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Interview

A Modern Secularism Crucial for India's Progress: David Washbrook

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David Washbrook, Research Professor in South Asian History, Trinity College, Cambridge, U.K. Photo: M. Moorthy

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*A leading British historian of colonial south India, **David Washbrook**, Research Professor in South Asian History, Trinity College, Cambridge, U.K., sees India at a crossroads with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) heading the Union government.*

Do you see parallels between post-liberalisation India's social, political and economic changes and the country's past in terms of 'modernity'?

Certain features of "liberalisation" are not necessarily new, especially to southern India, which was so importantly part of a previous form of global economics – one based on the 'early modern' textile trade, spice trade, movement of money, and the development of more fluid forms of society.

In some senses India has recovered the position it occupied prior to colonial domination, and hence there are references and echoes of the past in the present. At the same time, it is a very different sort of global modernity. It depends very much on, and reflects the power of, new centres of technology and new large scale industries. It requires new levels of infrastructure which India struggles to complete, precisely because of some of those inheritances from the past: suspicions of the goodwill of the state to advance welfare for everybody that goes back to the colonial era, in which the state reneged on its wider responsibilities.

[India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal] Nehru attempted to bring a modern version of the state, as a westerner would understand it, into India; but may not have allowed enough for the particularities and the distinctiveness of culture. From the 1960s – after Nehru's death - one moved into a period in which the goodwill of the state became increasingly problematic. Without an acceptance of that goodwill, it is very hard to coordinate and organise some of the efforts in public investment, which are necessary fully to participate in the globalisation of the 21st century.

We are seeing the demise of Nehruvian concepts. The last standing, perhaps, is Nehruvian secularism. Do you see recent political developments [the election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha] as the final difficulty for Nehruvian secularism, or do you see its validity in the present context and going forward?

I think secularism, as a doctrine anywhere in the world always arises in the context of religious violence and conflict. It is a limiting condition. It's a way of dealing with a threatening situation of violence. One of the problems is that once it becomes successful – as I think Nehruvian secularism was for 30-odd years – the reason for it begins to disappear. One loses a sense of the kind of dangers to the nation that were widely felt here, between the 1920s and the 1950s. The problem is that once you begin to remove, it begins to collapse – the way it did in the 1980s and the 1990s. You then recreate the conditions for violence and conflict, and then, the response to that must be to re-advance secularism to contain them.

“Nehruvian secularism neglected trying to construct an alternative set of cultural markers”

I think we are in an interesting situation and it is a little early to make predictions. At the moment, it is possible that the election of a Hindu nationalist BJP government will lead to an intensification of conflict to an attempt to impose a Hindu hegemony and will start to move us back to those kinds of conditions that India was in the 1920s to the 1940s. That is certainly a possibility with the election of this government.

On the other hand, it has to be said that if one takes [Prime Minister] Narendra Modi at face value, he's moved away from that. That isn't the direction he wants to take India. He is aware of the importance and the imperatives of social cooperation to advance his modernity programme.

It may very well be that we begin to see, if not a revival of Nehruvian secularism, certainly a reassertion of some form of secularism, in the sense of seeking to redefine the Indian nation in ways which incorporates its various minorities. I think we're at a crossroads.

This present government faces a choice. It can either turn to the path, which brought it to power in the 1980s and 1990s, in which case the results will be catastrophic. Or it could move towards a form of secularism which is not a precise copy of the Nehruvian secularism – the circumstances of both India and the world are very different – but which certainly poses the state as a means of mediating tolerance between different cultural groups and minorities. We're at the crossroads. We don't know yet which way this new government will go. There are hints in both directions.

How do you see claims about ancient Indian [expertise in] science, including nuclear technology – to be taken seriously or [only] as political statements?

As a historian I am shocked that such views are still being held. They do represent a danger. Certainly their relevance within the new government would push things in this direction quite strongly. On the other hand, there are indications that point in the other direction. Admittedly, they could be a little bit stronger. [The views of] certain Ministers [who have made such pronouncements] have not had strong backing from the central authority. There are counter-pronouncements seeking to define India as a Hindu nation, but in the way that Gandhi would have done: as one which has the capacity to incorporate diversity. So it would not be a Nehruvian secularism.

