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Democratic Development and the Global Indian: Glimpses of the Uncompleted Portraits of India

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Abstract

India, with a rich history of more than 5000 years, the last seven decades of which have been as a modern independent state, is a vibrant democracy in which freedom is cherished, if not always realized, as society progresses amid contradictions and paradoxes. In this article, the author argues that only creative debate and dialogue can make India a viable player in the globalized world of today. In the first part, the author highlights the contribution of Amartya Sen, who equates genuine freedom with enabling development and fostering the capabilities for all citizens. He then turns to the present state of political freedom and democracy in India through the analysis of Mukulika Banerjee. This takes him to the problem of corruption in India and the promise and failings of the Anna Hazare movement's attempt to address it. In the final sections the author turns to literary and journalistic depictions of Indian modernity that lead him the conclusion that only respectful, on-going dialogue among all players can merge the entangled stories of India within a global Indian identity.

[Keywords] *Indian democracy, Indian elections, India portraits, Anna movement, global citizen.*

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민주주의의 발전과 세계적인 인도인: 인도의 미완성 초상화 힐끗 보기

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<국문요약>

지난 70 년 동안 현대 독립 국가로 있었던, 오천 년이 넘는 풍부한 역사를 가진 인도는 모순과 역설 속에서 사회가 진행됨에 따라 항상 실현되지는 않더라도 자유를 소중히 여기는 생생한 민주주의를 실현하고 있다. 이 논문에서 저자는 독창적인 토론과 대화만이 오늘날의 세계화된 세상에서 인도를 성장가능한 주자로 만들 수 있다고 주장한다. 첫 번째 부분에서 저자는 Amartya Sen의 공헌을 강조하는데 Amartya Sen은 모든 시민을 위해 발전을 가능케 하고 능력을 배양시키는 진정한 자유를 중요시한다. 그는 Mukulika Banerjee의 분석을 통해 인도의 정치적 자유와 민주주의의 현재 상태에 눈을 돌렸다. 이것은 그를 인도에서의 부패 문제와 그것을 해결하려고 시도하는 Anna Hazare운동의 약속과 실패로 이끈다. 마지막 부분에서 저자는 인도의 현대성에 대한 문학적, 저널리즘적 묘사에 집중하는데, 이로써 모든 주자들 사이에서 정중하고 지속적인 대화만이 세계화된 인도의 정체성내에서 얽힌 이야기를 풀어서 모을 수 있다고 결론을 이끌어 낸다.

[주제어] *인도 민주주의, 인도 선거, 인도 초상, 안나 운동, 글로벌 시민.*

I. Introduction

One of the worst tragedies of modern India was the Gujarat violence in 2002, a series of incidents between Hindus and Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat. On 27 February 2002, Muslims allegedly attacked the Sabarmati Express train at Godhra. A resulting fire of uncertain origin killed 58 Hindu pilgrims, including 25 women and 15 children, returning from Ayodhya, believed by many Hindus to have been the birthplace of Rama. This in turn prompted retaliatory attacks against Muslims and general communal riots on a large scale across the state, in which 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus were ultimately killed and 223 more people were reported missing. Amid the bloodshed 523 places of worship were damaged: 298 dargahs (tombs of Muslim saints or other Muslim shrines), 205 mosques, 17 temples, and 3 churches. Muslim-owned businesses suffered the bulk of the damage. Many fled their homes, including an estimated 61,000 Muslims and 10,000 Hindus. Preventive arrests of at least 17,947 Hindus and 3,616 Muslims were made.[1] [2]

