developed, authorities are yet to take up these options.

The second challenge is educating students in such a way that a significant number develop into high-calibre scientists. Three key areas call for special attention.

First, introducing students to scientific inquiry—and to rational inquiry in general—from the beginning of their undergraduate education and helping them develop the capacity for independent inquiry. This ability would then serve as the foundation for developing research skills during graduate studies, and for thinking and decision making in their professional and personal lives.

The spirit of scientific inquiry (‘the scientific temper’) would be a natural outcome of the pursuit of these abilities.

Second, developing the capacity for scientific inquiry must be trans-disciplinary—it must focus on those aspects of (scientific) inquiry that are shared across disciplinary boundaries.

Third, India must focus on countering the growing trend of fragmentation in education and research, promote multidisciplinary research and facilitate the productive cross-pollination of ideas that transcend disciplinary boundaries. This requires the design of a curriculum embedded in an integrated transdisciplinary perspective of (scientific) knowledge and inquiry. This in turn calls for an infrastructure of human knowledge that facilitates transdisciplinary connections and the integration of knowledge across...
The complex web of quadrilateral strategic relations

LOUISE MERRINGTON

Although the disputed border between China and India is often highlighted as the major sticking point in Sino–Indian relations, in reality it has remained relatively peaceful since the end of the 1962 war, and the potential for overt military conflict in the region remains minimal. Of much greater concern is the strategic quadrilateral relationship in South Asia involving China, India, the United States and Pakistan. It has both regional and wider implications.

At the heart of this matter is the India–Pakistan conflict over Kashmir, and continuing US involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The relationships between these four actors are extremely complex. China’s support for Pakistan in its conflict with India is a serious and ongoing source of tension in the Sino–Indian relationship, while the US relationship with Pakistan is looking increasingly fraught even as its relationship with India improves in the wake of the 2008 civilian nuclear deal. Growing closeness between India and the US has caused some concern in China about the possibility that the US may be establishing a policy of containment or encirclement, and this concern in turn affects China’s relationship with both the US and India. Understanding this complex web of relationships is key to understanding the issues which are at the heart of China–India relations and which affect markedly how these two countries interact in the region.

China sees its South Asian interests as firmly linked with Pakistan, a stance which is problematic not only for the Sino–Indian relationship—due to the ongoing India–Pakistan conflict—but also for the China–US relationship because of significant US investment in Pakistan. So although US relationships with India and Pakistan are more likely the result of America pursuing its national interests than an overt attempt to contain China, the region’s volatility and its location in China’s traditional strategic backyard mean that any US attempt to befriend India or other South and Southeast Asian countries is often viewed with suspicion by the Chinese.

Both the Indian and Chinese bilateral relationships with the US feed into the India–China–Pakistan–US strategic relationship in South Asia, and consequently affect the China–India relationship. For example, it has been argued that good relations between India and the US, and also between India and China, may have a positive impact on the Pakistan issue, because the US and China are really the only countries which can exert influence over Pakistan. But all this depends on US and Chinese aims in Pakistan and the wider region. For instance, the US has turned a blind
eye to Pakistani assistance being channelled to terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attacks) because of Washington’s agenda in Afghanistan, while China has long held its close relationship with Pakistan as integral to its interactions in South Asia, and worries that US interests there typify a greater encirclement strategy. In addition, such a volatile region can often give rise to unexpected variables. The most recent of these was the assassination of Osama bin Laden on 2 May 2011, which, although it provided a decisive boost for the US, may yet have longer-term problematic consequences. The deteriorating US–Pakistan relationship could have implications for the entire region, including the possibility that Pakistan could move even closer to China.

Pakistan is the issue which appears time and again at the heart of strategic politics in South Asia, and it is arguably Pakistan—even more than Afghanistan—which holds the key to stability in the region. The US and India have specific bilateral issues to resolve, but while Pakistan and Afghanistan remain unstable and at risk of collapse, providing a haven for terrorist groups (particularly as these pose a real and immediate threat to India), it will be difficult for the Indo–US relationship to take any great leaps forward.

MATTERS are also complicated by the complex relationship China has with both the US and India. This issue not only makes the Indo–US relationship more difficult by potentially leading the US to consider strategies of encirclement—to which India will never be party, despite some American beliefs to the contrary—but also directly plays a major role in the issue of instability in Pakistan and the India–Pakistan relationship through the Sino–Pakistani partnership.

Pakistan is increasingly becoming the problem child of South Asia. In some ways China’s relationship with Pakistan is similar to its relationship with North Korea, though the former is more solid. And although China will not step away from its relationship with Pakistan, it is increasingly reluctant to get trapped in the quagmire of South Asian politics, and Kashmir in particular, as its focus is increasingly on global issues, territorial disputes in the South China Sea and its own domestic problems.

What is becoming increasingly clear is just how closely the Sino–Indian relationship is linked to India–Pakistan tensions, and how, even if the Sino–Indian border dispute were to be resolved, the full normalisation of relations would be unlikely to occur while Kashmir remains an issue. The Kashmir dispute is arguably at the heart of South Asia’s problems, and until it is resolved India’s relations with its regional neighbours, including China, will suffer. It will also hinder India’s development, insofar as Delhi focuses on Kashmir and other security issues in the immediate region, rather than infrastructure, alleviating poverty and other domestic problems, or its trade and diplomatic linkages with the rest of the world. But India often seems to view the India–Pakistan and India–China relationships as separate issues, connected only by China’s support for India’s enemy, rather than as a strategic triangle. China, meanwhile, is better recognising the interdependence of the relationships. Until the interconnectedness of the wider US–India–China–Pakistan relationship is fully acknowledged and acted upon, tensions in the region are likely to remain high.
The foreign policy of an emerging power

STEPHEN P. COHEN

HE practice of, and thinking about, Indian foreign policy has changed quite significantly over the past few decades. In the 1970s the study of Indian foreign policy was a largely inconsequential branch of what Robert Kaplan called ‘Cold War area studies’. At this point, people who considered themselves optimists about the outcome of the Cold War were studying Russian, pessimists were studying Chinese, and ‘the fools’ were studying Hindi or Urdu.

This situation has changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War. Thinking extends beyond bipolarity, beyond containment, and beyond India as a Soviet ally. Following its economic reforms and increasing confidence, India is now an independent actor.

Two important perspectives on thinking about Indian foreign policy are still helpful after the end of the Cold War. The first is the idea that Indian foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. While this is an exaggeration, it is largely true. Regional issues are important and those without the language skills to detect them will struggle to notice some of the deep interconnections between other parts of South Asia and nearby regions and Delhi’s policies.

The second is Indian nuclear proliferation. The question of nuclear non-proliferation is almost as important now as it was during the Cold War. A great many people attracted into thinking about Indian foreign policy towards the end of the Cold War were worried about Indian nuclear proliferation. These worries have dissipated to some extent, but India remains a nuclear power and this fact underpins much debate about Indian foreign policy.