A modern secularism, perhaps, because it would have to acknowledge greater importance to culture and religion of the great majority of people. I haven't entirely lost hope that the government will move in this wider direction. I fear that if it doesn't, then many of the goals that the government has set itself will simply be impossible. It will not be possible to move India along a path of peace, prosperity and progress in the way that the government claims, or wishes to.

You talk of a southern 'modernity' in India in the 1920s. This period also saw with the rise of new socio-political formations: the Justice Party [in southern India], and the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] in western India. Now, there are two trajectories: the declining phase of Dravidian parties in the south, contrasted with the ascendancy of RSS-based parties in north and, possibly, pan-India. Do you think that Dravidian parties have outlived their ideology, and that the RSS is coming of age?

There are two separate questions there. I have a great deal of time as a historian for Dravidianism and radicalism, and the way that took up very important themes in the context of the 1920s through to the 1980s, particularly pushing issues such as caste injustice and poverty of certain sections of society. As a political movement it suffered from its own success. Having achieved a political dominance, having come to dominate the State – as often with such movements – as it moved from movement to party to government, it does seem to have lost a sense of its original trajectories, and, in that sense has outlived its usefulness in many ways. It is not to say that the cause of the poor and people at the bottom of society is still not a very major and important one, but this does not seem to be the way of addressing that anymore. It's become populist; to some extent, with the corruption scandals surrounding it, it's become extremely elitist in terms of the interests it serves. Where we go, though, I'm not sure.

In the south, to the extent to which caste is entrenched, Dravidianism has, in a sense, lost its engagement with the real caste issues, the caste issues at the bottom. We will see a revival over caste politics, perhaps within that

tradition – a renewal of different leadership, a new set of developments – or perhaps outside. I noticed, rather interestingly, that the PMK [Pattali Makkal Katchi] is now talking about moving outside its caste constituency to set itself up in alliance in a kind of southern base for an all-India third front, bringing together all Left parties. That may be a way forward.

With regard to western India and the rise of religious parties there, I think we are dealing with a different thing. If one looks at the origins of Hindutva, it's very much located in the particular circumstances of Mahratta Brahmins, and in particular, Chitpavan Brahmins in the 20th century, an erstwhile elite and ruling group, which lost out heavily under the colonial dispensation, and, in a sense, were looking to revive the past – a glorious past of Hinduism, which to some extent they had invented in order to redress the problems of the present.

To an extent, Hindu politics, through to the 1980s, reflected something of that sentiment and something of that constituency, but subsequently it has broadened out. I think it now contains within it a response to, perhaps, one of the weaknesses of the Nehruvian dispensation: to give Indians a clear sense of cultural identity at the national level.

Nehruvian secularism was extremely critical of all kinds of cultural markers because of their threat to divide India; but it neglected trying to construct an alternative set of cultural markers for an Indian national identity which could be widely recognised. You could say that Nehru set the identity of Indians at a universal level: they would stand for non-alignment, socialism in the world, the struggle against imperial powers; but not specifically as Indians, not in terms of the distinctiveness of their own culture, rather as part of a broad, universal front or movement. That, in the end, ceased to be satisfying in the 1980s, along with the kinds of economic concerns and policies that Nehru was addressing with a significant rise of not just the middle class but of broader bases and possibilities of consumption. A constant emphasis simply on poverty and on struggle from below lost a lot of its appetite and appeal. I take what's going on in Hindutva or with Hindu nationalism to be an attempt – at its best – to construct a cultural identity for Indians to give them a history and a sense of achievement of which [they] can be proud of. That would – at its best – comprise all Indians and not a narrow band of particular Hindu affiliates.

We are in a process of struggle. Very clearly, Hindu nationalism can be conceived in a very narrow, very sectarian, very divisive way, which is a risk we have seen in the past. It is a risk that is still there and could come back. But there are alternative and other ways of defining India as a culture and a cultural nation.