The nature of these events remains politically controversial in India even after 15 years. Some commentators have claimed that thousands of human beings died in a genocide with alleged state complicity ("2002 Gujarat Riots" 2017). It was only after ten years that Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, who is alleged to have been involved in the riots, was interviewed by former MP Shahid Siddiqui, a Muslim and the editor of Urdu weekly *Nai Duniya*. Commenting on this interview, Sudheendra Kulkarni, columnist and former strategist for the right-wing political leader L.K. Advani, held that "India's democracy is a demanding teacher and, as all good teachers are, very fair and unfailingly helpful. Its lessons are meant for both people and politicians. Those who learn are rewarded. Those who don't, suffer." Consequently, "One of the lessons that democracy teaches, with the persistence of a devoted teacher, is the virtue of dialogue. Especially, dialogue between adversaries for the sake of the larger good of the nation" (Kulkarni 2012). It is on this dialogical dimension of Indian existence with its necessary freedom and development that we want to focus in this article.[2]

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

The seminal work, *Development as Freedom,* by Amartya Sen (1999), a Nobel Laureate in Economics, constitutes a comprehensive challenge to the

[1] The details given here, including the causes and motivations of the violence and the number of casualties, are drawn from the Wikipedia account ("2002 Gujarat Riots" 2017). All aspects of the riots have been the subject of ongoing, often ferocious debate. I acknowledge that the data may not be fully reliable, but the reality of the carnage is beyond dispute.

[2] This article expands the analysis originally presented in *Stories of Indian Development*, Pune: Jnanam, 2004.

classical theories of development that have dominated economics and economic theory during the last 20 years. [3] According to what has become the "conventional wisdom" of economics, the most important function of economic policy is to safeguard the "right" of a minority to accumulate profits at the highest rate possible (euphemistically referred to as "growth") (Manji 2010). Development, it is assumed, is possible only if there is such growth. Only when this freedom is unrestricted will others in society benefit from any associated spin-offs (the trickle-down effect). All other freedoms are only achievable if such growth occurs. The purpose of "development" is, therefore, to guarantee "growth" so that ultimately other freedoms can, at some indeterminate time in the future, be enjoyed. State expenditure, according to this dogma, should be directed towards creating an enabling environment for "growth," and not be "wasted" on the provision of public services that, in any case, can ultimately be provided "more efficiently" by private enterprise.

These are the assumptions that we will find in the various writings on economic development over the last 20 years – whether from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, or from bilateral development agencies in the North. This is the madness that "makes socially useful members of society such as school-teachers and health workers feel more threatened by conservative economic policies than do army generals." It is the madness that led to social calamities such as the genocide in Rwanda. In his important book, Amartya Sen tries to bring sense (and sanity) to bear on economics and development theory. For him, the well-being of humans is the focus of all development. So the well-being of humans is placed as "both the goal and the means for development, not simply a spurious side effect" (Manji 2010).

According to Amartya Sen, "Freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means." Therefore, development should be seen as a process of expanding freedoms. "If freedom is what development advances, then there is a major argument for concentrating on that overarching objective, rather than on some particular means, or some chosen list of instruments" (Manji 2010). Achieving such development, he argues, requires the removal of poverty, tyranny, lack of economic opportunities, social deprivation, neglect of public services, and the various means of repression. He challenges the conventional economists with gentleness and reason. There is both breadth in the scope of subjects considered and depth in the treatment of empirical data that he amasses as evidence for his conclusions.

He shows, for example, how high per capita income does not necessarily correlate with greater life expectancy: poor African Americans have a lower life expectancy than the poor in the Indian state of Kerala where the people have access to public services. Further, he demonstrates that the "solution of the

[3] For this section I am indebted to the excellent review article by Firoze Manji (2010), a Kenya-born author and activist.

problem of population growth (like the solution of so many other social and economic problems) can lie in expanding the freedom of the people whose interest are most directly affected by over frequent child-bearing and child-rearing. The solution of the population problem calls for more freedom, not less" (Manji 2010). Thus, he shows that famines are not a product of absolute shortages of food; rather, "inequality has an important role in the development of famines and other severe crises … [the latter] thrive on the basis of severe and sometimes suddenly increased inequality" (Manji 2010).

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

In this way, Sen integrates ethics, values and development in his economic theory. "The formation of values and the emergence and evolution of social ethics are also part of the process of development." He argues that a variety of social institutions including those involved in the operation of markets, administrations, legislatures, political parties, NGOs, the judiciary, the media and the 'community', all contribute to the process of development, and therefore an integrated analysis is needed of their respective roles.

