

The Sunset of the Century: India and the Ideal of Internationalism

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Outlook: 70 Years of Indian Independence

The world is in crisis. The risks from climate change, the renewed threat of nuclear weapons, the Long War on Terror, a refugee catastrophe, and the possibility of ecological collapse have fed widespread anxieties about economic security and personal safety. Everywhere there is clamor for solutions, yet never have our options felt more restricted. On the one hand, there is the existing liberal order, which has brought us austerity, global corporatism, and soaring inequality. On the other lies a return to majoritarian nationalism, which, unfettered by international institutions, helped lead us to two world wars.

India, for its part, has sought to play it safe, adopting muscular, majoritarian nationalism at home while embracing the liberal order abroad, unwilling or unable to make a clear choice between the two, or to think creatively beyond them. In contrast with this lack of imagination, India's anti-colonial pioneers dreamt of a country on the move, in the world, alive with possibility. They brought commitment, energy, and an undeniable zeal for tackling intractable problems, to make the impossible possible. The fate of India and that of the global polity, they insisted, was inextricably linked. As they applied their ideals, they inspired a generation to think and act in new ways, and their insights may well yet offer a pathway out our current predicament.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, but drawing from an older well of ideas, visionaries across the world saw that many of the biggest social issues—poverty, identity, migration, violence—were interrelated and so demanded an integrated set of solutions. Across a wide

swath of the political spectrum, internationalists, as they came to be known, argued that we had to look at things from a planetary perspective to find the most viable and enduring answers.

In the United States for instance, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt brought both optimism and determination to bear as they unleashed program after program to help combat the despair of the Great Depression of the 1930's. They profoundly reconfigured the American political economy before FDR declared a universal quest for Four Freedoms: of speech and worship, from fear and want.

This kind of broad-minded global politics resonated with a wide array of founding figures in the Indian subcontinent, who came to similar conclusions on their own terms. Despite the fact that they had many disagreements, and endless capacity for debate, they found common ground on a substantial set of goals: a belief in collective responsibility for the social good, a sense of justice, a duty to raise up the wretched, and a desire to emphasize shared human dignity.

B.R. Ambedkar gave the “highest place to fraternity as the only real safeguard against the denial of liberty [and] equality; and fraternity was another name for brotherhood or humanity.” “What else can give to all living beings the same happiness which one seeks for one’s own self,” he asked, “to keep the mind impartial, open to all, with affection for every one and hatred for none?” Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, quoting Mahatma Gandhi, insisted “we must recognize that our nationalism must not be inconsistent with progressive internationalism.” K.M. Munshi declared that India had to have “a sense of fairness, a burning desire for peace and a faith in One World.” Informing all of these views was a scathing critique of nationalism that Rabindranath Tagore had penned in 1917.

Railing against the “cruel epidemic of evil” and the war-mongering exclusivity at its core, Tagore argued that nationalism was no solution to the people’s ills, and instead a cause of them, juxtaposed to an international cosmopolitanism. In his forlorn, soul-stirring way, he concluded with a lyrical warning: “The naked passion of self-love of Nations,” he wrote of “the sunset of the century,” “in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance... The crimson glow of light on the horizon is not the light of thy dawn of peace, my Motherland. It is the glimmer of the funeral pyre burning to ashes the vast flesh,—the self-love of the Nation—dead under its own excess.”

Such words spoke to Jawaharlal Nehru’s heart, and appealed to his tactile understanding of politics. From the end of the First World War, he sought ways to turn such poetry into political prose. After his initial hopes were raised and then dashed by Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, he found an opening when Gandhi began quietly talking about internationalist ideals in the late twenties. The two soon began to exchange ideas, agreeing, first and foremost, that the imperial order had to be upended, for therein lay the ultimate manifestation, if not the root, of systematic dehumanization, discrimination and domination. These triple terrors led not only to everyday misery for millions, but also, inevitably, to violence and to war.

But the fate of the Fourteen also revealed a tragic truth. Internationalism in and of itself was no panacea, for it was not inherently anti-imperial. Instead, as the League of Nations willed into being by South Africa’s Jan Smuts demonstrated, the two could go hand in hand. Combinations

of empires, would not—and could not—alter the ideologies and ambitions that were hardwired into their constituent units, making such an organization an ineffective instrument of peace. The League’s failure to prevent the outbreak of World War II proved this point as much as it revealed the need for all, including the Great Powers, to be included in a functional international union.