Take, for example, the relationship between India and Pakistan. The existence of nuclear weapons makes it easy to avoid war but hard to bring about peace. At present there is little incentive for normalcy, let alone peace. A great many Indians see Pakistan as an annoying nuisance that they would like to see blow away, but with nuclear weapons, and terrorists, that is not going to happen.

One of the key factors in this relationship is the decline of Pakistan. Pakistan will remain in its present state of crisis for some time. How India manages this situation will be much more pivotal than how America manages it. But it will be hard for India to manage a relationship with a failing Pakistan, especially if India continues to go from strength to strength. Of course, with the dominance of its army, it will always be hard for Pakistan to manage its relationship with India. Envy and old rivalries still shape the relationship and now nuclear weapons make both parties nervous about committing even the slightest miscalculation.

Globally, the big question is whether a more modern, developed India, with more weapons and self-confidence, will be an assertive India, and in what way it will be assertive. To date, a central theme in Indian foreign policy has been restraint. But when the Indians achieve a greater degree of capability it is unclear whether and how they will use that capability. While India may have been restrained militarily in the past, might this change if they start to feel they can do things militarily and get away with it?

Pakistan is deeply concerned about Indian military escalation and perceived aggression. Much of this aggression is in the eye of the beholder but the future of Indian policymakers’ attitudes to military action is as much up in the air as is that of Chinese policymakers. There is a large question mark over how emerging powers will behave once they have the resources to throw their political weight around. Will they behave the way the US has behaved until recently? Will they be stabilisers in the international system? Will they follow the rules of the game? Will they try to disrupt it?

India by and large is a status quo power. But countries do change and emotions, which run high in India, especially when it comes to Pakistan, figure prominently in foreign policy. And with nuclear weapons, there is always the chance that an accident will occur that upsets all calculations of stability.
In India today there is an active debate on whether the country’s trend economic growth rate is rising. Some continue to be bearish on growth prospects, regarding each slowdown as revealing the true lower potential growth rate. But traditional factors determining growth—including labour, finance, productivity and demand—throw more light on the issue.

First, consider labour. Youthful entrants to the labour force are expected to top 12 million per year over the next five years. Absorbing these workers alone would require a 10 per cent growth rate with employment elasticity of 0.25. In addition, segments of the 300 million or so Indians living below the poverty line will have to transfer to higher-productivity employment. By way of comparison, the unemployment impact of the global financial crisis in economically advanced countries only affected 22.5 million workers. Although it is difficult to obtain one precise number, The Economist recently estimated India’s unemployment rate to be 10.8 per cent in 2010, while the National Sample Survey round of 2009–10 shows it to be over 20 per cent for those with a degree or diploma.

Growth can facilitate equity if both jobs and wages rise—but this requires the creation of large numbers of higher-productivity jobs. Inclusive growth, which is the current policy objective, should be understood not as redistribution from a productive section to the rest, but as creating the right conditions for the masses to contribute to and participate in growth. Successes with conditional cash transfers in Brazil suggest that subsidising activities which improve human capital is a good way of providing incentives for the very poor and compensating for market failures that exclude them. Improving infrastructure and public-service delivery increases the rewards of hard work. Further developing technology—such as mobile phones—that is frequently used by the poor has great potential. With such initiatives, generic labour resources have high potential for growth.

Second, consider finances. Savings have risen structurally in India—a promising sign, since other rapidly growing Asian economies generally had high savings rates. This is consistent with research showing that lagged savings lead growth. India’s capital availability is roughly 40 per cent of GDP, derived from a savings-to-GDP ratio of between 36 per cent and 32 per cent and a ‘safe’ current account deficit of between 2 per cent and 4 per cent of GDP. Given India’s incremental capital output ratio (ICOR, a measure of how efficiently these investable funds are used in production) of four, we should expect a 10 per cent rate of growth, give or take.

Infrastructure spending is expected to rise from 6 per cent to 9–12 per cent of GDP, as US$1 trillion is expected to be spent over the next five years. The funds will come from a combination of domestic savings, government budgetary support, and foreign investment. If the current account deficit is about 3 per cent only one-quarter of this total amount, or around US$250 billion, can come from foreign savings. This is a large absolute amount, creating many earning opportunities for capital from abroad. But the bulk still has to come from domestic resources, so better financial intermediation of domestic savings is also required.

Indian entrepreneurs have shown that they can become competitive, given the opportunity. The potential availability of labour, finance and productivity implies that aggregate supply is able to expand in the longer run. Diversity in sources of growth, a demographic advantage, network effects, the crossing of a threshold of growth, cautious liberalisation and the strengthening of institutions all suggest that India has entered a robust catch-up growth phase.

Each of these elements can be used to derive an assessment of potential growth. Underestimating India’s potential could lead to excessive monetary–fiscal tightening, and the
Economic reform from the bottom up

STIMULATING AGRICULTURE

MADHU PURNIMA KISHWAR

‘DEVELOPMENT’ and ‘underdevelopment’ are politically loaded terms. Most ‘underdeveloped’ societies have a colonial past in which their people and resources were economically exploited and their social, cultural and political institutions were wrecked. These terms are designed to create amnesia about the politics of colonialism and convince people in these societies that their poverty is due to their own ‘backwardness’. Whenever we see people trapped in poverty, instead of seeing them as objects of charity it is best to find out who is using what power to prevent people from earning a dignified living.

An important reason for the continuity of wide-scale poverty despite the growing wealth of the Indian elite is that India’s economic reforms have been confined to the corporate sector, which employs no more than 3 per cent of the country’s working population, compared to the 92 per cent of workers in the unorganised or informal sectors. The vast majority remain poor because they are the victims of bureaucratic controls. They include farmers, who yield enough crops to make the country self-sufficient, and whose produce—wheat, basmati rice, long staple cotton, and a whole range of exotic fruits and spices—has ready buyers in the national and international markets; and traditional craftsmen and artisans, including iron, gold, a range of metal workers, and those who make exquisite art objects and icons.

Poverty in the self-organised sectors continues due to the unwillingness of successive governments to incorporate these workers into the national agenda of economic reforms, as they yield enormous bribes and kickbacks. But just as large sections of India’s corporate sector have become globally competitive within the last 15 years of liberalisation, those in India’s informal sectors also have the capacity to become generators of wealth if the government would stop creating needless hurdles and siphoning off a good part of workers’ incomes through bribes.

While the Indian corporate sector was not quite ready for liberalisation, farmers’ organisations in India have been fighting since the 1970s to get rid of statist controls. But the government has resisted economic reform in the farm sector and continues its war against Indian farmers through many different means.

For example, the colonial-minded Land Acquisition Act has uprooted 60 million farmers since independence and is yet to be repealed. Recently proposed reforms retain the colonial principle of eminent domain and do not give farmers the right to decide...
whether or not they want to sell their land. This enables land sharks to buy agricultural land at low prices.