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

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

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

As India is being hailed as the next superpower, we need to ask some uncomfortable questions in the political field. Is its record on governance and development over the seven decades of being a self-ruling democracy up to the challenge of its newfound reputation? Mukulika Banerjee, of the London School of Economics, points out that India has achieved some remarkable successes but also failed in significant ways (Banerjee 2009). While economic growth has been rapid over recent decades, this has not translated into greater welfare for the majority of the Indian population. Banerjee cites Pulapre Balakrishnan, a renowned economist: "Despite overtaking Japan as the third largest economy, India has lost its leadership role in the continent because, unlike its eastern neighbours, it has ignored its poor" (Balakrishnan 2013).

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

IIIa. A Vigorous and Vibrant Civil Society

Where Banerjee finds a more mixed record is in India's implementation of democratic ideas: the participation of citizens, rule of law, and the responsibility of the state in ensuring basic freedoms, material security and education. It is evident that India's heterodox policy of a mixed economy of planned economic development and liberalization has put it at the high table of emergent powers in the world. She accepts that the positive effects of this are yet to reach the majority of Indians, in particular the poorest citizens. Many of those in power have severely abused their position, transgressing trust and probity, as scandals of corruption, bribes and kickbacks are revealed on a regular basis. While some of this corruption is widely regarded as inevitable transactional costs, the more serious consequences have been felt by what has been called an

"economy of influence," (Banerjee 2009), namely, the "nexus of corporations, politicians and the press who have colluded to strengthen entrenched interests and weaken institutions." This has been acutely felt, for instance, in the state's policy on India's natural resources, which has consistently ignored the rights of indigenous populations (tribals) whose lands contain these resources and preferred the corporate interests whose main goal is exploitation of the resources for commercial gains. This neglect, on the back of an abysmal human development record among the same populations, has led to violent insurgency movements in some districts (called Naxilite movements), whose leaders allegedly oppose the democratic state and its institutions.

The Indian state, for its part, has not held back in its violent suppression of these movements. Elsewhere too, India's civil society remains vigorous as ecological, feminist, religious and justice-based social movements continually challenge the status quo. The national body politic has developed "a vast repertoire of protest and persuasion, drawn on the techniques developed during the anti-colonial struggles and those from the twenty-first century, to bring pressure on governments to be responsive to popular demands" (Banerjee 2009). These movements "utilize and challenge the freedoms and liberties within the purview of democratic institutions and sometimes outside of it."

IIIb. Elections with Flair and Festivity

At the heart of India's democratic system have been the regular elections that now see the participation of over a hundred political parties and the largest electorate in the world (about 814 million – larger than all the potential voters in North America, Europe and Australia combined). The voter turnout in the 2014 general elections has been comparable to other major democracies (about 66 percent) but is still trending upwards, unlike in the older democracies where rates are generally falling in the midst of growing voter apathy. Even more surprisingly, the most enthusiastic voters in Indian elections are not the well-educated urban middle classes but those who are the poorest, most discriminated against, and least educated – citizens living primarily in villages and small towns. Incredibly, turnout rates at elections in these areas can for local elections exceed 80 percent. Further, the more local the election, the higher the turnout, which goes against global trends. Contrary to what many predicted in 1947, notes Banerjee, poverty and illiteracy have not hampered the functioning of Indian democracy.

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

According to her, one important factor in the faith that people have in elections is the performance of the Election Commission of India (ECI). Set up in 1950 to manage and conduct elections, unlike many of its counterparts in other democracies, the ECI is an autonomous and constitutional body, which through its sixty-year old life has evolved into a responsive and efficient public body. Only the Supreme Court of India shares this level of popular respect. The voting process, the successful adoption of electronic voting machines, the maintenance of electoral registers, the security provided to voters and political actors, and the standards of probity among the two million election officials who conduct the elections have all emerged "as enviably efficient features in a country where much else goes wrong" (Banerjee 2009). During general and state elections, the Election Commission is given wide-ranging powers to create greater transparency and accountability and politicians and governments are governed by the strict rules of a Model Code of Conduct imposed by the Election Commissioner of India. So, in general the Indian electorate trusts the Election Commission of India much more than the politicians.

