



**A Lecture on
India : Large & Small
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All are cordially invited

INDIA: LARGE AND SMALL

Amartya Sen

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Affiliations such as nationality are not only matters of entitlement, they all also involve attachment and responsibility. In a rapidly changing country, as India certainly is, one of the duties that we have as Indians is to ask: what kind of a country this is. This may lead to the further question: what does it demand of us, at this time? I am very aware that it is rather reckless to ask grand questions of such apparent naivety. But since I don't indulge in other dangerous activities, like taming lions, or being on the trapeze, or standing for parliamentary elections, perhaps I ought to show some bravery and foolhardiness here. Hence this lecture.

India is of course a large country, with a huge population. The relative size of the Indian population is not a new phenomenon, contrary to the presumption, which seems fairly common in the world today, that India has become relatively enormous mainly because of recent population growth. In fact, the share of India in world population prior to the eighteenth century was very considerably larger than it is today. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many other parts of the world - Europe in particular - grew much more rapidly than India and China and the non-Western world in general, and the share of the so-called West sharply increased. When that Western growth moderated, in the twentieth century, while the expansion of the non-Western population.

including that in India, speeded up, there has been some catching up relative sizes, which according to U.N. projection may be completed during the first half of this century. All this does not, of course, diminish the importance of reducing the fertility rate in India (it is an urgent priority, given its social consequences) , but it is important not to see the relative largeness of the Indian population as a brand new phenomenon.

India is a large country not only as a part of humanity, but also in terms of its diversity, with many languages, cultures and religions, remarkably distinct pursuits, vastly disparate convictions, and widely divergent customs. The sheer variety of things in India has made many observers doubt whether India can at all be seen as one country. Indeed, when Winston Churchill made the momentous pronouncement that India was no more a country than was the Equator, it is evident that his intellectual imagination was severely strained by the difficulty of seeing how so much diversity could fit into the conception of one country. The British belief, which was very common in imperial days and is not entirely absent now, that it is the Raj that has somehow "created" India reflects not only a pride in alleged "authorship," but also some bafflement about the possibility of accommodating so much heterogeneity within the consistent limits of a coherent country.

And yet general statements about India and Indians can be found over thousands of years, from the ancient days of Alexander the Great and Apollonius to the ."medieval" days of Arab and Iranian visitors, well exemplified by Alberuni's remarkable book, Ta'rikh

al-hind ("the history of India"), written in early eleventh century.

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Even though the past and present of India can be seen in many different perspectives. I would claim that there is a case for focusing particularly on the long history of the argumentative tradition in India, and its continuing relevance today. I think the intellectual largeness of India links closely with the reach of our argumentative tradition. I will discuss this diagnosis very briefly here - I have discussed it more fully in a forthcoming book, called The Argumentative Indian.

That there is a vigorous tradition of arguing in India would be hard to dispute. I recollect being amused as a young boy by a Bengali verse - a very serious nineteenth-century poem by Raja Rammohun Roy - because of the way it explained what is really dreadful about death:

Just consider how terrible the day of your death will be.

Others will go on speaking, and you will not be able to argue back.

Our argumentative tradition has earned Indians many distinctions of a somewhat dubious nature. Krishna Menon's record of the longest speech ever delivered at the United Nations (9 hours non-stop), established half a century ago (when Menon was leading the Indian delegation) , has not been equalled by anyone from anywhere. Other peaks of loquaciousness have been scaled by other Indians. We do like to speak and argue. Alberuni came close to

saying, in his eleventh-century book that while many things (like mathematics and astronomy) were admirable in India, nothing impressed him as much as the Indians' ability to speak eloquently on subjects on which they knew absolutely nothing.

Speaking a lot is not new habit in India. The ancient Sanskrit epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, which are frequently compared with the Iliad and the Odyssey, are colossally longer than the works that the modest Homer could manage. Indeed, Mahabharata alone is about seven times as long as the Iliad and the Odyssey put together. They proceed from stories to stories woven around their principal tales, and are engagingly full of dialogues, dilemmas and alternative perspectives. And we encounter masses of arguments and counterarguments spread over incessant debates and disputations. Indeed, the most read document of philosophical Hinduism, the Bhagavad Gita, which is a part of the large epic Mahabharata, is essentially one long argument.