Further, the draconian Essential Commodities Act enables the government to impose restrictions on farmers accessing national and international markets through a ban on interstate movement of food grains, and by obstructing private-sector purchases of food grains through direct and indirect means. The unrealistically high minimum export price (mEP) for farm produce makes Indian farmers internationally uncompetitive. For example, the Indian government fixed the mEP for onions at US$475 per tonne in 2011, while Pakistan and China were exporting at US$225–250 per tonne.

Farmers also face restrictions on processing produce; compulsory levies on sugar and rice (up to 75 per cent in some states); low investment in irrigation, which leads to frequent crop failures; little effort to prevent floods which destroy not only crops but also homes and assets; poor road connections and access to markets; inadequate power supply; an absence of crop insurance; poor rural infrastructure; and bureaucratic hurdles in setting up agro-processing industries.

Not surprisingly, millions are abandoning farming and migrating to cities as economic refugees. But property and land prices are so artificially inflated due to the government’s land monopoly that almost all of them end up living in slums as illegal encroachers—even while paying disproportionately high rents and protection money. Most are at the bottom of the employment ladder because the traditional skills they carry are not valued in the modern economy. The few who try to access the world of enterprise find the entry points blocked by statist controls. For example, street vending and cycle rickshaw-pulling attract impoverished migrants because they offer relatively greater opportunity for upward mobility than menial jobs. But city-government licensing policies make it virtually impossible for these workers to operate legally, and as a result they become easy victims of extortionist mafias.

Similarly, millions of highly skilled craftspeople, artisans and performing artists are abandoning their traditional occupations for unskilled, low-paying occupations. This process began during British colonial rule as part of a deliberate policy to de-industrialise India and create a market for British goods. It has continued unabated in independent India. To add insult to injury, all these productive and highly skilled social and economic groups are also termed ‘backward’ or India’s ‘most-backward castes’, with the government reserving small quotas for them in educational institutions and government jobs as a
pretence at affirmative action.

So how should the government act to help these unorganised sectors?

First, farmers do not need free food—they need remunerative prices for their crops. This can happen only if farmers have free access to national and international markets. The government must also provide assured irrigation and a regular power supply to protect against crop losses and to increase productivity. Quality seeds, pesticides and other inputs are also badly needed—currently almost all improvements in seeds and farm technology come from the private sector. Further, farmers need improved connections to urban centres, better storage facilities for their crops, and affordable credit and crop insurance.

Similarly, the poverty of India's traditional artisans and technologists cannot be eradicated by treating them as ‘backward,’ while roping them into government jobs as clerks and peons as a panacea. They need access to national and international markets without exploitative intermediaries. In addition, they should be welcomed to appropriate institutions of higher learning such as textile engineering, departments of metallurgy and schools of architecture, as well as in institutions for training artists and performers—both as teachers and students—so that they are able to build on their traditional skills.

The poor need no subsidies, no special concessions. All they need is freedom from needless bureaucratic controls that prevent them from earning a dignified living through their own entrepreneurialism and productive capacity. As Mahatma Gandhi said: ‘The pressure from the top crushes those at the bottom. All that is necessary is to get off their backs.’

KAMA MACLEAN

A T THE Sydney Cricket Ground on 5 January 2012, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard spoke confidently about the upswing in Australia–India relations—which had been strained since the violent attacks on Indian students in 2009—citing cricket as the ‘common language’ of the relationship. In the closing days of 2011, Gillard had also helped to remove an important irritant in the bilateral relationship as she championed and pushed through a change to Australian Labor Party policy, which had precluded the sale of uranium to India.

Despite these developments, there is an urgent need to reimagine the Australia–India relationship, emphasising mutual exchange and collaboration as the means of engagement. The economy of ideas—of education, and of research and development—holds enormous potential here.

Australia’s tertiary sector is the ideal place to begin rebuilding relations. Students from India have been central to the Australian higher education system in recent years, and a corrective measure is needed to rebuild confidence following the 2009 student-safety crisis. Education policy within Australia will also be crucial in positioning the country to cope with a post-resource economy, one in which Asia’s emerging powers—China and India—are projected to play a major, if not dominant, role.

In preparing Australian graduates to function in a different world order, Asia literacy programs need to be present in curricula from the earliest stages of schooling. So far there has been a considerable amount of public investment injected into the study of China at a number of levels. In the tertiary sector, the federal government pledged A$53 million (US$55 million) to the Australian National University’s Centre on China in the World in 2010, while the University of Sydney is seeking A$10 million (US$10.38 million) for a centre of its own. By comparison, the Rudd government pledged A$8 million (US$8.3 million) in 2008 to the University of Melbourne’s Australia India Institute. But these federal funds—representing a fraction of those invested in the study of China—will expire in late 2012. And while Australian scholars maintain the need for greater study of Asian languages in general, India is often neglected because of the supposition that ‘English is enough’ to get by in India.

This is not to suggest that Australia should choose between the two Asian superpowers—India and China—but simply that it should diversify its Asia strategy. Educational trends are fuelled by contemporary economic imperatives, so China’s current
importance to the Australian economy is to a great degree determining choices available to Australian students. But according to several projections, India will have become a global economic powerhouse by 2020, and contemporary directions in education therefore need to be better aligned with this projected future. Both federal and state governments need to diversify their investments in Australia's Asian future, directing resources toward the study and teaching of India nationwide.

But while India consistently demonstrated impressive annual growth in the past decade, a 2002 inquiry into the state of Asian studies in Australia, Maximising Australia's Asia Knowledge, noted that the study of India in Australian tertiary institutions was declining. Little has been done to reverse this trend, and the decline is still continuing. A 1998 Australian Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade report subtitled ‘Commonwealth, common language, cricket and beyond’ also proffered an impressive list of recommendations aimed at extending bilateral relations. But the stalled implementation of many of these, combined with the overemphasis on others—in particular, tapping the market for Indian students but failing to regulate the environment in which this was done—has left an unpleasant legacy.

While there is ample evidence that the trade relationship has been remarkably resilient to the fluctuations in diplomatic ties in the past, a failure to conduct relations with greater sensitivity will jeopardise Australian and Indian long-term interests. The ability to cooperate over critical global issues in the coming decades—such as security and environmental crises like global warming in the Indian Ocean region—will be of great importance. For too long, politicians have fallen for the much-repeated ‘mantra’ of shared experiences—like Commonwealth and cricket—in the face of disengagement. Citing cricket as the language of bilateral relations simply undermines the message that Australians need to come to terms with a dynamic and resurgent India. The opportunities represented by India’s growth need to be negotiated against its particularly paradoxical predicament: the world's largest democracy, home to a massive middle class with growing spending power, alongside a disconcertingly large underclass, nestled in a relatively unstable region. All this demands knowledge of India's glorious historical, political and social complexities. A failure to appreciate India has so far wasted an extraordinary potential based on so many commonalities—most notably that of democracy.
In the whole spectrum of India’s political experience, one thing that stands out is the wonder of Indian democracy.

