The Idea of India - Pedagogical Perspectives

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*We often hear people saying: Oh yes, the idea of India existed in the Vedic period, it existed in the Gupta period, it existed in the Mughal period, and so on. I would beg to differ with that. We don’t really know how people saw themselves with regard to questions of ‘Am I state? Am I nation? Am I country?’*

(Romila Thapar in Conversation with Spivak, *History for Space* 2019, n.p.)

In a letter to Charles Freer Andrews in 1921, the Bengali literary legend Rabindranath Tagore wrote: “my India is an idea and not a geographical expression. Therefore I am not a patriot” (Tagore 1994: 294). Almost a century later, the “idea of India” finds its resonance in the realities of post-independence nation-making, internal ruptures, external influences, and the blurred cultural boundaries – “shadow lines”, as Amitav Ghosh calls them – between India and other South Asian nations at large. It thus comes as no surprise that Romila Thapar, perhaps one of the most celebrated historians of India, goes on to question:

> When did the idea of India come into existence? One can’t date it, of course, because one can seldom date ideas with precision. Ideas have a way of wandering around backwards, and so on—you can’t pinpoint them. Let me begin by saying that it’s a modern idea, a concept which I think emerges in colonial times (2019: n.p.).

Yet, this imaginary cartography of India has been the source of myriad Orientalist ideologies, making the “idea of India” even more difficult to render into disciplinary pedagogies.
Teaching India, in that sense, becomes a counterintuitive exercise given that it is – and has always been – an object of endless epistemic deferrals. In the context of Euro-American classrooms, it is prone to three peculiar constructions: 1) India as a singular national culture; 2) India as an object of Oriental yearns and exotic amalgamation of languages, religions and cultures, and 3) a rapidly changing nation – New India – with an expansive diasporic community, extreme economic disparities, immense technological potential, gendered social hierarchies, and archaic social customs that ceaselessly collide with one another. While engaging with these constructs, this chapter aims to provide tentative insights to teaching India to Euro-American students both at basic and advanced levels through a series of prompts consisting of images, film clips, commentaries and vignettes by prominent Indian writers, feminists and theorists. The inherently fragmented nature of this approach would not only help students to absorb the complexity of India projected through a wide spectrum of metaphors and symbols but would also expose them to the difficulties of deducing a linear narrative or a discourse of national culture without falling prey to the fractures, disruptions, ellipses, and misrepresentations imparted therein. In particular, the chapter focuses on the three principle divisions and disruptions produced by various actors, actants, and stakeholders to the mantle of postcolonial India: 1) the structural divisions enabled by India-Pakistan partition; 2) the internal divisions that constantly unsettle any claims for homogeneous national identity; and 3) the external projection of the affinity, polarity, and diversity of Indian identities in the diasporic discourses.

But before I delve into the intricacies of these divisions, two significant historical events that are central to the processes of postcolonial nation building in India merit further attention: The 1857 Sepoy Revolt and the Kashmir dispute. These would serve as a “warm up” exercise to the students.

1.1 Prompt, Headline:

1857 National Revolt

After presenting the prompt on a slide, the students should be directed to research on the headline for ten minutes using their electronic devices, or an article on Indian history provided by the instructor. The students should be assigned to the following tasks:
1. find out what happened in British India in 1857
   • when the students respond, then redirect them to find out how many religious groups participated in the events of 1857
2. find out a map of British India in 1857
   • when found, reorient the students to list the types of sovereign powers present in British India

**Instructors’ follow up:** The above prompt as well as the tasks will ensure that the students are exposed to one of the major events in British India that shaped the history of the subcontinent, one that also reveals that complex communal convergence and divergence in colonial India, with Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs both fighting for, and fighting against the British Raj. The 1857 Sepoy Revolt (also known as ‘Nationalist Revolt’ or ‘the Mutiny’) broke out in Central and Northern India, specifically in Calcutta, Oudh, Meerut and Jhansi. The revolt was led by Indian soldiers (sepoys) of the East India Company, who were not only influenced by the growing anti-British sentiments amongst native princely rulers, but also by the rumour that cartridges of the newly introduced Enfield rifle – which the sepoys had to unseal with their teeth – were coated with a wax drawn from a mix of cow and pig fat. Since Muslims do not eat pork and cows are sacred for Hindus, it was believed that the sepoys collectively revolted against the East India Company.