Some of the earliest open general meetings aimed specifically at arguing out the differences between competing points of view took place in India in the so-called Buddhist "councils," where adherents of different points of view got together to argue out their differences. The first of these large councils was held in Rajagriha shortly after Gautama Buddha's death twenty-five hundred years ago. The grandest of these councils - the third - occurred, under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE, in the-then capital of India, Pataliputra - now called Patna. Ashoka also tried to codify and propagate what must have been among the

earliest formulations of rules for public arguments - a kind of ancient version of the nineteenth-century "Robert's Rules of Order." He demanded, for example, "restraint in regard to speech, so that there should be no extolment of one's own sect or disparagement of other sects on inappropriate occasions, and it should be moderate even in appropriate occasions." Even when engaged in arguing, "other sects should be duly honoured in every way on all occasions."

To take another quick example from a much later period, when in the 1590s, the great Moghal emperor, Akbar, was making his pronouncements in India on the need for tolerance, and was busy arranging organized dialogues between holders of different faiths (including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Jains, Jews, and even - it must be noted - atheists) , the Inquisitions were still flourishing in Europe. Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake in Rome, in Campo dei Fiori, for heresy, in 1600, even as Akbar was holding inter-faith dialogues in Agra.

I have argued elsewhere that not only is public reasoning, including open public arguments, central to the emergence and practice of democracy, the history of public reasoning is spread right widely across the world. India is fortunate in having a very distinguished heritage in this field.

Even though the argumentative tradition is not uniformly used by all sections of the people, there is potential here for very wide use indeed. It is interesting that some of the most telling questions in the Upanishads come from women interlocutors/ like

Gargi and Maitreyi. There are voices raised against the caste system too. In the Mahabharata, when Bhrigu tells Bharadvaja that caste divisions relate to differences in physical attributes of different human beings, reflected in skin colour, Bharadvaja responds not only by pointing to the considerable variations in skin colour within every caste ("if different colours indicate different castes, then all castes are mixed castes" }/ but also by the more profound question: "We all seem to be affected by desire, anger, fear, sorrow, worry, hunger, and labour; how do we have caste differences then?" There is also a genealogical scepticism expressed in another ancient document, the Bhavishva Purana: "Since members of all the four castes are children of God, they all belong to the same caste. All human beings have the same father, and children of the same father cannot have different castes." These doubts do not win the day, but nor are their expressions obliterated in the classical account of the debates between different points of view.

To look at a much later period, the tradition of "medieval mystical poets" which was well established by the fifteenth century, included exponents who were influenced both by the egalitarianism of the Hindu Bhakti movement and by that of the Muslim Sufis, and their far-reaching rejection of social barriers brings out sharply the reach of arguments across the divisions of caste and class. Many of these poets came from economically and socially humble background, and their questioning of social divisions as well as of the barriers of disparate religions

reflected profound attempts to deny the relevance of these artificial restrictions. It is remarkable how many of the exponents of these heretical points of views came from the working class: Kabir, perhaps the greatest poet of them all, was a weaver, Dadu a cotton-carder, Ravi-das a shoe-maker, Sena a barber/ and so on. Also, many leading figures in these movements were women, including of course the famous Mira-bai (whose songs are still very popular, after four hundred years), but also Andal, Daya-bai, Sahajo-bai, and Ksema, among others.

3

Not paying adequate attention to the nature and reach of the argumentative tradition can lead to misinterpretations of our past. Consider the politically charged issue of the role of so-called "ancient India" in understanding the India of today. In contemporary politics, the enthusiasm for ancient India has often come from the Hindutva movement - the promoters of a narrowly Hindu view of Indian civilization - who have tried to separate out the period preceding the Muslim conquest of India (from the third millennium BCE to the beginning of the second millennium ADE) . In contrast, those who take an integrationist approach to contemporary India have tended to view the harking back to ancient India with the greatest of suspicion. For example, the Hindutva activists like invoking the holy Vedas, composed in the second millennium BCE, to define India¹'s "real heritage. " They are also keen on summoning the Ramayana, the great epic, for many different

purposes, varying from delineating Hindu beliefs and convictions, to finding alleged justification for forcibly demolishing a mosque - the Babri masjid - that is situated at the very spot where the "divine" Rama, it is claimed, was born. The integrationists, in contrast, have tended to see the Vedas and the Ramayana as unwelcome intrusions of Hindu beliefs into the contemporary life of secular India.

