

Modi's idea of India-1

As his second Republic Day closes, it is clear PM's concept of nationhood extends beyond constitutional parameters.

Comments (70)

Written by **Ashutosh Varshney** | Published: January 27, 2016 12:02 am



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 67th Republic Day parade at Rajpath in New Delhi on Tuesday. (Source: PTI)

What is Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s idea of India? In what ways is it different from, or similar to, the idea of India inherent in India's Constitution? We now have over a year and a half of record, both speeches and actions, to answer this highly significant question. I will present my interpretation in two columns. This column lays out the external dimensions of Modi's idea of India. The next column will concentrate on the internal features.

No Indian prime minister in history has courted the Indian diaspora more ardently. Earlier prime ministers met India's overseas community in small

gatherings. Modi has held mammoth community rallies in New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Singapore, San Jose, etc. What view of the nation has been expounded in these events? The question has both conceptual and empirical significance.

Scholars of nationalism routinely divide the foundational principles of nationhood into two types — *jus solis* (territory- or soil-based) and *jus sanguinis* (blood-based). France and the US are viewed as the prototypes of the first, Germany and Japan have been prime examples of the second.

In principle, anyone born on the soil of the US and France, even if she has Asian or African parents, can be an American or French national or citizen. The application of this principle has not been entirely smooth. Jews were seen as “not French” by many in France’s history, and today, many North African Muslims, despite citizenship, also do not feel fully included in the French nation. But *jus solis* has never been abandoned. If you are born in France, you remain eligible for French citizenship regardless of your ethnicity. The problems of integration are analytically distinguishable from citizenship.

Like France, the US too, at certain points in history, practised departures from its *jus solis* principle, especially with respect to African Americans, the Chinese and the Japanese. But the basic *jus solis* principle was never given up. Irrespective of the ethnic origins of parents, children born in the US can be American citizens.

In contrast, by making blood ties a decisive criterion of nationhood, Germany and Japan have lived their national lives and histories differently. Anyone born of German or Japanese parents anywhere in the world can be a German or Japanese citizen. After the Soviet Union fell, many Russian-speaking ethnic Germans automatically became citizens of Germany, even though they did not speak German. In contrast, hundreds of thousands of Turks, born in Germany, stayed on as “guest workers” for decades without being granted citizenship (although since 2000 it has become easier to become citizens). Similarly, Alberto Fujimori, a former Peruvian president of Japanese descent, seamlessly

fled to Japan as a Japanese citizen, when charges of corruption were brought against him in Peru.

Where does India fit? At the time of Independence, India stayed away from the principle of blood ties. When the Constituent Assembly debated whether Indians in South Africa, East Africa, Sri Lanka, Malaysia or the Caribbean could get Indian citizenship, the accepted view was that while they were free to maintain their links with their relatives in India, they were citizens of the countries where they had been living, not citizens of India. But India did not go all the way towards a soil-based conception either, in that those having non-Indian parentage, but born in India, were not made citizens. The Calcutta Chinese were the best example. Since Calcutta was the capital of Britain's Asian empire, many Chinese came to Calcutta as early as the 19th century to work and make a living. Their India-born children and grandchildren could only become citizens through a difficult process of naturalisation, not by birth.

Why did India, after rejecting the German-Japanese model, not go fully towards the French-American model? One answer is strategic. If *jus solis* had been accepted, the many million migrants from India to Pakistan at the time of Partition, having been born on Indian soil, would have been eligible for both Indian and Pakistani citizenship. Clearly, this would have raised difficult practical issues. But there is also reason to believe that leaders of independent India could not fully trust the "foreigner". Their stance was far removed from Mahatma Gandhi's view. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi had argued: "It is not necessary for us to have as our goal the expulsion of the English. If the English become Indianised, we can accommodate them." If the British accepted Indian culture as their own, Gandhi was prepared to view them as Indians. Ethnicity was irrelevant.

With the rise of **BJP**-led governments (1998-2004), things began to change. A vigorous attempt was made to woo non-resident Indians. The logical culmination of this move was the idea of "overseas citizens of India", promoted under the NDA but turned into law in 2005. "Overseas citizens" were not

allowed full citizenship, but given all rights except voting and eligibility to run for public office.

It is also a blood-based idea of nationhood that led to [Sushma Swaraj](#)'s fiery opposition to the possibility of [Sonia Gandhi](#) as prime minister of India in 2004. Swaraj argued that Sonia Gandhi was an Italian, not an Indian, even though she had married an Indian and become an Indian citizen.

Modi has taken this idea much further — in concept, if not in law. He has brought Indian nationhood even closer to the *jus sanguinis* model. Overseas Indians are part of his idea of India. Of the many speeches

he has given, nothing suggests this more clearly than the closing remarks of his Wembley speech in London: “Mera apka nata khoon ke rang se juda hai, aapke passport ke rang se nahin. Jitne adhikar Narendra Modi ke hain, utne aapke bhi (Our relations are based on the colour of our blood, not on the colour of our passports. All the rights that Narendra Modi has, you also do).” This statement is not legally factual. Overseas citizens of India can't still vote in Indian elections nor contest for public office. But it expresses a political desire.

Whether this move is right or wrong is a separate debate. My objective here is not to judge, but to interpret a significant part of Modi's external project. By focusing on blood ties and by repeatedly addressing ethnic Indians, both in London and abroad, as *deshvasiyon* (those who live in India), not *pravasi Bhaaratiyon* (overseas Indians), Modi is extending the idea of nationhood beyond the constitutional parameters. His courting of overseas Indians as part of the Indian nation is both exceptional and unambiguous.

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