This example also exposes students to the vexed problem of post-colonial India; the *communalization* of conflict between Hindus and Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs (which also corresponds to India and Pakistan). The Sepoy Revolt example highlights the communal bonds, rather than the divisions, among Hindus and Muslims in colonial India. It further testifies to what Cynthia Talbot calls the colonial construction “of social strife (which) were labelled as religious due to the Orientalist assumption that religion was the fundamental division in Indian society” (1995: 693). This is largely due to the fact that the British attempted to valorize any political resistance from the Indian peasants, sovereign rulers, or tribal groups as religiously-motivated, thereby communally orchestrated violence rather than an ideological or politically motivated one – a view objected by many literary and cultural critiques on India (Guha 1983). Such colonial discourses of communal construction also provide the link to the next prompt; the Kashmir dispute, and the self-perception of Indian Hindus and Muslims in
postcolonial India who “see themselves as distinct religious communities, essentially two separate nations occupying the same ground” (Talbot 1995: 693).

Once the students find out the map of British India in 1857, which is located on Wikimedia\(^1\), the instructor should then direct the students to list the number of princely states, provinces and sovereign powers present in India at the time of the Sepoy Revolt. The instructor should then draw attention to the fact that while the state of Kashmir with a Muslim majority was ruled by a Hindu king, the State of Hyderabad with a Hindu majority was ruled by a Muslim king. The active cultivation of such asymmetrical power relations by the colonizer is touted to be one of the major factors in the development of communal identities in postcolonial India. At the same time, the students will have gleaned by the impression of the map, with the instructor’s guidance, that India as a nation-state is also a *colonial construction*, for in 1857, there existed only a collection of sovereign states, colonial enclaves, and disputed areas stretching across the vast terrain touching Iran in the West and the Bay of Bengal in the East, that would later become India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. As Romila Thapar aptly reminds us, “with each conquest, the boundaries change until, finally at the end of the nineteenth century, the entire subcontinent is painted red – that is the India of the British Empire” (*History for Space* 2019: n.p.).

### 1.2 Reading, The Kashmir Dispute

The instructor should circulate a short article published in *The Telegraph* (link in the works cited) and give the students five minutes to find out 1) origins of the Kashmir dispute; 2) different stakeholders in the dispute; and 3) its present status. Given the readability of the article, the students would most likely draw out the appropriate answers, of which the instructor should highlight the following points on a slide/PowerPoint:

- Kashmir was one of some 650 remaining princely states at the end of British reign in the subcontinent (1947), ruled by a Hin-

du king named Maharaja Hari Singh, who had the choice either to join India or Pakistan, but he chose to remain neutral

- Both sides, India and Pakistan, were making their own attempts to persuade the king to join their respective countries, but Hari Singh, fearing a military attack from Pakistan chose to cede Kashmir to India

- India and Pakistan fought a first war in 1947, which resulted in a UN resolution in 1948 allowing the people of Kashmir to decide their own fate through a “free and fair” plebiscite, i.e. whether to choose India, Pakistan but not necessarily remain independent

- In 1949, another ceasefire was agreed with “65 per cent of the territory under Indian control and the remainder with Pakistan”. Subsequently a ‘Line of Control’ was drawn between Indian and Pakistani-controlled parts of Kashmir

- In 1957, Kashmir was formally ceded into the Indian Union with a special status (Article 370, which was repealed in 2019 by Narendra Modi’s government)

- In 1965, a war broke out again, and in 1971 another one, when India extended military support and aided the separation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from the West (now Pakistan).

As these details would ascertain, the dispute over Kashmir at the end of the British reign has shaped the formation of young nations and national identities across three countries – India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh – while Kashmir itself remains in a limbo, suspended in a non-national realm of deferred identities. The very fact that Kashmir was always subject to the discourses of belonging either to Indian or Pakistan, Hindus or Muslims, liberators or “terrorists”, underscores a postcolonial point that seeks to preserve the autonomy and agency of the colonized natives, while simultaneously acknowledging the entangled histories, and indispensable power structures of colonialism.