The integrationists are not wrong to question the fractional nature of the choice of so-called "Hindu classics" over other products of India's long and diverse history. They are also right to point to the counterproductive role that such partisan selection can play in the secular, multi-religious life of today's India. Even though more than 80 per cent of Indians may be Hindu, the country has a very large Muslim population (the third largest among all the countries in the world - larger than the entire British and French populations put together) , and a great many followers of other faiths: Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Parsees, and others. The fact that India currently has a Muslim President, a Sikh Prime Minister and a Christian head of the dominant party in the ruling coalition may make India very unlike any other country in the world, but it need not be seen as particularly strange in India itself.

However, even after noting the need for integration and for a multicultural perspective, it must be accepted that ancient India remains extremely important for India today. These old books and narratives, many of them dating from ancient India/ have had an

enormous influence on Indian culture, literature and thought. They have deeply influenced intellectual and philosophical writings, on the one hand, and folk traditions of story telling and critical dialectics, on the other. The difficult issue does not lie in judging the importance of the Vedas or the Ramayana (they are certainly extremely important), but in understanding with clarity what kinds of documents they are, and in particular the fact that they contain a great many arguments and differences of views.

The Vedas may be full of hymns and religious invocations, but they also tell stories (like the wonderful one about the troubles of the compulsive gambler), speculate about the world, and - true to the argumentative propensity already in view - ask difficult questions. A basic doubt concerns the very creation of the world: Did someone make it? Was it a spontaneous emergence? Is there a God who knows what really happened? As it happens, there are verses in the Rigveda that expresses radical doubts on these issues:

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? . . . Perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not. The one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows - or perhaps he does not know.

These doubts and profound arguments from the second millennium BCE would recur again and again in India's long argumentative history. The rich heritage of atheism and agnosticism in India, which can be traced for well over two thousand years (they were clearly powerful in Buddha's own time in the sixth century BCE) is also a part of the ancient Indian culture, which also harboured, as I have

discussed elsewhere, a great many unorthodox questions about epistemology and ethics.

Similarly, the adherents of Hindu politics - especially those who are given to vandalizing places of worship of other religions - may take Rama to be divine, but in much of the Ramayana, Rama is treated primarily as a hero - a great "epic **hero**" - with many good qualities and some weaknesses, including a tendency to harbour suspicions about his wife Sita's faithfulness. A pundit who gets considerable space in the Ramayana, called Javali, not only does not treat Rama as God, Javali calls Rama's actions "foolish" ("especially for," as Javali puts it, "an intelligent and wise man"). Before he is persuaded to withdraw his allegations, Javali gets time enough in the Ramayana to explain in detail that "there is no after-world, nor any religious practice for attaining that," and that "the injunctions about the worship of gods, sacrifice, gifts and penance have been laid down in the Shastras [scriptures] by clever people, just to rule over [other] people." The problem with invoking the Ramayana to propagate a reductionist account of Hindu religiosity lies in the way the epic is deployed for this purpose - as a document of supernatural veracity, rather than as a marvellous "parable" (as Rabindranath Tagore describes it) and a widely enjoyed part of India's cultural heritage.

The roots of scepticism in India go far back, and it would be hard to understand the history of Indian culture if scepticism were to be jettisoned. Indeed, the resilient reach of the tradition of dialectics can be felt throughout Indian history, even as conflicts

and wars have led to much violence. Given the simultaneous presence of dialogic encounters and bloody battles in India's past, the tendency to concentrate only on the latter would miss out something of real significance.

It is indeed important to see the long tradition of accepted heterodoxy in India. In resisting the attempts by the Hindutva activists to capture ancient India as their home ground (and to see it as the unique cradle of Indian civilization) , it is not adequate only to point out that India has many other sources of culture as well. It is necessary also to see how much heterodoxy there has been in Indian thoughts and beliefs from very early days. Not only did Buddhists, Jains, agnostics and atheists compete with each other and with adherents of what we now call Hinduism (a much later term) in the India of first millennium BCE, but also the dominant religion in India was Buddhism for nearly a thousand years. The Chinese in the first millennium ADE standardly referred to India as ¹¹ "the Buddhist kingdom" (the far-reaching effects of the Buddhist connections between the two largest countries in the world are discussed in the essay "China and India"). Ancient India cannot be fitted into the narrow box where the Hindutva activists want to incarcerate it.