Three aspects of Indian democracy cause theoretical surprise and one generates concern.

First, the stability of Indian democracy is surprising, given that India is a low-income economy. Per capita income remains at US$1200 per annum, despite 30 years of fairly rapid economic growth. This curious quality of India’s experience has defied the traditional theory of democracy, a theory which linked democratic systems with high levels of income. Democracies simply have not lasted that long in low-income societies.

Second, Indian democracy operates amidst radical ethnic and religious diversity. This is surprising given that, as John Stuart Mill first noted, a radically diverse country would seem incapable of democracy because there is no fellow feeling among its constituents. By this he meant both that diversity would inhibit the democratic process and prevent consensus policymaking, and that democracy required nationalism that could not emerge in the context of a fragmented polity. Curiously, India is now beginning to develop a reasonably coherent national identity. This is not to say that diversity is giving way to homogeneity; nationalism is on the rise despite ongoing diversity on ethnic, religious and cultural levels. Both subnationalism and nationalism coexist.

One response from scholars, in particular Arend Lijphart, has been to suggest that radical ethno-religious diversity does not inhibit the emergence and sustenance of democracy, so long as a specific kind of democracy is developed. This type of democracy is referred to as consociational democracy. It is characterised by guaranteed group representation and power-sharing arrangements. However, it is clear to students of Indian democracy that India is not a consociational democracy, though Lijphart has argued otherwise.

A part of the curious puzzle is why India’s diversity has not led to greater fragmentation over the past half-century. During the lifetime of Indian democracy there have only been four secession movements. In 1989–90, the worst year for secessionism, only 3.5
per cent of Indians were in areas of India that recorded high levels of pro-secession feeling.

Indians have developed the ability to hold two or three identities simultaneously. National identity has not swamped regional or subnational identity. The Indian experience here is similar to that of Belgium, Canada and Spain. This dualism of identity is encompassed in the concept of state-nation (as opposed to nation-state) which has emerged out of the scholarship of Indian political science. As Alfred Stepan and Juan J. Linz have recently argued, unlike nation-states, state-nations do not seek to erase regional linguistic and religious identities or seek a coherent, unitary national identity. State-nations both recognise diversities and explicitly nurture larger polity-level loyalties.

The third surprise is the durability of Indian democracy in an environment with entrenched inequalities, notably those of caste and gender. One of the guiding principles of democracy is political equality. How then can democracy function in such an extremely unequal setting as India? Here, as with India’s low-income democracy, the Indian case study has led to improvements and refinements in democratic theory.

Finally, an issue that causes both theoretical and empirical concern is the quality of Indian democracy. Certainly the institutional framework of democracy, including the voting mechanism, has survived in India for 60 years, but is this enough to consider India a vibrant democracy? What about what happens between elections? How accountable is the government to its citizens?

At the level of ‘quality of democracy’, India has performed poorly. In particular, it has not delivered public services to its poor, who still account for up to 25–30 per cent of Indian society. While India has politically empowered its poor through the vote, it has done very little for their education and health. Recently the middle class has also come out to complain that the government lacks accountability between elections. The middle class is economically empowered, but feels politically marginalised.

The performance of Indian democracy between elections has not received much attention from scholars, as the literature on the quality of democracy is newer and underdeveloped. As this area of research expands, India will play a crucial role as a source of empirical materials.

A BALANCED LEGACY

Citizenship and the resilience of democracy

ORNIT SHANI

India’s founding leaders were determined to create a democratic state when the country became independent in 1947, but becoming and remaining a democracy was by no means inevitable. The difficulties were daunting: the mass killings and violence unleashed by the subcontinent’s partition, widespread illiteracy, dire poverty, and the country’s profound religious, ethnic and social diversity. How, in such adverse circumstances, were democratic citizenship and practices institutionalised in India? And how has India’s emerging framework for membership in the nation, the essence of citizenship, enabled the endurance of its democratic polity?

Key to the making and endurance of democratic nationhood in India were the evolving conceptions of the relationship between the state and its would-be citizens in the process of constitution-making and institution-building. In practice, these relations function through the concept and institution of citizenship, which defines the terms of engagement between individuals, social groups and the state. It forms the basis for attaining membership and a sense of belonging in the social body and the state, as well as delimiting and excluding people from membership in the nation.

To a considerable extent, it is because different conceptions and practices of citizenship were articulated and could coexist within India’s constitutional framework that India’s constitution and democracy struck roots and endured against
the odds. The constitution’s drafters, in the long process of its creation, gave enough space for different, even contradictory, views of the relations between the state and its citizens to exist, compete and legitimately make counter-claims of the state, while still remaining members of a unitary nation. Indeed, there are four dominant and competing conceptions of citizenship in India, representing different views on the nature of relations and resource allocation between the state and various social groups. These are the liberal, republican, ethno-nationalist and non-statist Gandhian conceptions.

The liberal conception of citizenship views the individual as the bearer of a package of rights, designed to protect personal liberties. Individual freedom is ensured by minimum external interference, in particular from the state. The republican conception of citizenship is based on the notion of a pre-existing common good. Republican citizenship emphasises the civic virtue of citizens as active participants with a sense of public rather than individual responsibility. The ethno-nationalist conception of citizenship views membership in the nation-state as being defined, above all, by a ‘descent’ group which can be based on blood ties, religion, or on cultural or linguistic affiliation. In these three conventional conceptions, citizenship is defined from the viewpoint of the state, and becomes an end in the making of the state.

In India, it is also possible to distinguish a fourth, and paradigmatically different, conception of citizenship, identified as ‘non-statist citizenship.’ Its ideational and institutional basis is derived from Mahatma Gandhi. Citizenship, in this view, implies a notion of membership of the state in the society (rather than membership in the state). This should make the state subservient to society, guaranteeing that power is invested in the people. The state is viewed above all as a coercive entity, owing its very existence to violence. To ensure genuine self-government, minimal interaction and control by the state is desired. In this conception the individual plays a critical role in the pursuit of true self-rule. In Gandhi’s notion of the self, true freedom is derived from the self-disciplined, self-realised individual, liberated from attitudes of exclusivity, absolved from any particularistic identity. The spatial structure underlying the relationship between the individual and the state is composed of an ‘oceanic circle’ of villages, referring to a social order with ever-widening, non-hierarchical and self-sustained autonomous villages. At the centre of this structure is the individual who is prepared to defend his village and the next. This, according to Gandhi, is the road to true democratic self-rule. And true democracy is what promotes the welfare of the people and brings uplift for all (Gandhi called it sarvodaya). The notion of a harmonised caste-based social and moral order that created unity of cultural diversity formed part of Gandhi’s vision of ‘perfect democracy.’ For Gandhi, the citizen’s duties, particularly the duty to dissent in the face of injustice, took precedence over individual rights, and were primarily tied to non-violence as a core value.

