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# A tale of two Republics

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### *Hollande's visit is an occasion to reflect on what India and France have to teach each other*

French President François Hollande's presence as chief guest at India's Republic Day parade today is an occasion not just to advance cooperation in economic and strategic fields, but also to reflect on republics as systems of government and how they continuously learn from each other.

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France is a leading example of a republic among modern nation-states, boasting a philosophical tradition of limits on absolute state power, people's participation in governance and promotion of enlightened citizenship. French républicanisme, enshrined in revolutionary mottos like "liberty, equality and fraternity", was a major inspiration for the founding fathers of the Indian republic.

The fundamental rights in our Constitution carry forward the legacy of the legendary 1789 document, 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen', enacted by France's National Constituent Assembly. If post-independence India assumed the mantle of a democracy which vested power in the will of the people rather than in the hands of a monarch or an organised religious entity, the conceptual origins of this model derived from the ideals of multiple French republics.

By sustaining a constitutionally governed liberal republic far better than fellow developing countries, India is living up to the eternal truths enunciated by French intellectuals. The doctrine of separation of powers among legislature, executive and judiciary, which has enabled India to avert excessive concentration of power in any one person or group, owes to the French

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thinker Montesquieu who advocated designing government such that “no man need be afraid of another”.

The checks and balances which helped India avoid destructive dictatorships and civil wars have a distinct French feel, although they were adapted to suit a uniquely Indian context. On our Republic Day we must take a bow to another pioneering mind of the French republic, Rousseau, whose concept of the “social contract” shaped republics worldwide by establishing responsibility of rulers to the ruled as a fundamental principle of politics.

Rousseau’s call for people to obey only “legitimate powers” through direct democratic means and to oppose coercive rule was an emancipatory doctrine. The father of our Constitution, B R Ambedkar, often quoted Rousseau to amplify his vision of social justice in India and maintained that “everyone from the labouring classes should be acquainted with Rousseau’s The Social Contract”.

Rousseau’s early alarm bells about “a handful of people gorging themselves on superfluities, while the starving multitudes lack the basic necessities of life” set a benchmark of socioeconomic equality for republics to emulate. Radical French republicanism is the ancestor of President Hollande’s ruling Socialist Party.

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It is equally an influence on Indian political ideologies of various hues that claim to be devoted to the “poorest of the poor”.

Yet, despite the richness of ideas transferred from France to India, the land of Montesquieu and Rousseau faces arduous challenges for the future. The core pillar of France’s republican values – laïcité or constitutional secularism – has become so rigid that it is impeding integration of Muslim immigrants who comprise 10% of the French population.

Islamophobia is on the rise in France, as evidenced by the growing popularity of extreme rightist political parties such as the National Front, which mask their xenophobia and racism by harking to French republicanism. The defence of the “French republic” is nowadays a thinly disguised code to force Muslims in France to abandon expression of their cultural symbols and willingly conform to majoritarian ways of life.

France is struggling under the combined weight of prolonged economic crisis and widening social cleavages, which are being exploited by terrorist outfits such as Islamic State. The Paris attacks and their aftermath have shaken up the spirit of a French republic that is unable to readjust itself to a multicultural 21st century environment.



Here, there is something India can teach France in return. Our openness to refugees and our more mature acceptance of multiple faiths and ethnicities holds lessons for France, which is being torn apart by identity-based fragmentation. Since inception, the Indian republic has defined its secularism not as a denialist technique to suppress freedom of faith and belief but to celebrate the equal expression of a bewildering array of identities.

While illiberal tendencies do crop up as problems in Indian politics and society, the fabric of coexistence and tolerance is robust in our country. The Indian republic is more secure than that of France thanks to our ethos of “unity in diversity”, which is an improvisation upon the American republic’s motto of “e pluribus unum” (out of many, one).

Divisions based on religion, caste, race, language and region exist in India, but we have built a relatively harmonious national identity which gives space to parochial loyalties instead of trying to smother them, as is the case in France.

The flexibility of Indians to be simultaneously “this” (immediate and local) and “that” (national and global) is one of the secrets of the longevity and vitality of our republic. As France undergoes agonising internal debates in



the face of threats from Islamist terror, and grapples with reinterpretation of its fraught laïcité policies, there is merit in recalibrating its republic by adopting best practices that have worked in India.

Our two nations are cooperating in practical fields of defence, intelligence sharing, energy security and geopolitics. But we must also exchange wisdom at a deeper level – as proud republics.

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