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

Elections in India are a big festival. As Banerjee has pointed out (2009), it is at this time that "the two political domains of the demonic/demotic that remain largely separate for the most part are forced to collide and confront each other," for during election campaigns the politicians have to account for their neglect of their constituencies and beg a second chance. During long and exhausting election campaigns in large and diverse constituencies the "laundered clothes of rich politicians are sullied by dusty road journeys, their arrogant heads have to be bent entering modest huts of the poor," and their hands have to be folded in front of the ordinary people. In this way, elections in India have a carnival air as people celebrate, dance around and "delight in this levelling effect of campaigns, as the ordinary voter suddenly becomes the object of attention of the powerful" (Banerjee 2009).

At the same time, the Indian voters also feel some pressure to play their own role in making the proper choice, which is always open to the influence of a caste group, kin or community. At the fundamental (or local) level, there is tremendous pressure to not waste a vote. One of the ways in which this pressure is created is by a simple procedure carried out by the Election Commissioner of India. In any Indian election, each voter has their left index finger marked by a short vertical line in indelible black ink just before they approach the electronic voting machine. While this procedure is carried

out to ward off repeat voting, it has also had the unintended consequence of making it impossible to lie about *whether* one has actually chosen to vote. It, therefore, generates tremendous peer pressure among people to go and take the trouble to vote, for not to do so causes the discomfort of constant questions and suspicions. The importance of not losing face in front of others, whether they are kin or party workers, is in fact an important motivation for voting and results in high turnout rates (Banerjee 2009).

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

After her elaborate analysis Banerjee sums up India's record on democracy as "reasonably consistent" (Banerjee 2009). Her assessment of Indian democracy is a pointed challenge to choose the demotic against the demonic: India's "institutions have been mostly robust though they have also increasingly come under threat by personal greed and the collusion of powerful actors who seek to undermine the principles and robustness of these institutions. Yet, at the same time, in the wider society, ideas about democratic participation, the role of the electorate and the importance of a shared duty of citizenship are also vigorously articulated. In the end, it will be the challenges posed by this latter demotic politics of hope, mobilization, participation and justice that will need to overcome the demonic world of greed and power" (Banerjee 2009).

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

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

IV: Lessons from Anna Hazare's Movement

Kisan Baburao Hazare (born 15 June 1937), popularly known as Anna Hazare, is a social activist who led movements to promote rural development, increase government transparency, and investigate official corruption. He has helped organize and encourage a number of grassroots movements in India (for example, he contributed to the development and structuring of Ralegan Siddhi, a village in Parnertaluka of Ahmednagar district, Maharashtra, India, for which he was awarded the Padma Bhushan, the nation's third-highest civilian award, in 1992). To further these causes Hazare has frequently conducted hunger strikes to further his causes—a tactic reminiscent, to many, of the work of Mohandas K. Gandhi, the Father of the Nation. To cite one significant recent initiative, Anna Hazare started an indefinite hunger strike on 5 April 2011 to exert pressure on the Indian government to enact one of his proposals, the Lokpal Bill, a stringent anti-corruption law that would create the position of ombudsman with the power to deal with corruption in public places. The fast led to nation-wide protests in his support. The fast ended on 9 April 2011, a day after the government accepted Hazare's demands. The government issued a gazette notification on the formation of a joint committee, consisting of government and civil society representatives, to draft the legislation.

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

Gradually, Anna Hazare's fight against corruption movement began to fizzle out, partly due to his own doings. If one studies the whole event, one may conclude that right from the beginning Anna started committing blunder after blunder. He seemed to be claiming a monopoly in defining moral values and their implementation in civil society, and to be shifting his goals at random. So the three-day fast by Anna Hazare against the government's version of the Lokpal Bill in Mumbai starting on December 27, 2011 drew lukewarm response, unlike his earlier fast (Totanawala 2011).