For Gandhi, the citizen’s duties, particularly the duty to dissent in the face of injustice, took precedence over individual rights, and were primarily tied to non-violence as a core value.
caste ‘upliftment’ solely within the Hindu framework of the moral social order. Caste conflicts can challenge an ethno-Hindu conception of the nation and therefore impede Hindu ethno-nationalism. It was chiefly Gandhi’s idea of non-statist citizenship that guaranteed the dynamics of a continuing interplay and shifting balance between the four conceptions of citizenship, and ensured that Indian citizenship was never fully dominated—at least not for long—by any one conception of citizenship.

In effect the evolving constitutional framework, informed by different conceptions of citizenship, allowed for multiple social conflicts and different notions of belonging to coexist within the Indian polity. This citizenship framework also allowed for a non-rigid adjudication on matters of the state and its relations to the various social identities of its human constituencies. The nature of the interconnections between the four competing conceptions of citizenship created a dynamic wherein an ongoing interplay and shifting balance between these conceptions resulted in the sustainability of some conflicts while excluding other more threatening divisions. This dynamic has ensured the resilience of India’s democracy.

ORTH EAST India is populated by diverse ethnic groups, many of which are classified as Scheduled Tribes with historical ties to Myanmar, China and other locales outside India. Since India’s independence in 1947, citizens and commentators have variously viewed the northeast frontier as a secessionist badland, the front line between India and hostile neighbours, a colourful slab of exotica and a curious geographic appendage. But in the last decade-and-a-half a series of peace agreements, state-led development projects and increased migration flows out of the frontier have altered the dynamics between the Indian heartland and the northeast. These changes offer key insights into changes taking place in contemporary India.

The Indian government plans to transform the northeast from a frontier to a corridor linking India to the rest of Asia. The North Eastern Region Vision 2020 which Prime Minister Manmohan Singh launched in 2008 promises to increase the region’s connections and create employment, encourage private investment, increase border trade and promote tourism. At its heart, Vision 2020 seeks to use the region’s natural resources and hydro-power potential, and create an hospitable climate for investment and border trade. This has major consequences for the environment in the frontier region as natural resources that were previously difficult to reach have become more accessible. The rapid changes taking place include mega hydro-power projects in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Sikkim, and mining in Assam (coal), Meghalaya (coal, limestone and uranium) and Nagaland (coal). There is deforestation throughout the region, but especially in Assam, Meghalaya and Nagaland, and other damage from highway construction, bio-prospecting, erosion and flooding. The resulting environmental degradation has led to local-level activism, an occurrence which it is tempting to read through a ‘state-versus-frontier’ or ‘state-versus-ethnic-minority’ rubric. The situation poses complex dilemmas for environmentalists and external activists seeking to unproblematically equate ethnic minority status with a deeper ecological sensibility and anti-development worldview, and further complicates the way ethnic minorities have related to the Indian state and ideas of nation-building.

Internal migration from the northeast to Indian cities has also dramatically increased over the past five years. Given that rejecting India is an important part of tribal identity in the frontier, shaped by decades of secessionist politics and occupation by Indian military and paramilitary
forces, the attraction of Indian cities for ethnic minorities deserves closer attention. There are six main push and pull factors spurring migration from the frontier: refuge from conflict, better livelihood opportunities, changing aspirations, changing attitudes toward India, aggressive labour recruitment and improved transport connections.

Equally compelling are the labour markets in cities such as Bengaluru, Delhi and Hyderabad. In places like Delhi, attempts to transform the city are driven by the desire to fashion a ‘global city’, and key to this desire is the creation of exclusionary spaces: gated neighbourhoods, restricted-entry shopping malls and restricted-entry parks which marginalise poor, working class and migrant communities. The focus on exclusionary spaces does not take into account the ways these spaces offer inclusion in the city for other marginal communities, especially tribal migrants. Tribal migrants covet the employment opportunities in these neo-liberal capital spaces, and employers in these spaces desire tribal labour. The majority of migrants find work in shopping malls, spas, restaurants and call centres, where employers desire tribal labour for its de-nationalised aesthetic—its ‘un-Indianness’.

It is not just ‘being tribal’ that matters in the heartland cities, but challenging what being tribal means in contemporary India. Public representations of tribal people from the northeast continue to be mired in colonial anthropology. The stereotype of the exotic tribal people from the pure and unspoiled remote hill country persists. But tribal people are linked to global networks in ways that bypass the rest of India, including the influences of global Christianity, knowledge of Korean and other East Asian popular cultures, adoption of East Asian fashion and hairstyles (particularly Korean and Japanese), and a rejection of archetypal Indian pastimes in favour of basketball, skateboarding and graffiti art. These components equip tribal migrants with a feeling of sophistication that is at odds with the ways they are viewed by mainstream Indian society.

The increased connections between the frontier and the heartland also reveal ignored dynamics of racism within India. Racism underpins the ways the frontier itself is governed, justifying military occupation, and the ways that tribals experience urban India as migrants, through harassment, discrimination and violence. Tribal people are targets of sexual violence, face severe discrimination in urban housing markets, and are harassed in their everyday encounters in India’s cities.

In the standard narrative, racism is something that foreigners do to Indians, not something of which Indians themselves are capable. The 2001 Bradford riots in the UK and

Naga dancers prepare to present a traditional dance at a festival in Agartala. The stereotype of exotic tribal people from the unspoilt hill country persists.
violent attacks on Indian students in the US and Australia were widely covered in the Indian media and abroad. Receiving less coverage, but certainly not completely neglected, are the abuses against Indian domestic workers and labourers in the Gulf, and violence against Indians in Fiji. Racist violence, abuse and the denial of individual rights in these locations are very real and indefensible, yet the preoccupation with this makes introspection on racism within India very difficult.

India’s economy is growing rapidly, and the country’s frontiers are acquiring a new value as corridors to markets, capital and resources in China and Southeast Asia. The opportunities, ruptures and grievances brought about by the creation of corridors provide extensive research possibilities. While transnational migration receives a lot of scholarly and policy attention, the changing dynamics of internal migration, especially from transforming frontiers, can be equally disorienting for the migrants themselves, who are disrupting conventional urbanisation narratives. These migrations also raise interesting questions around citizenship. In the case of tribal communities in the northeast, citizenship has long been viewed with suspicion and even hostility, yet for many young tribal people citizenship now provides access to growing heartland cities. Studies of belonging in the Indian diaspora dominate popular and scholarly narratives, yet for ethnic minorities the scenario is very different. Limited discussion of race and racism within India leaves questions of belonging for ethnic minorities under-analysed, in favour of a macro-racial discourse drawing on the colonial past and the transnational present.

PLANNING FOR DEVELOPMENT

Public or private? India’s investment in infrastructure

NABEEL A. MANCHERI

The provision of infrastructure and other public utility services has traditionally remained the domain of government and statutory bodies in India. But with a phenomenal upsurge in the demand for transport; water supply; and effective sewerage, drainage and solid waste management systems, India’s government has found itself lacking in the financial, technical and executive capacities that are needed to plug the demand–supply gap in infrastructure.