4

An attempt to talk about the culture of a country, or about its past history or contemporary politics, must inescapably involve considerable selection. I need not, therefore, belabour the point

that the focus on the argumentative tradition in this lecture is a result of choice and does not reflect a belief on my part that this is the only reasonable way of thinking about the history or culture or politics of India. I am very aware that there are other ways of proceeding.

The selection of focus here is mainly for three distinct reasons: the long history of the argumentative tradition in India, its contemporary relevance, and its relative neglect in on-going cultural discussions. It can, in addition, be claimed that the simultaneous flourishing of many different convictions and viewpoints in India has drawn substantially on the acceptance - explicitly or by implication - of heterodoxy and dialogue. The reach of Indian heterodoxy is remarkably extensive and ubiquitous/ and it has direct relevance to the roles of democracy and secularism today, and even to the contemporary economic debates.

The celebration of public arguments has positively helped the growth of democracy in India. The historical roots of democracy in India are particularly worth considering, if only because that connection is often missed, through the temptation to attribute the Indian commitment to democracy simply to the impact of British influence (despite the fact that such an influence should have worked similarly for a hundred other countries that emerged from an empire on which the sun used not to set). India's unusual record as a robust, non-Western democracy includes not just its immediate endorsement, following independence from the British Raj, of the democratic form of government, but also the tenacious persistence

of that system since then, which contrasts with the experiences of many other countries where democracy has intermittently made cameo appearances.

The long history of heterodoxy has a bearing not only on the development and survival of democracy in India, it has also richly contributed to the emergence of secularism in the form of the neutrality of the state between different religions. This is not to deny that there have been kings and rulers in India who have not followed Ashoka's admonition that "the sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another," or Akbar's insistence that "no man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him." But we have to see how extraordinary have been these codifications of religious neutrality of the state as and when they have been enunciated. It is hard to find pronouncements of similar liberality in Europe until more recent times. The tolerance of religious diversity is implicitly reflected in India's having served as a shared home - in the chronology of history - of Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Parsees, Sikhs, Baha'is, and others.

The role of public reasoning in the practice of democracy and secularism has been much discussed in contemporary political philosophy, led particularly by John Rawls and Juergen Habermas. Even though historians of democracy - as opposed to political theorists - have tended to concentrate rather exclusively on balloting and voting, the importance of the argumentative tradition

in India for the development of democracy and secularism can be more fully appreciated. To illustrate, even though the 2300 years old conversation between the world-conquering Alexander and Jain philosophers bereft of clothing, as reported by Arrian, has been much discussed, the conversation has tended to be viewed mainly as an illustration of exotic customs and speculative viewpoints. It is, however, important to understand what the content of the conversation was.

When Alexander asked the Jain philosophers why they were paying so little attention to the great conqueror, he got the following - deeply anti-imperial - reply:

King Alexander, every man can possess only so much of the earth's surface as this we are standing on. You are but human like the rest of us, save that you are always busy and up to no good, travelling so many miles from your home, a nuisance to yourself and to others!...You will soon be dead, and then you will own just as much of the earth as will suffice to bury you.

Alexander responded, we learn from Arrian, to this egalitarian reproach with the same kind of admiration that he had shown in his encounter with Diogenes, even though his own conduct remained altogether unchanged ("the exact opposite of what he then professed to admire").

5

Before I turn to some specific policy issues, let me make a brief remark on the distinct roles that arguing plays in the working of a society. At the risk of oversimplification, I would like to^v distinguish between two distinct functions: (1)

affirmation, and (2) critique. Affirmation is associated with voice, and in particular with enunciation of claims as well as principles. Critique goes beyond that and insists on scrutinizing what is being voiced. The functioning of democracy needs both.

Consider the much discussed proposition that famines do not occur in democracies - only in imperial colonies (as used to happen in British India), or in military dictatorships (as in Ethiopia, Sudan, or Somalia, in recent decades), or in one-party states (as in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, or China during 1958-61, or Cambodia in the 1970s, or North Korea in the immediate past). It is easy to affirm in a socially visible way, the duty of a responsible state to prevent famines and to record the voice of the potential victims when public expression is not prohibited. And it is hard for a government to withstand public criticism of a policy failure when a famine occurs. This is not merely due to the fear of losing elections, but also connected with facing public censure when newspapers and the media are independent and uncensored and when opposition parties are allowed to pester those in office. Indeed, the proportion of people affected by famines is always rather small (hardly ever more than 10 percent of the total population), and for a famine to be an electoral nightmare for the government, the sharing of information and the generating of public sympathy through public discussion are quite crucial. This is one reason, among many others, that the recent moves towards guaranteeing "the right to information" are full of economic as well as political and social significance.