That internationalism did not inherently serve as a negation of imperialism did not of course mean that it could not. For Gandhi, the takeaway was obvious: “[i]nternationalism is possible only when nationalism becomes a fact, i.e., when peoples belonging to different countries have organized themselves and are able to act as one man.” But for this to be true, the *type* of nationalism mattered, as did the *type* of internationalism that followed. This meant that “narrowness, selfishness, and exclusiveness” all had to be rejected and expunged. As with all other things, for Gandhi the way one traveled to a destination determined the nature of the arrival and where one might be able to go thereafter.

Writing in July 1942 to a prominent disciple, the Mahatma proclaimed: “I was trying to take...everybody towards world federation.... I want free India too for that purpose. If...power of non-violence is firmly established, Empire idea dissolves and world State takes its place, in which all the States of the world are free and equal.” Just weeks later, the Indian National Congress committed the anti-colonial movement to this ideal in the Quit India Declaration. And in the wake of the Second World War, India formally adopted the creation of “One World” as its grand strategic objective, “a world government, with all its requisite organs for executive, deliberative, and judicial functions...[where] the absolute sovereignty of each nation will have to undergo an agreed upon modification.”

Progressive internationalism was premised on the principle that free people everywhere should determine their future—together—under the aegis of forged common ideals. Difference and the will of the locality had to be respected, under the proviso that neither could serve as an excuse to oppress. Gandhi explained that individual, national, and international independence were all interconnected, and one could not truly have one without the others, each limited only by the legal maxim to “not use what you have to harm others.”

This is what led Indians to embrace the new concept of *human rights* then in gestation. In parallel with decolonization, and as part of it, India understood such rights as a way to embody the basic values that all societies shared, essential for the common good. Each right carried with it an attendant obligation, so every person, every people, and every state had a range of duties to one another, inflecting the protections all were guaranteed. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and Hansa Mehta helped shape the formal UN instruments with this in mind.

For nearly two decades, India advanced this agenda with tenacity, though of course not without domestic and international setbacks and inconsistencies. The country’s idealism was practically mitigated by a sense of *realpolitik*, shaped in part by Nehru’s Fabianism. India saw the big picture, but also approached each constituent situation clear-eyed. Compromise that validated opponents while not betraying principles was essential to progress, and small achievements were to be celebrated.

A liberal international order took the place of the preceding imperial regime, coinciding with its demise, and centered on the nation-state. But for India this was not at odds with its goals, since decolonization and self-determination were seen as fundamental elements and necessary preconditions for functional global government. The liberal order was a step in the right direction.

Indian leadership attracted admirers from all over, from eccentrics like “first world citizen” Garry Davis, to éminences grises, like Albert Einstein. Arnold Toynbee, who had achieved renown for his grand *Study of History*, traveled to India in 1960 to deliver the first Azad Memorial Lectures at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, after they had been inaugurated the year before by Nehru. Introduced, along with the Prime Minister, as “citizens of a world state which is not yet in being,” Toynbee pointed to what he called India’s characteristic “fabulous variety-in-unity” as “the only alternative to mutual destruction.” He brought his talk to an end reflecting the catholicity of the Maulana for whom his lectures were named: “We have not merely to appreciate our neighbors’ distinctive contributions,” he affirmed, “we have to love our neighbors themselves as precious members of a human family.”

But the Cold War created an impenetrable cloud of confusion and paranoia. Suspicion bred more suspicion, until, finally, mistrust between a polarized world restricted and then smothered any opportunity to forge stronger bonds. The 1962 Sino-Indian War was but one symptom of the malaise, after which India abandoned the high road. From its descent, it has never regained the standing it once held.

India’s turn away from its former positions following the Chinese incursion was not a sharp, immediate reversal, but rather a gradual one. The country continued to work within international frameworks like the Non-Aligned Movement, and to build regional cooperatives like SAARC, to stand apart from the superpowers, though now in service of much diminished aims. It jettisoned its larger dream of One World, and started to take more hardline, aggressive positions, embracing a perceived new realism. Nonetheless, India never retired its high-minded talk either, and the result has been a growing gap between rhetoric and action, the country’s hollowed out moral proclamations betraying the bigger strategic vacuum.

Yet, the world is now in crisis. And both nationalism and the existing liberal order have fallen short in addressing our underlying distress, and have, in some ways, even exacerbated matters. And so perhaps it is time to think anew about India’s unfulfilled internationalist vision of a world governed by political and civil liberties, as well as economic, social, and cultural rights—of a world that celebrates differences of custom and community within such norms, and that empowers people at both the local and the global level.

“Keep watch, India,” Tagore implored. “Be not ashamed...to stand before the proud and the powerful with your white robe of simpleness. And know that what is huge is not great and pride is not everlasting.”