The combined pressure from civil society organisations, greater numbers of quality-conscious citizens, a vociferous media and the need to progress with Millennium Development Goals related to affordable access to basic services has motivated the government to encourage private participation. Private players, of course, tend to focus on sectors where there is a clear conception of user cost—which can be easily realised—and many prominent civil society organisations, public interest groups and media outlets repeatedly question the integrity of private players in rendering crucial public services.

Relying on private participation also heightens the danger of inordinate tariff increases and reckless layoffs. But these negatives are usually apparent at the beginning of the process, when the government is searching for private investors. Instead of addressing these concerns, the government’s ‘faulty, rushed, non-competitive and non-transparent’ application of policies—referred to in a recent article—is driving out healthy competition.

With a dire need to develop new financing and institutional mechanisms to plug the glaring infrastructure gaps, the Indian government has largely come to accept that access to supplementary capital funding from the private sector is a notable advantage of private participation. Reduced delays in the implementation of projects, lower lifecycle costs and greater accountability are seen as other advantages. Since the 1990s the government has actively encouraged private investment in infrastructure because it clearly estimated that serious infrastructural bottlenecks deprive the country of 1–2 per cent GDP growth every year. For example, the Economic Survey of India estimates that 12 per cent of power shortages at peak levels and 8 per cent at non-peak levels represents a loss of US$3.4 billion in generational capacity, which is equal to a GDP loss of US$68 billion and seriously undermines India’s global competitiveness. Under these circumstances, increased private sector participation is the only solution to bridging the appalling gaps in India’s infrastructure.
The Indian government has endeavoured to attract private investment by instituting mechanisms which encourage both public and private investment, and public-private partnerships (PPPs), with the latter considered the preferred model for constructing and operating infrastructure projects. As a result, India has witnessed some progress in attracting private participation for infrastructure projects. This has largely taken place through the corporatisation of existing public sector utilities, the development of new projects via greenfield investment, the adoption of Build, Operate, Transfer (BOT) or Build, Own, Operate, Transfer (BOOT) formats for PPP projects in the road sector, and through various concession deals.

India’s Eleventh Five-Year Plan had the ambitious target of increasing the total investment in infrastructure from about 5 per cent of GDP in the Tenth Five-Year Plan to 9 per cent of GDP. In absolute terms, this implies an increase from US$183.89 billion in the Tenth Plan to US$416.89 billion during the Eleventh Plan. This has led to the projection that 30 per cent of India’s financial needs for infrastructure initiatives will be met by private sector participation during the Eleventh Plan period (2007–2012). Private investment in infrastructure totalled US$45.7 billion in the period covered by the Tenth Plan, and more than trebled during that of the Eleventh Plan to US$150.8 billion.

The sheer number of PPP projects is increasing across India as well. As of December 2009, 241 PPP projects with a total investment of US$13.52 billion were completed, and 292 projects with a total investment of US$48.93 billion were under implementation. Another 412 projects involving a total investment of US$76.4 billion were in the pipeline. These projects are comprised of investments in all kinds of infrastructure, including national highways, state highways, airports, ports, and power generation, transmission and distribution.

Even with the sustained importance given to PPPs in India’s five-year plans, the private sector has not responded with any particular enthusiasm. It is greatly inhibited by overlapping regulatory jurisdictions and sub-optimal risk allocation mechanisms under the PPP model, with transparency, and cost and time over-run issues also creating problems. Many experts support the creation of a centralised PPP mechanism and a single point of clearance for proposed projects. Financial markets are inadequately developed in India, which currently leads to PPP projects depending on commercial banks for funding. This exposes the investors to risk concentration, maturity mismatches, and rising interest rates and tightening credit conditions over the life of the project.

The PPP model is not necessarily suitable for all infrastructure projects, but where it is appropriate, the model needs to include effective regulation . . . and create sustainable project revenues.

In spite of taking significant steps to encourage private players to invest, the field has only recently started to gain momentum in India, especially when compared to other emerging market economies. India stands fourth after China, Brazil and Russia when it comes to attracting private investment in infrastructure. Telecommunications, energy and the transport sector have secured the most private investment, with 49.6 per cent, 28.9 per cent and 21.3 per cent private participation, respectively. But these figures fall abysmally short of what is required to develop basic infrastructure services in India.

The private sector’s response has been relatively lacklustre, and projects have faced various implementation challenges like tariff setting and adjustments, regulatory disputes, ambiguous contracts, the hasty allotment of contracts leading to re-negotiations, and unequal risk sharing. There is a serious dearth of transparent investor-friendly policies and procedures.

The PPP model is not necessarily suitable for all infrastructure projects, but where it is appropriate, the model needs to include effective regulation, liberalised labour laws, smart corporate governance and create sustainable project revenues. If India is to bridge the current gaps in infrastructure—and extend the provision of basic services to a greater proportion of its population—the country urgently requires more realistic planning in a stable macroeconomic framework, with transparent revenue flows and risk-sharing agreements. It must be remembered that profitability alone cannot determine a project’s viability. There has to be a genuine meeting point somewhere between the public and the private sectors.
In early 2008, India’s Zee News broadcast a ‘special investigation.’ With a loud, red banner labelling the inquiry an ‘exclusive’, the program made two claims: first, it professed to have found definitive proof that Ravana, the mythical villain of the Ramayana, had maintained an air force. And second, the program revealed that it had found a secret cave in Sri Lanka containing Ravana’s mummified body.

By way of proof, the channel offered an excited-looking reporter standing on a hill holding some local black soil. As he explained, the soil was black because the blast from Ravana’s aircraft had singed it. For the second claim, the channel specified that the mythical demon king’s mummy was exactly 17 feet long and it lay entombed in a mountain cave. Only, the intrepid reporter could not reach the supposed crypt because there were demons guarding their lord’s mummy.

Footage of the reporter was also liberally interspersed with dramatised scenes from a 1980s televised version of the Ramayana and another more recent version. It was as if the dramatised scenes were stock news footage from a real historical event. There was not even the pretence of demarcating reality and artistic portrayal.

The program helps illustrate two contradictory trends in Indian television over the past decade: a booming and continuously expanding television market in India, and simultaneously a severe crisis of content and regulation.

What explains this situation?

Consider the facts. In 2000, India had 132 television channels. By 2011 this number had increased to over 500 channels in various languages. By 2009 more than 100 channels were broadcasting news in 15 languages and more than 80 were 24-hour news channels. There has been a simultaneous expansion in reach: in a little over a decade, the total number of Indian households with television more than tripled, to 120 million.

The boom is only half of the story. As a growing industry, employing three million people a year and earning US$15 billion in annual revenue, everything should be rosy. But talk to any senior TV executive today, especially those working to provide content, and you are confronted by tales of gloom. In 2011 the head of Star TV—India’s largest television network—argued that there was a serious ‘dearth of talent’ in the industry. This means that mediocre content, low levels of innovation in programming and constant repetition of anything that seems to work pervade Indian television.