It may be up to the Left to respond and to begin to think of ways in which it could construct a cultural alternative at the level of identity that would have the same kind of particular appeal. Communism is dead, the Marxist revolution is no longer really with us. In cultural terms, what exactly does the Left stand for? If one scratches some of the Left parties, like the CPI (M) [Communist Party of India – Marxist] in Bengal, it clearly represents Bengal. It is a Bengali party. A lot of north Indians don't really understand what it's about for them.

You mentioned the possibility of another party moving in to capture the space left behind by Dravidian parties [in Tamil Nadu]. Do you see the BJP-backed parties, or the BJP itself, finding political space in Tamil Nadu, given the State's comparative 'modernity' and 'markers of modernity' which you have studied?

I think that's quite difficult. I think the language issue is quite problematic in Tamil Nadu because of the extent to which the Tamil identity, which I think is extremely important, has come to be defined against a northern identity.

So, a party that is very closely associated with essentially northern versions or essences of Hinduism could struggle.

On the other hand, certainly parties utilising more religious symbols within a set of Tamil idioms could succeed, and perhaps could themselves, then, become allies of the BJP at the all-India level. For Hindu nationalism really to be successful in Tamil Nadu it would have to Tamilise itself to make itself more directly available in the distinctive idioms. I don't think the BJP has done that.

As a long-standing professor of History, how do you view the impact of rewriting History textbooks on society?

Well, history is always being re-written. In my own country there has been a row in the last few years with the Conservative government about rewriting history. Particularly there has been an attack on negative views of the First World War, which we are celebrating in Britain. I'm not quite sure what we're celebrating, but that's what's been going on. So, history is always being rewritten, as it were, politically. These particular rewrites, certainly at an intellectual level, are so unacceptable to the great bulk of the academic community in India that they have very little chance of surviving or being taken seriously.

“*History should be a ground of contestation***”**

One of the interesting things from a historian's point of view, is that there should be a contested history. History should be a ground of contestation. The danger is – and this doesn't matter whether this is a Left history or a Right history – if only one version comes to be established. For me it is very important that the press remains free, that historical debate remains lively, that the popular media respond to a variety of different historical versions so that in the end the relationship between the past, present and future is open-ended and capable of being contradicted. The dangerous impact that comes from history is if there is only one version and it becomes popularly available to people. That is the thing to be avoided – whether Left or Right.

Do you think this move towards the political Right signifies a real shift in the Indian popular thinking, for absence of another word, or is it a passing blip, representing disenchantment over non-performance?

I can't quite make my mind up. I think it's more than just a blip. I don't think this election was only about the 'incompetence and corruption of the Congress'. It was about a wide variety of other things. It was particularly about the way that Modi captured a sense of a desire for achievement, for aspiration. People, even quite poor people, were no longer satisfied with just being given hand-outs from a government from above. They wanted the opportunity to participate, to achieve in their own right, via education, via employment, and he caught that mood. Much depends on whether he will be able to deliver. There are huge problems in doing so and I am not wholly convinced that he will. The key question, really, for India as a democracy is whether or not he can provide means of satisfaction for large amounts of people, including – not everyone at the bottom – but a significant section half-way down and below that.

If it's possible for these neo-liberal forms of economic policy to achieve that, then this may well mark a very significant shift. I have my doubts that it is, in fact, possible. Certain aspects of neo-liberalism will exacerbate problems in India. They will be very difficult to achieve. The most obvious and straightforward is the need to build

modern infrastructure. If you can't get your hands on land, you can't build roads and the land issue has become so extraordinarily significant.

I think it is open. If this government can achieve significant and inclusive growth for enough people, over the next five to 10 years, then the shift will be there. If it doesn't, we may regard it as just having been a failed experiment and find ourselves going back to retrace the problems of the past.

You have been on successive visits to India. What have you noticed as the visible markers of change in India?

When I first came in 1970 what was absolutely shocking for someone from Britain, was the levels of poverty, people with stick-like legs and arms, not just in obscure parts of the country, but even in the city. That level of physical poverty has much, much reduced. In addition, there is just a much greater sense of liveliness, a bustle – sometimes when you're out on the roads a bit of too much of a bustle I must say – but there is a very strong energy that now seems to be everywhere.