Again, Anna Hazare proceeded on 28 July 2012 his fast-unto-death on the Lokpal issue in Delhi. He stated that country's future was not safe in the hands of the two major political umbrellas: Congress and BJP. He hoped to campaign in the coming elections for those candidates with clean backgrounds, presumably members and affiliates of Team Anna, which would be fasting alongside him. On the third day of his indefinite fast, Anna stated that he would not talk even to the Prime Minister until his demands were met. But this time the response of the masses and the mass

media were very discouraging. The government refused to negotiate with Team Anna. On 2 August 2012 Anna said that there was nothing wrong in forming a new political party, but he would neither join the party nor contest elections.

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

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

Tavleen Singh, a popular Indian columnist and political reporter and a critique of Team Anna, wishes well for Anna Hazare. Writing in her regular column, she hopes that the team who has decided to join politics, "realizes the fundamental principle of democracy is debate." She confesses that among the things that "put me off Anna, and his movement, from the start was its totalitarian nature. Its apparent inability to accept that neither Anna nor his team have all the answers." She was apprehensive of "their inability to comprehend the power of debate and the meaning of dissent" (Singh 2012).

She holds that the strength of democracy lies in its institutions and in the rule of law (Singh 2012). So despite her doubts about Anna Hazare and her distaste for "his very unsavoury team mates," she welcomes their entry into electoral politics. "If they can find a new way, tread a new path and bring people into the Lok Sabha [Parliament] who have a genuine interest in public service, then they would have done this country a real service" (Singh 2012).

Amartya Sen has been as critical of the government as Anna Hazare (cf. Sen 2005). In particular, he has not been shy about his opinion of the current prime minister. As he has said publicly, "I don't want Narendra Modi as my PM" (Sen 2013). But Sen has also been as critical of Hazare's choices as Singh. Referring to Team Anna, Sen (2012) has bluntly stated that "I believe that their reading of corruption or what causes corruption or how it can removed is wrong," while he also rejects the notion of using indefinite

fasts as a tool to eradicate corruption (Sen 2012). “The system needs changing but that’s not a question of changing a minister or doing *dharna* or having someone tied up at a tree. It’s a question of changing a system and looking at the incentives the system gives on corruption,” he added. For Sen, “You have to mobilise the political system because you know democracy is meant to be governed by discussion instead of that what we’ve ended up in India is the government by pressure groups and the pressure groups are very sour” (Sen 2012).

As of today, the movement has petered out, though the political party that was formed of it (Aam Admi Party) has support, especially in North India, and survives without the support of Anna. As such, the story of Anna appears to have faltered, but not ended. The narrative and discourse for a corruption-free India goes on. The new political set-up after the election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in 2014 has made the movement go dormant, but the vital concerns remain central to the Indian democracy. So the issues and dreams behind the story of Anna will have to be addressed. The discourse is not ended, merely postponed.

While what will happen to the movement associated with Anna Hazare is uncertain at the moment, it is still possible to feel, certainly to hope, that freedom and democracy in India, which this movement hoped to purify and strengthen, are in safe hands, in spite of the many weaknesses in their Indian incarnation that Hazare and his followers exemplified. What remains beyond serious dispute is that such freedom and democracy are closely tied to a humane and empowering understanding of development, as Amartya Sen holds.

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

V. Two Contemporary Stories of Development and Freedom

In this concluding section we take up the emergent, increasingly entrepreneurial India in the globalized scenario. We will view it through the prism of two young, enterprising observers of the contemporary Indian scene, the novelist Aravind Adiga and the journalist Akash Kapur.

Va. Aravind Adiga and The White Tiger

Aravind Adiga is the well-known author of *The White Tiger* (2008). First published in 2008, it won the 40th Man Booker Prize in the same year. The novel provides a darkly humorous perspective of India’s

class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from Balram Halwai, a village boy. In detailing Balram's journey first to Delhi, where he works as a chauffeur to a rich landlord, and then to Bangalore, the place to which he flees after killing his master and stealing his money, the novel deals with religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and abject poverty. Ultimately, Balram transcends his sweet-maker caste and becomes a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service. In a nation proudly wanting to disown poverty and underdevelopment, he claims to be the symbol of "tomorrow."