Even though the working of democracy is easily successful in preventing conspicuous disasters like large famines, it is often far less effective in politicizing regular but non-extreme undernourishment and ill health. India has had no problem in avoiding famines with timely intervention, but it has been much harder to generate adequate public interest in less immediate and less dramatic deprivations, such as the quiet presence of endemic but non-extreme hunger across the country and the low standard of basic health care. While democracy is not without success in India, its achievements are still far short of what public reasoning can do in a democratic society, if it addresses less conspicuous deprivations such as endemic hunger. A similar remark can also be made about the protection of minority rights, which majority rule may not guarantee until and unless public discussion gives these rights enough political visibility and status to produce general public support.

The largeness of India links with its ability to include all in the domain of public reasoning - not to exclude the underdogs of society, nor the minorities. Even though the less privileged in India, linked with class or gender or community, has often been neglected from the domain of public concern, the general vehicle of public reasoning is ultimately a large boat - a mahayana in the literal meaning of that lovely word.

6

Are there positive signs of change right now, and if so, how

should we interpret and assess them? I am aware that I am entering a difficult territory here, but I would argue that there are good reasons to be optimistic, but also need for more vigorous use of the argumentative tradition. Let me, then, extend my already established record of recklessness by commenting a little on some of the economic and political issues of the day.

I rely on an analysis I have present earlier, jointly with Jean Dreze (India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity and India: Development and Participation), that the Indian economy has suffered from a chronic underactivity of the government in some fields (particularly in basic education and elementary health care) while being overactive in others (in the form in the so-called "license Raj" in particular). While the 1992 reforms introduced by Manmohan Singh, then Finance Minister, attempted to address the latter problem in a visionary way, it did not, we had argued, go far enough in facing the first problem. There is considerable evidence that the present Indian government, led by Manmohan himself, is much more committed to removing that imbalance. The underinvestment in the social sector is now more fully recognised. Even though there is a long way to go, both the affirmation of the principles involved and the critiques that have been presented seem to have received significantly more attention. As an argumentative Indian I am ready to offer appreciation here.

What about the Employment Guarantee Bill for rural areas? Here too there is cause for jubilation as far as affirmation is concerned. We are dealing here with some of the poorest people in

Indian society, and giving them a reliable source of income through 100 days of guaranteed employment can be an enormously important instrument. India has one of the highest rates of basic undernourishment in the world, and that deprivation, along with other consequences of penury, require recognition and response. The affirmation of the principles involved and acknowledgment of the problem to be addressed must now be followed up by an adequate critique and assessment of the provisions and the modalities involved.

Some of the difficult issues involved have already been well identified, judging from the discussions I have seen. There are questions of financing and resources, the division of the burden between the centre which has to bear much of the costs and the states which have to take much of the actions, and the big problems of implementation, including prevention of corruption which has much potential whenever money changes hand. These issues will no doubt receive attention as the Bill moves through the parliament.

There are also a few other issues that must be examined. First, education and health care as well as expansion of physical infrastructure directly add to the productive capabilities of people. Employment itself does not do not do this, and hence the need for effectively channelling the work that would be supported by employment guarantee is especially strong. The well-understood case for expansions of basic education and health care drew on the experience of many countries in the world, for example in China and East Asia, in which they have been veritable engines of progress.

Employment guarantee does not have much past experience to draw on, except from India itself. The employment guarantee in Maharashtra - has indeed been a success in preventing hunger (for example, in averting what almost certainly would have been a famine in 1973, but in this achievement, transfer of income is itself the primary vehicle of improvement. If the economic capabilities of the poor are to be effectively advanced through employment guarantee/ the focus has to be as much on the nature of the work done as on having a cast iron guarantee on receiving a wage.

Second, even though the enthusiasm for the employment guarantee proposal often has tended to come from activists keen on the social sector, the form of the guarantee is aimed entirely at securing a private income. Given the fact that India spends a comparatively small proportion of the GDP on public health care and public education, compared with other similarly placed countries, it would be important to make sure that in the enthusiasm for guaranteeing private income we do not lose any ground on possible expansion of investment in social public goods that are vitally needed for reasons that Jean Dreze and I have tried to present in our last two books. For any commitment of expenditure, the opportunity costs have to be scrutinized, and employment guarantee is no exception to this.