The instructor could then lead the quandary of Kashmir as the defining feature of postcolonialism. Of the many working definitions on the subject, perhaps Stuart Hall’s definition is best suited for the purpose of the current discussion:

So, postcolonial is not the end of colonisation. It is after a certain kind of colonialism, after a certain moment of high imperialism and colonial occupation – in the wake of it, in the shadow of it, in-
flected by it – it is what it is because something else has happened before, but it is also something new (Hall in Drew 1999: 230; emphasis in original).

In view of this definition, it is possible to read the occupation of Kashmir as a kind of colonialism – either by India or Pakistan – were we to give its aspirations for autonomy and independence due consideration, the same aspirations that fueled the desire for independence in the two countries from British colonialism. In a sense, the postcolonial condition of Kashmir could be read as a legacy of both “something else” and “something new”; a toxic blend of British colonialism, and the internal colonialism of India and Pakistan.

The instructor could apply this view/definition of postcolonialism – i.e. a mix of old structures of dominance and oppression that shape the new ones – to postcolonial India as well. In other words, postcolonial India itself is a reflection of many microcosmic Kashmirs, which are characterized by unfulfilled nationality questions, unresolved class, caste and tribal divisions, indigenous ambitions and struggles of ethnic secession. In order to further the various textual and medial examples of these fractured and fissured identities in the subsequent sections, two key theoretical underpinnings of postcolonial nationalism in India call for a closer scrutiny:

(a) Homi K. Bhaba’s (2004 [1994]: 51, 207—08] distinction between pedagogic and performative nationalism

**Pedagogic:** nation states, largely dominated by elites and educated classes unleash nationalist symbols such as national anthems, clothes, food, monuments etc.

**Performative:** since the people, who are the subjects of the nation, are never singular but diverse, they receive these nationalist symbols and perform them in diverse ways

(b) Partha Chatterjee’s (1993, 51-131) distinction between derivative and generative nationalism

**Generative:** The opposite of derivative; nationalism generating from within the nation
**Derivative**: Nationalism that is not born out of inner life or inner desire for a nation, but out of anti-colonial, anti-British ideologies; often resulting from the imitation of the nationalist ideologies in Europe by the Western-educated leaders in India. The elite, who initially concede the inferiority of the colonized state to the colonial one (“moment of departure”), embark on modernizing the nation by amassing the mass support of diverse indigenous masses (“moment of manoeuvre”), but eventually abandon the latter’s aspirations and desires once nation-building process becomes complete (“moment of arrival”).

As both the theorists imply, a continuation of colonial legacy between inherited history and new beginnings, between pedagogic nationalism and performative forces, and between derivative and generative discourses, postcolonial India remains a competing narrative of an incomplete nation one that not only inhabits but actively cultivates fractures, fissures, divisions, including diverse claims of nationalities within, of which I shall highlight three variants below: 1) structural; 2) internal; 3) and external/diasporic.

2 Structural Divisions

**2.1 Reading & Discussion of Saddat Manto’s Story “Toba Tek Singh” (1955)**

Set during the partition of India and Pakistan, Saddat Manto’s famous story offers a fitting extension of the Kashmir dispute. The story, as well as the very process of partition, deals with the structural divisions within India. These pertain not only to the physical division of a nation, but also the mental construction of ideological walls on either side of the fractured space. The story is set in a lunatic asylum in Lahore. Although the author states that the story takes place after some three years of India-Pakistan partition, there is an inner timelessness to the story given that most characters are lunatics who have “no idea what day it was, what month it was, or how many years had passed” (n.p.). Hence, it could be argued the story might even be set in the interregnum between the commencement of partition on 14 August 1947 and the announcement of the boarders of each country (“Radcliffe Line”) three days later. The story itself revolves around a bizarre idea conceived by the officials on both sides of the border: to exchange the lunatics who claimed or deemed to belong to the other...
country. The protagonist of the story is a Sikh lunatic called Bishan Singh, but his fellow lunatics call him ‘Toba Tek Singh’ because of his obsession over his hometown by the same name. At a border post between the two countries where the exchange of the lunatics was to take place, Toba Tek Singh makes a frenzied but fatal move to find out whether his hometown went to India or Pakistan:

[…] he stopped in the middle and stood there on his swollen legs as if now no power could move him from that place. Since the man was harmless, no further force was used on him. He was allowed to remain standing there, and the rest of the work of the exchange went on. In the pre-dawn peace and quiet, from Bishan Singh’s throat there came a shriek that pierced the sky […] From here and there a number of officers came running, and they saw that the man who for fifteen years, day and night, had constantly stayed on his feet, lay prostrate. There, behind barbed wire, was Hindustan. Here, behind the same kind of wire, was Pakistan. In between, on that piece of ground that had no name, lay Toba Tek Singh (n.p.).

Given the metonymical mirroring in the story, i.e. the place Toba Tek Singh is being replaced by the person Bishan Singh, who becomes synonymous with the place, it is possible to read that what “lays” between the “piece of ground that had no name” is not necessarily Bishan Singh, but his hometown – the place itself – Toba Tek Singh. Seen from this perspective, the allegorical death of a town on a “piece of ground” that essentially belongs to, and is separated by, the ground beyond the barbed wire denotes a structural violence in which both the nation’s body and the nation as body could be moved from a borderless entity to entrapped fence, from a place to non-place, and from a ‘piece of land’ to no-man’s land.
2.2 Discussion of Images 1 and 2: Sadhus and Capitalism

The two images above bespeak of another structural divide in the Indian society, particularly in the context of economic liberalization in the 1990s as well as the market capitalism of the post-millennial era. The first image, which came into the media limelight from an anonymous source in the late 90s, is symbolic of the sheer polarities of tradition and modernity, destiny and desire, fate and future that characterize postcolonial India. The guru or Godman, who is holding a cell phone, shatters Orientalist myths about India, as, for instance, advanced by the French anthropologists Louis Dumont (1970) who argued that Indian society lacked individuality given the hierarchical and ideological pre-eminence of the Hindu religion. The juxtaposition of a Sadhu and a cell phone, as seen in the picture, not only suggests that presence of an ascetic individual on the fringes of Hindu ideology and its hierarchy by means of withdrawing himself “from the world in order to pursue his salvation” (Srinivas 1984: 153), but also his penchant for what is otherwise the hallmark of post-millennial individualism; the possession of a cell phone.

The second image represents a related paradox, albeit one more closely associated with commodification of spirituality. The promotional image of Patanjali Ayurved – a series of food and cosmetic products – claiming to possess some natural divinity privy to Hinduism and its land – featuring one of its founders, Bhabha Ramdev, is indeed a glaring testimony to the aggressive marketing of the spirit of

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2 Images taken from the following sources:
Image 2: https://inc42.com/buzz/patanjali-ecommerce-baba-ramdev/.
“new India” by select ideologues, institutions, and political bodies in the post-millennial era. Sure enough, the Patanjali Ayurved, which capitalizes on the ancient traditions and practises of yoga and naturopathy, and features products as wide ranging as peanuts, chips, ‘fairness creams’, and ramen noodles, is currently valued at $1 billion.

These postcolonial, or rather post-millennial paradoxes are perhaps best summed up in the vignette that follows the image below:

2.3 Discussion of Image 3: A Tale of Sarees and Bikinis

The image above, captured on a popular beach in Goa, enunciates yet another structural divide between the value of modernity and tradition, native and the foreign, including the discourses of public safety and risk, as evinced a mooted debate in the local parliament. One faction of the parliamentarians, ostensibly representing a Hindu nationalist party, proposed the banning of bikinis in Goan beaches as they are not suitable for Indian culture, whereas the other faction proposed the banning of Sarees and Salwar Kameez – both native attires for Indian women – for they are not be suitable for swimming and even pose the risk of drowning (Chunha 2014: n.p.)

While the examples above help the students define the structural divisions that shape the idea of postcolonial India by which the notions of national self and the foreign other, indigenous and exploitative, and traditional and modern are constituted, the following section

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3 Image taken from the following source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ae/Women_with_sari_at_Colva_beach_%28Goa%2C_India%29.jpg.
focuses on three specific examples of the divisions internal to the socio-political fabric of India.

