

The First Republic and the Second Republic

By: Hindol Sengupta

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There is a simple way of understanding the inevitable comparison between the terms of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the incumbent. Nehru began with the idea of “discovering India”, and proclaiming its moral greatness to the world. Modi, on the other hand, started having discovered India, and proceeded to rebuild its material strength.

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The British governed India on a single audacious premise: that there was no India to govern. “There is not, and never was an India,” wrote the colonial administrator John Strachey; it was, in Churchill’s later sneer, no more a nation than the Equator—a mere geographical expression, a subcontinent of warring peoples held together only by the conqueror’s sword. Every serious Indian who came after had first to answer this charge, and so the founding act of the Indian mind in the 20th century was not the writing of a Constitution but the assertion of a civilisation: the claim that India was ancient, continuous, and coherent.

On this, Jawaharlal Nehru and Narendra Modi entirely agree. Whatever else divides them, both are civilisational nationalists who think in civilisational time, who regard India not as a state that happens to be ancient but as an ancient civilisation that has lately acquired a state. The central argument of the Indian republic has never been whether India is a civilisation. It has been which civilisation it is. The First Republic answered one way; the Second answers another. To understand the country, one must understand both the ground they share and the chasm that runs through it.

THE SHARED INHERITANCE

Begin with what they hold in common, because it is more than partisans of either will admit. Both Nehru and Modi believe India is among the oldest living civilisations on earth, and both take fierce pride in its antiquity—its mathematics and astronomy, its philosophy and grammar, its contribution to the common inheritance of humanity. Read *The Discovery of India*, written by Nehru in a colonial prison, and you find a man almost intoxicated by the depth of the Indian past, cataloguing its sciences and its sages with the same wonder a *Hindutva* pamphlet musters today. The supposed rationalist and the supposed revivalist are, on the sheer fact of civilisational greatness, in complete accord. Both also believe India is meant to teach. Nehru's India would instruct the world in tolerance, non-violence and the moral conduct of nations; Modi's India would offer yoga, Ayurveda, and the ethic of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—the world as one family, which became the motto of India's G20 presidency. The vocabulary differs; the conviction is identical: that this civilisation possesses something the rest of mankind needs. Both, finally, narrate independence and renewal as a civilisational awakening—Nehru's "soul of a nation, long suppressed," finding utterance at the midnight hour; Modi's *Amrit Kaal*, the reclamation of a destiny that foreign rule had interrupted. They are closer in method than most analysts understand.

SYNTHESIS OR ESSENCE

But there is indeed a key difference. The deepest difference between the two men is not about policy but about what kind of thing Indian civilisation fundamentally is and here their readings are almost opposite.

For Nehru, India is a synthesis. His master-image, in "The Discovery of India", is the palimpsest: a manuscript written over again and again, on which no later inscription ever wholly erases the earlier, so that the whole is the sum of every layer at once. Aryan and Dravidian, Greek and Scythian, Arab and Turk and Mughal and Briton, each had entered India and each had been absorbed, altered and made Indian. The genius of the civilisation, in this view, is precisely its appetite for difference: India is not a thing but a process, a permanent act of assimilation, defined by its capacity to take in the foreign and dissolve the boundary. Its unity is a unity in diversity, and the diversity is not a flaw to be overcome but the very substance of the nation.

For Modi and the civilisational tradition he speaks for, India is an essence. *Bharat* is not the running sum of its invasions but a continuous dharmic self, rooted in *Sanatana Dharma*, that long predates and underlies every later layer. Where Nehru sees accretion, this vision sees a core, older, deeper, and indigenous, that conquest obscured but never extinguished. The task of the present is therefore not further synthesis but recovery: the clearing away of what was imposed so that the original self may stand revealed again. One man defines the civilisation by what it has absorbed; the other by what it has always been. Almost everything else follows from this single divergence.

THE ARGUMENT

Nowhere does the divergence cut deeper than over the thousand years of Islamic and then European rule. For Nehru, the Indo-Islamic encounter produced a genuine synthesis—the composite culture of language, music, architecture and manners that he regarded as fully Indian, not foreign residue. Akbar was a national hero; the Mughal centuries were a layer of the palimpsest, written into the page for good. The colonial period he condemned as exploitation, but even Western liberalism and science he folded, characteristically, into the ongoing Indian project.

The civilisational reading Modi represents treats the same millennium very differently—less as synthesis than as rupture: a long subjugation in which temples were broken, wealth extracted, and a confident civilisation taught to be ashamed of itself. From this flows the politics of reclamation that has defined his era—the rebuilding and consecration of the temple at Ayodhya, the restoration of sacred geography at Kashi and elsewhere, the call to shed what he names the *ghulami ki mansikta*, the slave mentality bequeathed by foreign rule. To some this is overdue civilisational self-respect. To others it goes against the composite settlement Nehru held vital. The argument between these two responses is, in the end, an argument about whether the second millennium was something India did or something done to it.

DISCOVERY AND ASSERTION

The two visions even feel different. Nehru's is a civilisation in the key of discovery—tentative, self-questioning, a little melancholy, a rationalist's India that honours the past but reserves the right to outgrow its superstitions, and that keeps faith and state at a deliberate distance. He titled his book *Discovery*, as though India was something he had to search for and was never quite sure he had found. Modi's is a civilisation in the key of assertion—confident, proud, a Bharat to be proclaimed rather than excavated, in which dharmic symbol and national power appear unembarrassed on the same stage, whether at the United Nations on the International Day of Yoga or at the consecration of a temple by a sitting head of government. The first mood produces humility and, its critics say, apology; the second produces pride and, its critics say, majoritarian swagger. Each carries the defect of its quality.

THE SAME WOUND, TWO CURES

Strip away the quarrel and what remains is a usually neglected kinship remains: both men are addressing the same wound. Each is answering the colonial amputation: the lie that India was never a nation and had nothing of its own. Each loves the civilisation and stakes his political life on its greatness. They do not differ in devotion but in diagnosis. Nehru believes the civilisation is healthiest when it is most capacious, when it defines itself by what it can include; Modi's tradition believes it is healthiest when it is most rooted, when it remembers what it essentially is. One fears that an India of fixed essence will fracture along the very lines it tries to suppress, while the other is concerned that an India of endless synthesis will dissolve into having no self at all.

Here is the hard truth that the Second Republic was built to confront: the world respects the moral, but it bows only to the material. A civilisation that wishes to shape the international order, rather than merely appeal to its better angels, must possess the capacity to act and to be felt. This is the recognition, long delayed, partly begun by the reformers of 1991, that Narendra Modi has placed at the centre of his project. If the First Republic asked whether India deserved to exist and be heard, the Second asks whether India can act and be reckoned with.

This is not a disagreement that admits of easy reconciliation, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. It is the deepest fault line of the republic, and the country's future turns on it: whether these two readings of the civilisation can be held in some productive tension—as perhaps they must be, since a great civilisation is surely both continuous and capacious—or whether one must finally defeat the other. Nehru gave India the confidence to believe it was a civilisation. Modi has given it the confidence to argue, loudly and without apology, over what that civilisation means.

That the argument exists at all is the strange, shared achievement of the First Republic and the Second.

Every republic is born twice—once in law, and once in imagination. The distance, and the closeness, between those two ambitions, between moral stature and material capability, is the truest narrative of independent India.

** Hindol Sengupta is a multiple award-winning historian and author of 13 books. He is currently researching the idea of Indian civilization*