When I first came there was a sense of passivity, there was a sense of people waiting for things to happen to them, not of going out and doing them themselves. I don't sense that now. India is finally starting to make its own history. *(V.S. Srambandan is Chief Administrative Officer, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy.)*

Schizophrenic Attitude to Social Science Research on India : Washbrook

David Washbrook spoke to A.R. Venkatachalapathy on the status of university education and research in the U.K. Excerpts:

You belong to the second generation of post-imperial historians. Britain was blamed for India being a very backward economy. Now, within two or three generations of independence it is on a very different path. Is there a change in perception about India among British social scientists and historians?

To go back to those two or three generations, there was a time when the imperial record was wiped clean in Britain. We were told we were all Europeans. I was never taught anything in school about the Empire. It was something that was, as it were, forgotten about. That has changed. There has been a recognition, now much more, of the imperial record, [which] partly reflects the fact that [approximately] three, four million Britons are from origins in the colonies and now very much part of British society. [They] have demanded to know much more about their own history. Post-empire imperial history has a much larger role in syllabi and also in the social sciences.

With regard to how the social sciences treat India now, there is still a schizophrenic attitude and good deal of conflict. One branch has very much responded to the new India, the modern India. It concerns the development of links of technology and business with India. On the other hand, there are very significant parts of the social sciences establishment in Britain initially tied up with development studies. You have a great deal of studies on Indian poverty and [sections of the British social science establishment] who still have not recognised the changing context.

Still, their essential concern with the country is the traditional bread basket, the famine hit areas. They still want to address very, very basic issues such as poverty. It does have a place, a very important place, but sometimes it

looks very odd that the weight of research that is going on in India in the social sciences seems to be placed on that side – tackling the poverty and hardship of minority groups - without appreciating the changing context in which that is operating, and [the fact] that India itself now has the wealth, the means and the technology for resolving the problems for itself without necessarily depending on external intervention. Some branches of social sciences have not yet fully appreciated the extent to which India has grown up and is now able to take responsibility for its own problems.

You have taught for 40 years in the best universities both in the U.K., and the U.S. To somebody from outside, it seems that British higher education is in a deep crisis. If this continues, will it be able to produce scholars like you who have invested so much in non-British societies? In India the business of higher education seems to be in a boom. Is there something we can learn from British higher education administration, both positively and negatively?

Well, don't do it like the British are doing it is the first thing. The university situation is very, very problematic in Britain, especially if you're British. I'll take that up later. The fee structure now means that people who go to university from ordinary backgrounds graduate with debts that will take them more than their lifetime to pay off, and, that's at the undergraduate level!

What we're seeing, certainly in the league universities is that a lot of bright students, who in the past might have well gone on to an academic career, of what one hopes considerable achievement but of very modest pay, thinking about that very seriously. I am concerned about the quality at the top-end of students going on to research. That being said, there are some relative bright spots.

At the upper end, places like Oxford, Cambridge, London, and Edinburgh, have opened up as international schools, particularly at the post-graduate level, and are able to bring together extremely interested young scholars from all over the world. I think that interaction – studying India with Indians, with Americans, with Canadians – does create a liveliness and a diversity in perspective, which makes me, at that level, hopeful of the global academic community and history, even while recognising the ability of Britons themselves to participate in this is relatively limited.

We have several funds in Cambridge University, quite considerable funds involving several millions of Pounds, which are available for students from all over the world, except Britain. The government funding of graduate research, especially in the arts, and soft social sciences has been cut, and cut and cutting again. It's very difficult. One almost expects a notice on the History faculty in Cambridge soon saying 'No Dogs. No British' on it. So, from a British point of view I am very, very pessimistic, but from the point of view of academic research, I think the last 20 years have had some very encouraging signs as regards internationalisation of research and the exchange of ideas.

(A.R. Venkatachalapathy is a Professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, and a member of the Board of Advisers of The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy. He is a historian and Tamil writer and has published widely on the social, cultural and intellectual history of colonial and post-colonial Tamil Nadu.)

'History with a political edge': David Washbrook (Frontline Dec 2, 1994)