3 Internal Divisions

3.1 Reading and Discussion of Mahasweta Devi’s “Douloti the Bountiful” (1993)

Devi’s story is a tragic tale of a 14 year-old young tribal girl named Douloti whose life is dictated by “upper caste” men who sell and resell her for a fistful of rupees that she inherits from her father Ganori Nagesia, as debt. Due to her father’s failure to repay the debt from a local baniya named Munbar, Douloti is sold as a bonded labour to the baniya trader. A local Brahmin named Paramananda Mishir proposes Ganori Nagesia that he would pay off his debt (to Munbar) in exchange for his daughter’s hand. Eventually, Ganori Nagesia marries his daughter off to Paramananda and breaks free of his indebtedness. But Rampiyari, the housekeeper and manager of a whorehouse, where Douloti is sent to work by her newly-wed husband, spares no thought for the fathers who resell their daughters in the name of marriage (Collu 1999: 54): “Your fathers! They blow me away. The animal says marriage, he’ll marry a Dusad, Dhobi, Chamar, Parhaiya girl? Brahmins? Who burn harijans? They catch you to make you a kamiya […] now they’ll eat the fruit of your womb” (Devi 1993: 59).

The above quote serves as a hermeneutical grid to unravel the internal divisions of Indian social organization, particularly those of the caste system – an endogamous social unit tied with occupational guilds in which a person’s identity, status and occupation in a society are ascribed by birth (see Srinivas 1987; Omvedt 1988) – its preservation under the colonial rule, and its reification by the postcolonial Indian elite as well as its relationship to the tribal people of India. At this stage the students can be directed to conduct a short research task (using online resources) with the following terms from the story:

- **Nagesia, Parhaiya** (tribal people)
  - Who are they? What part of India do they come from?
  - Are they part of the caste system?

- **Chamar, Dusad, harijans** (Untouchables)
  - What is the place of the untouchables in India?
- What is the justification for its existence?

_Brahmins, Baniya_ (names of castes)

- What are the functions of these castes in colonial and postcolonial India?

Upon the completion of the task above, a subsidiary task emanating from the discussion on castes and tribes in colonial and postcolonial India could be used to familiarize the role of two important figures in colonial and postcolonial India, and their respective _positions_ on caste and tribal divisions within the nation:

- Birsa Munda
- B.R. Ambedkar

These tasks provide the cultural as well as analytical context to understand the fateful end of Doulotí’s life near a hand drawn map of India in front of a crowd gathered to celebrate India’s Independence Day:

Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Doulotí Nagesía’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs. Today, on the fifteenth of August, Doulotí has left no room at all in the India of people like Mohan for planting the standard of the Independence flag. What will Mohan [the local schoolmaster] do now? Doulotí is all over India (Devi 1993: 94).

If Toba Tek Singh’s body in no-man’s land signifies the arbitrariness of maps and ideological structures, then Doulotí filling “the map of India allegorically juxtaposes the body of the _bona fide_ nation with that of the body of a bonded prostitute at its margins” (Malreddy and Purakayastha 2017: 7). Such exclusionary nature of gendered, and internally divisive India is the signature theme of Mahasweta Devi’s stories, which take stack at the double colonization of the Indian tribes by the British _and_ the Indian elite.

3.2 Movie Clip: Discussion of Scenes from Rajkumar Hirani’s _PK_ (2014)

_Instructor’s Preamble_: Unlike Devi’s story, Rajkumar Hirani’s _PK_ gestures towards the _inclusive_ character of such internal divisions in
postcolonial India – often dubbed by populist politicians as ‘unity in diversity’ – specifically in relation to religious identities. Although the plot of the film revolves around the problems emanating from the multi-religious nature of the Indian society, it features an ‘alien’ protagonist who is not only a stranger to religion but to the entire humanity. The alien, who comes to be identified as PK by the earthlings, lands somewhere in a Rajasthani desert with a remote control strapped around his neck, which is stolen by a straying local. Without the remote control, PK cannot return to his planet. But everywhere PK inquires about the thief who stole his remote, he is met with the same evasive response: “God only knows”, “only God can help you find you what you want”, “pray to God that you will get your remote” (51:42). Subsequently, PK’s curiosity to figure out who this God is and why he stole his remote results in a comedy of errors that make a compelling case for the inclusive nature of each religious faith, as opposed to their putatively divisive character.