Overall, Indian television today is beset by three fundamental challenges: the absence of a comprehensive system of regulation, increasing political control of regional television channels and distribution networks, and structural problems with its business model and delivery platforms.

Sixteen years after the Supreme Court’s historic judgment that freed the airwaves from government monopoly, India is still waiting for a comprehensive law that covers all aspects of broadcasting, including reasonable content guidelines and cross-media ownership laws. India remains the most unregulated television market in the world—and while this suits owners and editors, the grey areas inherent in the legal structure are responsible for much of the current frustration with content issues.

The problem is that any discussion of broadcast reform gets stuck between two poles: the controlling impulses of a state always looking to take back lost control, and the need to maintain the independence of television. Instead, oversight is characterised by promises of self-regulation that always fall prey to the weekly tyranny of ratings. And with no overarching regulatory body, Indian broadcasting exists within a highly confusing maze of overlapping controls.

In many ways, Indian television...
has continued to operate in a legal framework that is akin to the north Indian word *jugaad* (roughly translated as an ‘improvised arrangement’). Jaipal Reddy’s 1997 Broadcasting Bill sought to create a new legal structure for broadcasting but disappeared into oblivion when the Gujarat government fell in 1997. Priya Ranjan Dasmunsi’s draconian version of such a bill is now on the backburner. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has also periodically tried to fill the regulatory vacuum with draft legislation, and executive directives and notifications.

A recent move by the Indian Broadcasting Federation (IBF) to add more teeth to its self-regulation mechanism, with backing from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, is still untested. It formed the Broadcasting Content Complaints Council in May 2011, and the organisation has since announced a series of self-regulatory guidelines for non-news channels, a system for classifying programming into categories and a mechanism for addressing viewer complaints.

Most major media groups insist that this kind of self-regulation is the only viable solution, but it is too early to judge the effectiveness of the new structure. It is important to note, though, that not all broadcasters are members of bodies like the IBF and self-regulation has not had a good track record in Indian broadcasting.

The second major challenge is the increasing level of political control within the industry—both in the cable networks that control distribution and the television channels themselves.

By early 2011, numerous channels were openly owned or aligned with political parties. In Andhra Pradesh, one regional editor estimated that 11 or 12 of the state’s 14 news channels were indirectly or directly controlled by politicians or their proxies. In Tamil Nadu, the DMK party’s Maran family continues to control the cable distribution industry. PMK founder S. Ramadoss started Makkal TV in 2006 and the AIADMK controls Jaya TV. In Karnataka, in the district of Bellary, the controversial Reddy brothers from the BJP control the entire cable business, just as the family of former JD(S) Chief Minister Kumaraswamy runs the cable industry in the Hassan district. In Kerala, Indiavision is run by Indian Muslim League leader Dr M. K. Muneer, while Kairali TV is said to be patronised by the CPM and Jaihind TV by the state Congress unit. These networks coexist with independent ones, but the trend of political control is strengthening, reducing the space for truly independent media.

The third major challenge is that the television industry’s business model is failing. In most developed television markets, roughly 70 per cent of earnings come from subscriptions and about 30 per cent from advertising. In India, it is the reverse. This means the networks’ business models are entirely dependent on advertising revenues. In a market where hundreds of channels are competing for advertising, the structural economy of television forces...
It is a system of multiple voices: Indian literature, world literature.

It is literature and literary scholarship from India, though sometimes unacknowledged, have been at the forefront of revitalising interest in the idea of ‘world literature’—a field of study that stresses global circulation, transcultural reading practices, broad structural patterns, and often unexpected connections among books and readers. As India has grown in prominence on the world stage, so too have its writers. The 1990s and 2000s witnessed a dramatic boom in Indian writers working in English, while the study of India’s many literary traditions has grown in strength in universities outside of India. The emerging concept of world literature has much to gain from debates that have long held sway within the study of the subcontinent.

The study of Indian literature has helped us think about the tension between the ‘world’ and the ‘nation’ as the proper adjective to describe literature. Are these competitive, mutually exclusive, intersecting, or complementary? As early as the mid-1960s, Indian literary scholars were thinking about world literature as a category that did not usurp, but in fact relied upon, the concept of the nation. In the 1990s Indian writers such as Amitav Ghosh argued that works could come to be perceived as world literature precisely because of their local inflections. Ghosh argued that the aspiration to join the ranks of world literature inspired the invention of the local: writers produced elaborate visions of particular places precisely to convey these life-worlds across cultural borders. This view of world literature sought to reveal how literature can participate in multiple worlds simultaneously, challenging the idea that worldliness is divorced from the local and questioning the idea that the indigenous is insulated from the world.

Indian literature has wrestled with the question of comparative language that haunts the concept of world literature. Western theorists have sometimes assumed that since the ‘nation’ is the provenance of the specialist and the ‘world’ the provenance of the generalist, we are somehow able to know a nation intimately, in a way that we can never know the world. Yet India has long had to grapple with internal heterogeneity, long historical duration and robust multilingualism. India is more comparable to Europe than to France, while the problem of multilingual readerships and aesthetics has long been a feature of Indian Anglophone production. In the historical novel The Glass Palace (2000), for instance, Ghosh invites us to think about the dizzying array of languages used in everyday life in 19th- and 20th-century South and Southeast Asia. Ghosh’s characters shift languages, on average, once every six pages, and no single figure has mastery over all the different tongues that appear in the novel. If the concept of world literature raises anxieties about our
inability as scholars to command so many languages, writers like Ghosh remind us that nations like India have long turned this very impossibility into a fruitful opportunity for linguistic exchange. Reading and researching Indian literature has required both lay and scholarly readers to think closely about the uses of translation, and to meditate on how encounters with a foreign language can shift our perspectives on the languages we know well.

Indian literary studies have further grappled with world literature’s animating tension between different ethical and political approaches to internationalism. Some of these approaches take us into the heart of imperialism and its legacies, while others look outward to new forms of solidarity or sympathy across social borders. Indian literary study has drawn close attention to the material asymmetries of global circulation, where some kinds of literature pass more easily around the world than do others. Literature in English, for instance, gains far more global publicity than literature in Tamil or Hindi, revealing the uneven topographies of world literature. Finally, Indian literature has long grappled with the prominent role of the diaspora, which has in many ways fractured conventional ideas of ‘Indian literature’.

Just as crucially, Indian literature has been a source of key critiques of world literature. Is this model another aspect of Western imperialism that reinstates the West as the implicit centre of literature under the pretence of cosmopolitan forms of reading? Does world literature implicitly privilege writers in the diaspora, such as Salman Rushdie, over less famous writers, such as Shashi Deshpande, who work within national geographies? And if the diaspora has complicated the idea of Indian identity, has it not also served to fossilise particular images of the subcontinent? Metropolitan reading publics have often taken writers of Indian descent as native informants who provide a sociological window of ‘truth’, while Indian audiences have sometimes interpreted such sociological assumptions negatively, critiquing writers of the diaspora for inauthentic portraits of Indian life. The very idea of worldliness seems to founder within these poles of reading.