The novel has been well-received, making the *New York Times* best-seller list in addition to winning many awards. Aravind Adiga, only 33 years old at the time of writing the novel, was the second youngest writer, as well as the fourth debut writer to win the Booker/Man Booker Prize. Adiga asserts that this novel attempts "to catch the voice of the men you meet as you travel through India — the voice of the colossal underclass." According to him, the purpose of *The White Tiger* was to capture the unspoken voice of people from "the Darkness" – the impoverished areas of rural India. He "wanted to do so without sentimentality or portraying them as mirthless humorless weaklings as they are usually" portrayed (The White Tiger 2013).

The locale of *The White Tiger* is the dynamic and developing India of today. The novel's main character, Balram Halwai, is born in Laxmangarh, Bihar, a rural village in "the Darkness." Balram narrates the novel as a letter written over seven consecutive nights that is addressed to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, who is visiting India. In his letter, Balram explains how he, the son of poor rickshaw puller, escaped a life of servitude to become a successful businessman. Balram begins the novel by narrating his early life in his native village, where he lived with his grandmother, parents, brother and extended family. Though a smart child, he is forced to quit school in order to help pay for his cousin's dowry. While at work in a teashop with his brother, he learns about India's government and new emerging economy from the conversations of different types of customers.

Balram admits that he was a bad employee who dreamt of becoming a driver. Slowly, Balram learns to drive and gets a job driving Ashok, the son of the local landlord. Balram moves to New Delhi with his boss and boss's wife, Miss Pinky Madam. Throughout their time in New Delhi, Balram is exposed to the extensive and all-pervasive corruption in India's government and bureaucratic system. He experiences at first hand the vast disparity between India's poor and wealthy and compares the luxurious life-style of the wealthy with that of miserable slum dwellers.

One night, Pinky decides to drive the car by herself and hits something. She is worried that it was a child and the family eventually decides to frame Balram for the hit and run. The police tell them that no one reported a child missing. Gradually, Ashok becomes increasingly involved with the corrupt government. Balram then decides that the only way that he can

escape India's "Rooster Coop" is by killing Ashok, his master. On a rainy day, while driving the car, he murders Ashok by bludgeoning him with a broken liquor bottle. In order to escape the police, Balram then flees from New Delhi to Bangalore with his younger brother. There he bribes the police in order to start his own driving service. As his driving company progresses and when one of his drivers kills a child, Balram pays off the family and police. Balram thinks that this child was killed as retribution for Ashok's murder. At the end of the novel Balram rationalizes his actions by saying that his freedom is worth the lives of Ashok and his family and the monetary success of his new taxi company.

The White Tiger fits in well in modern day India where increased technology has led to globalization. In the past decade, India has had one of the fastest booming economies. Globalization in general, and Americanization in particular, have played significant roles in the plot, since they provide an outlet for Balram to alter his caste. To satisfy Pinky's desire for American culture, Ashok, Pinky, and Balram simply move to Gurgaon, near Delhi. Globalization has assisted in the creation of an American atmosphere in Delhi. Ashok justifies this move by explaining, "Today it's the modernist suburb of Delhi. American Express, Microsoft, all the big American companies have offices there. The main road is full of shopping malls - each mall has a cinema inside! So if Pinky Madam missed America, this was the best place to bring her" (Adiga 2008, 101).

In the novel, India is compared to the rest of the world's superpowers. "There are so many more things I could do here than in New York now...The way things are changing in India now, this place is going to be like America in ten years," Balram notes (Adiga 2008, 77). Recognizing the rapid economic growth all around him, Balram knows that, in order to rise above his caste, he should become an entrepreneur. Although his taxi service is not an international business, Balram plans to keep up with the pace of globalization and change his trade when needed, since "I'm always a man who sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today'" (Adiga 2008, 274). Balram's recognition of the increasing competition resulting from globalization contributes to his corruption.