Third, precisely because there is reason for jubilation as far as affirmation is concerned that public discussion and agitation, initially linked with "the right to food," has brought about a political climate in which a radical proposal has been introduced

in the parliament with a good chance of legislative success, the penalty of failure, if it were to occur, could be extremely high. The route of public agitation will continue to have other uses, for example in pressing for going more strongly ahead in building schools and hospitals, and also in legislative reform that may be needed to overcome systematic absenteeism of teachers from schools and medical personnel in public health centres, where the clientele comes from the underdogs of society. Agitation is a scarce resource too, and the argumentative Indian has to expend it well. To point to the need for serious scrutiny is not, of course, to suggest that the scrutiny would produce a negative assessment, but rather to be able to choose modalities in an examined way, so that the affirmed social principles are best realized.

7

I turn finally to the political issue of minority rights and secularism, a subject in which there have been many ups and downs in recent years. The 2002 riots in the state of Gujarat, following the Godhra incident, in which possibly 2000 Muslims died, were not prevented by the state government, nor was the BJP-dominated state government, which had failed to protect minority community, booted out of office in the December elections that followed. On the other hand, the BJP-led central government did fall in the general elections held in May 2004. Any set of election results, especially in a country as large as India, would tend to carry the impact of many different types of influences, and there cannot be

any single-factor explanation of the electoral outcomes. But looking through the nature of the electoral reverses of the BJP and its allies in the recent elections, including the total - or near-total - demise of the "secular" parties in alliance with the BJP, it is difficult to miss a general sense of grievance about the neglect of secular concerns by parties which were not formally signed up for the Hindutva agenda. Not only were the voters keen on bringing down the BJP itself a notch or two (its percentage of voting support fell from 25% to 22%), but there are reasons to entertain the hypothesis that the "secular" support that the BJP allies delivered to the BJP-led alliance was particularly imperiled by the Hindutva movement's aggressive - and sometimes violent - undermining of a secular India and the complete failure of the BJP's allies to resist the extremism of Hindutva.

In particular, the violence in Gujarat did seem to tarnish the image of BJP and its allies, in addition to the issue of economic inequality and the back-firing of the boast about "India shining." The apparent concession by the former Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, that the Gujarat killings had been a major influence in the BJP's defeat ("It is very difficult to say what all the reasons are for the defeat [of BJP] in the elections but one impact of the violence was we lost the elections") was, I understand, withdrawn or significantly emended by him later, but no matter who concedes what that plausible connection would be hard to overlook. It is important to understand the hold of the sceptical tradition in India, despite the manifest presence of religions all across the

country. In responding to the exploitation of religious demography in the politics of Hindutva, the defenders of secular politics often take for granted that the Indian population would want religious politics in one form or another. This has led to the political temptation to use "soft Hindutva" as a compromised response by secularists to the politics of "hard Hindutva." But that tactical approach, which certainly has not given the anti-BJP parties any dividend so far, is, I would argue, foundationally mistaken. It profoundly ignores the strength of scepticism in India, which links with the argumentative tradition and which extends to religions as well, particularly in the form of doubting the relevance of religious beliefs in political and social affairs. Indeed, despite the bloody history of riots in India, the tolerance of heterodoxy and acceptance of variations of religious beliefs and customs are, ultimately, deep rooted in India. Rabindranath Tagore had put this issue rather more sharply more than eight decades ago in 1921, in his claim that the "idea of India" itself militates "against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one's own people from others." If this is correct, then it would be right to conclude that through their sectarian use of religious affiliations, the Hindutva movement has entered into a confrontation with the idea of India itself. This is nothing short of a sustained effort to miniaturize the broad idea of a large India - proud of its heterodox past and its pluralist present - and to replace it by the stamp of a small India, bundled around a drastically raw interpretation of Hinduism.

In the confrontation between a large and a small India, the broader understanding can certainly win. But the victory for the broad idea of India cannot be stable unless those fighting for the larger conception know what they are fighting for. The reach of Indian traditions, including heterodoxy and the celebration of plurality and scepticism, requires a comprehensive recognition. Cognizance of India's dialogic traditions is important for an adequate understanding of the capacious idea of India.