But Indian literature, broadly speaking, has also become a wellspring for a new confidence in a sometimes exuberant mode of world literature. Recent scholars have pointed to the rise of new Indian novels, such as Jamyang Norbu’s *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999), which despite its clear invocation of British literature is much less interested in Western colonialism than in using the global spread of English to address alternative imperial forces, such as China in Tibet. Recent years have also witnessed the rise of new ways of understanding how Indians have read Western literature, moving away from older models which stress such reading as a form of internal colonialism and toward newer models that illuminate the complex forms of creativity that transnational reading requires. Indian reading and writing practices are not necessarily in tension with Western or other traditions. When contemporary Indian literature, for example, speaks directly to its readers, it inherits the techniques both of British realist novels and of Indian oral storytelling forms. Indeed, we might see in these texts the influences of numerous, sometimes indeterminable ancestors.

Indian literature is also at the forefront of suggesting how world literature might de-centre the West. We are beginning to see a resurgence of interest in a world literature of the global South, which draws upon often submerged Bandung-style histories of aesthetic connections across the globe. These intimacies between Indian and, for example, Indonesian literature, not only dethrone Western conceptions of world literature but also show how, paradoxically, Western canonical institutions (like the Nobel Prize in literature) have heightened the visibility of these different parts of the global South to one another.

Indian literary studies offer promising angles for world literature. They bring an acute sensitivity to the material conditions under which literature gains visibility in different parts of the world; an acknowledgement of the usefulness of translation for legitimate scholarship, as used in literary histories of India; an awareness of competing ideas of ‘worlding’ in different literary traditions, as shown by emerging work on Hindi and Tamil; an attentiveness to histories of inequality and oppression; and an increasing confidence that working within international or intercultural systems does not necessarily eviscerate local connections. Most crucially, the precedent of Indian literature suggests that we do not need to agree on one single model of what ‘world literature’ is or should be: the multiplicity of worlds may be what makes the concept maddening, but also what makes it rich and useful.
CENSORSHIP in India comes in various forms. There is, of course, the ubiquitous censorship by the state, which censors films and plays before release, bans websites and decides what is in the national interest. There is also the censorship of the market, which decides what Indians should see and have market access to, and leaves little space for content that is seen as commercially unviable. And of course there is the vigilante brand of censorship, which is ever ready to defend any so-called attack on ‘Indian culture’.

The notion of censorship is closely linked with the moral panic that informs India’s popular debate about media and new technologies. Many Indians are prepared to take on the role of the ‘moral police’. They are everywhere: in the legislative assemblies, boardrooms, courtrooms, colleges, cinemas, cyber cafes, gardens and pubs, on the street, and even in police stations. The Hindu right-wing parties and groups which demonstrate their love for ‘Indian culture’ by molesting girls wearing jeans and vandalising Valentine’s Day celebrations are unfortunately only the tip of the iceberg.

Both censorship and moral policing are premised on the creation of a less powerful ‘other’ who is easily influenced by the seductive power of the media. There is also the fundamentally flawed assumption about the immense harm that images can cause to the hearts and minds of impressionable cinema-goers, driving them to commit acts of violence, sexual depravity and the like. Justice Hidayatullah’s formulation in the K. A. Abbas vs Union of India (1970) case is one example of this simplistic understanding: “The motion picture is able to stir up emotions more deeply than any other form of art. Its effect particularly on children and adolescents is very great since their immaturity makes them more willingly suspend their disbelief . . . They also remember the action in the picture and try to emulate or imitate what they have seen . . . A person reading a book or other writing or hearing a speech or viewing a painting or sculpture is not so deeply stirred as by seeing a motion picture’.

In other words, the Central Board of Film Certification acts as a patriarchal filter on the state’s behalf, protecting all those unfortunate less-powerful ‘others’ (including children, women, poor people, villagers and illiterates) who lack the necessary judgment and discrimination—and who are thus easily swayed by the power of the image. Needless to say, this notion of direct impact has been seriously discredited within the field of media studies; there is a lot of research and writing which establishes that relationships between spectators and media texts are complex, unpredictable and a result of negotiations between the agendas of both the text and the spectator. Those who plead the case for censorship also make the assumption that cinematic text is a simple message in a bottle, tied to a singular meaning. But meanings are more elusive. Like eels, they slip easily out of one’s grasp.

More pragmatically, how will the censors deal with someone who chooses to read forbidden words in the Oxford English Dictionary? They have been able to do precious little with film songs that boast double entendres. A recent example is the song Bhaag D. K. Bose (Run D. K. Bose) in the film Delhi Belly. When repeated as a loop, D. K. Bose turns into a Hindi expletive that has offended the sensibilities of many. And during the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1975, all newspapers were under a tight regime of censorship—but the Indian Express simply responded by leaving its editorial column blank.

Censorship is unfortunately not the sole prerogative of right-wing parties and groups. It is enthusiastically espoused by leftist parties, women’s groups and liberals, all regarding censorship as the only way to cope with anything that offends them. It
is a common belief that if there were no censorship, society would have little control over the proliferation of hate speech or pornography, for instance. According to this argument, a moderate degree of enlightened censorship helps to ensure that certain universal values are upheld. This argument casts state censorship as a panacea for such ills, but the Indian experience tells us that despite the rigorous regime of film censorship, neither hate speech nor pornography are on the decline. Media technologies have developed in ways that make it difficult, if not impossible, for any centralised agency to control the flow of images and words.

There are several examples of resistance to the regimes of silence and control that censorship engenders. Documentary filmmakers from across India organised a parallel film festival as part of a campaign against censorship in 2004, responding to the introduction of censorship at the Mumbai International Film Festival. This was the start of a collective, incorporating over 250 filmmakers, that continues as an e-group even today and mobilises around issues of freedom of expression.

The Pink Chaddi Campaign, launched in 2009, was a peaceful campaign launched by the Consortium of Pub-going, Loose and Forward Women that used Facebook and other means of mobilisation to counter virulent attacks by the right-wing group Ram Sene. In a satirical response, the consortium asked people to send Pramod Mutalik, the head of Ram Sene, pink underwear on Valentine’s Day. The campaign garnered much support and media attention.

One characteristic of these campaigns is that they tend to focus on a somewhat elite section of society. They have done much to create discussion around issues of censorship, but a much larger effort is needed to destabilise the dominant codes of censorship which are pervasive in Indian society.

Censorship in general, and media censorship in particular, has no place in a democracy. Article 19 of India’s constitution guarantees the right to freedom of expression. This right has been seriously eroded in our times. India needs to move beyond platitudes of offended sensibilities and national interests. It needs to think in terms of media education that helps viewers engage critically with media texts, that opens up spaces for dialogue and debate, and that helps us to ‘listen fearlessly’.
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