In an interview, Aravind Adiga has stated that *The White Tiger* was about an individual's quest for freedom. Balram, the protagonist in the novel, worked his way out of his low social caste (often referred to as "the Darkness") and overcame the social obstacles that limited his family in the past, but through dubious ways. Climbing up the social ladder, Balram sheds the weights and limits of his past and overcomes the social obstacles that keep him from living life to the fullest that he can. In the novel, Balram talks about how he was in "a rooster coop" and how he broke free from his coop. The novel is a personal memoir of his journey to finding his freedom in India's globalized, capitalist and corrupt society. Towards the beginning of the novel, Balram cites the well-known Muslim poet Iqbal, "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world" (Adiga 2008, 34). Balram sees himself personifying the poem and being the one who "sees what

is beautiful in this world" and rises through the ranks of society. In doing so he finds his freedom, at the cost of his soul, at the loss of his neighbours! But that cost, reflected in the novel's unflattering portrait of India's dark side as a society racked by corruption and servitude, has expectedly caused a storm in India.

Vb. Akash Kapur and the Incomplete Portrait of India Becoming

In *The New York Times,* Akash Kapur, another young and creative author from India, called Adiga's book "simplistic" and "an incomplete portrait of a nation and a people grappling with the ambiguities of modernity" (Powers 2012). Just what are the "ambiguities of modernity" to which Kapur is referring? Some hints can be found in an essay by the economist Tyler Cowen published in the *New York Times* in 2012 that warned, "Never Mind Europe. Worry about India." Although Cowen thinks that India is "likely to end up as the world's largest economy by the next century," he cautions that, in "one of the world's biggest economic stories," albeit one seldom acknowledged or understood in the West, economic growth has been faltering, leading to effects on society that are, as is so often the case in contemporary India, very unevenly distributed, "with the greatest burden falling on the poor." He is afraid that if this trend does not reverse itself, "millions of Indians, for another generation, will fail to rise above extreme penury and want" (Cowen 2012).

Ironically, Akash Kapur, the same Indian writer who criticized Adiga's portrait of India in *The White Tiger*, would later publish *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India,* a journalistic account of what he saw upon his return to South India in 2003, after receiving an education at an American school and at Harvard. In the years since he had left, he found that every other Indian he met seemed to be an "entrepreneur," reminding one of Balram. Kapur adds that in today's India "for the first time in my life, but arguably in India's history too, people dared to imagine an existence for themselves that was unburdened by the past and tradition." In this new environment, "India, I felt, had started to dream" (Kapur 2012, 9).

Kapur married and settled down to live in his "new" India, but he grew increasingly appalled by what he at first admired about his re-found country. Kapur points out that over 300 million of India's people – roughly the population of the United States where he was educated – live in abject poverty with incomes of only a dollar or less per day. He further notes that more than half of India's surface water is non-potable, and almost half of its land has eroded. In addition, some researchers are calling India's air the most polluted on the planet. Kapur focuses much of his attention on the millions of young people in India today who have left the villages of their birth behind to move closer to jobs in large urban centers such as Delhi, Calcutta and Mumbai. The rapid urbanization has contributed to the development of the new

Indian middle class, but is also posing immense ecological problems that threaten their future and the hopes of millions of other Indians to join them.

So here we have two books dealing with the ambiguities and uncertainties of modern India. How does Aravind Adiga's novel, this "incomplete portrait of a nation," compare with Kapur's non-fiction, *India Becoming: A Portrait of Modern India?* (Powers 2012 & Kapur 2012)? Kapur sets out to tell two parallel stories: "One is a story of progress," he writes, the other, "of the destruction and disruptions caused by the same process of development." Kapur's own feelings about his native country tend to get overwhelmed by bland nostalgia, but *India Becoming* is strongest when other voices are given freest rein as Kapur recounts the stories of a wide range of diverse characters he encountered during his research – Sathy, a rural landowner losing influence and status who wants simply to hold own to the comforting rhythms of the old India; Sathy's progressive, ambitious wife who is running a consultancy in Bangalore and growing annoyed with the circumstances circumscribing her; Hari, a young IT worker who is flourishing in the city but struggling with societal (and his own?) distaste for his homosexuality; Selvi, a small-town girl who moved to the city to take a call centre job and finds her views of Americans changing as she interacts with brusque customers; and Veena, an ambitious divorcee who must balance her aspirations for a career and independence with her desire for a family. Their entangled stories are what give the book its texture and insight, making it "a valuable investigation of the effects of India's fast-paced change on the land and its people" (Powers 2012).

Ironically, Akash Kapur's criticism of *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga is "an incomplete portrait of modern India" could be levelled against his own book as well as Adiga's novel, yet in both cases the incompleteness is a reflection of the book's strengths. A more complete portrait would be a series of graphs and charts and statistics, not a novel filled with living ambiguities and paradoxes, not a journalistic account like Kapur's that offers glimpses of the jarring complexities and contradictions that India encompasses. Such is the India of today: prosperous and poor, beautiful and ugly. Truly a living paradox!

VI. Conclusion: Sandhya Devi's Challenge

By definition, a paradox is never complete. It just is what it is. It goes on. We may roughly sum up India as simultaneously "ambiguous, ambivalent, progressive, regressive and so creative and/or destructive. It is not linear, not deterministic" (Powers 2012). It is really much more chaotic, but also more synergistic, than most of us can easily visualize. It is through the incomplete portraits of modern India that Indians, individually and collectively, can realize our freedom and enable progress that is humane. Such scenarios, complex and conflicting, call for genuine dialogue and creative interaction among the various partners. Dialogue between politicians of differing or opposing ideologies, between hope and greed, between the poor and

the rich is called for, as well as between religious groups of various shades and nuances. So our challenge is to foster a creative and respectful debate and "dialogue between adversaries for the sake of the larger good of the nation" (Kulkami 2012) and of every human being. Thus, the story continues to be narrated, the story of belongingness, freedom, development and progress. Such a story, complex, involved and multifaceted, goes on in contemporary India. Can we gently tweak it and give it a humane face?

In that endeavour, we need, at this historical point in the nation's history, to listen again to an old man's wisdom as we celebrate the 70th anniversary of India's modern statehood and as we approach the 70th anniversary, on January 30, 2018, of his violent death (for context see Tharoor 2016). In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, who is both respected and reviled in modern India:

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

Gandhi asked his fellow Indians, "Recall the face of the poorest and weakest woman you have seen, and ask yourself if this step you contemplate is going to be any use to her" (Brown and Parel 2011, 150).

It is here that we need to recognize the challenge posed by the tragic story of Sandhya Devi and her husband, Ashok Kumar. The Rajasthan state arrested the couple on the charge of selling their baby boy, born on July 31, 2012, to a neighboring couple, Vinod Agarwal and his wife Shakuntla, three days later for Rs 40,000 ($722) to pay for the treatment of their sick three-year-old son (Bareth 2012). They were forced to sell one of their children to take care of the other! The role of money, middle men and corruption is evident in the story of Sandhya Devi. The hermeneutic appropriation of the larger story of Indian democracy and development has to take account of such concrete and tragic cases.

If such incidents take place in some parts of India, what does it say of India's freedom and development? We need to creatively interpret and appropriate Gandhi's proposed talisman. We need collective and creative dialogue to move away from a culture of violence, exploitation and poverty. Then we pay heed to the wise counsels of Sudheendra Kulkarni, Amartya Sen, Aravind Adiga, Anna Hazare, Mukulika Banerjee, Akash Kapur and Mahatma Gandhi. Can we dialogue with friends and foes to reach our aim of sustainable development and free India? True, it is a herculean

challenge! But the “argumentative Indians” are capable of facing this challenge. The women and men of contemporary India have the inner wisdom and traditional resources that can help facilitate the emergence of the global Indian.

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