Movie Clip (1.35:00 – 1.38:50)

Following the instructor’s preamble to the movie, the above stated five-minute clip should be played for students, followed by a discussion on the basis of the “philosophical chairs” model dividing the entire class into two groups (agree or disagree). The two groups of students should then be tasked to respond to the following question:

Does PK’s reaction to the expectations of each religion reveal the divisiveness or the inclusiveness of all religious faiths in India?

Instructor’s follow up: Summarizing the two sides of the discussion, the instructor should offer an interpretative summary of the scene as outlined below. The movie clip introduces PK challenging a Hindu guru whether he could identify the religion of a person by his or her appearance. The guru accepts the challenge. Without much ado, PK parades a group of individuals, who, for the innocent bystander, appear to be a Muslim woman wearing a Niqab, a Jain in monastic attire, a Sikh warrior with turban, a Catholic priest in robes, and a Hindu saint in khadi. The guru takes PK’s challenge to be a joke and starts calling their religions – albeit wrongly – in the order of their appearance. As it turns out, PK tricked the Hindu guru by mixing up the dress code:
Just to show that religion is connected to fashion. See, beard, mustache, and turban, you have a Sikh. Remove the turban, you have a Hindu. Remove the mustache, there’s the Muslim. Such difference is made by a false God. If a real God wanted us to divide into so many religions, he would have put a label on us. (1.38.48)

While the scenes above reveal the inclusivity, or rather the alter-ability of religious difference, it does not necessarily undermine the heuristic valence of faith. In the climax scene, for instance, Tapasvi challenges PK’s vaunted atheism in the following manner:

Do you want a world without God, son? Do you have any clue of people’s suffering in the world? People who have nothing to eat, no roof above their heads, no friends to talk. People who have nothing to live for, but if they find purpose in their lives by placing faith in God, who are you to take that away from them? (2.06:00)

Much to his credit, PK retorts:

I agree, believing in God can give one hope and strength in the face of suffering. But I have one question. In whose God should I believe in? You say there is one God, I say no, there are two Gods: the one who made us, and the one who is made up by you [humans]. We know nothing about the God who made us. But the God you made up is just like you, the humans: Petty, corrupt, and imposturous. He makes appointments with the rich, and leaves the poor stand in a queue. He thrives on flattery but makes you live in fear. It is very simple to solve this: believe in the God who made us, and abolish the God you [humans] made up. (2.07:17)

The exchange between Tapasvi and PK opens space for students to engage with the complex interplay of not only the appearance of religious differences in India but the universality, or rather the inclusivity that characterizes the perceived differences across the religious faiths.

4 External/Diasporic Difference

In postcolonial studies it is often argued that diasporic communities tend to either overidentify with the (lost) nation, and as a result, produces extremely rigid identities and cultural practices in relation to the host country (Hirsch and Miller 2011). On the other hand, scholars like Edward Said (1993) argue that the exilic nature of diasporic popu-
lations often renders them intellectual and imaginary freedoms, and a
sense of carelessness and recalcitrant agency to move away from the
centers of power to the margins of society. Similarly, the Somali au-
thor Nuruddin Farah argues that being away has enabled to see their
homeland “with a clear vision. Distance distills and makes ideas worth
pursuing […] One needs to extricate oneself from the daily needs and
demands of living at home” (Farah in Jonas 1988: 74-75). These vari-
ous narratives of diasporic difference, emanating from times, places
and social expectations external to the original cultural context of the
diasporic subjects, have distinct overtones and undertones. The two
examples presented below, drawn largely from the work of comedians,
would aid the students to register the nuances of pushing the national
and cultural stereotypes to such extremes that their significance is ren-
dered meaningless and comical.

**Clip 1: Russell Peters’ “Terrorists vs Indians” (2006)**

In the clip above, the Canadian-Indian stand-up comedian Russell Pe-
ters performs an act in which he lays out the differences between In-
dians and terrorists, particularly in the post-9/11 context where
“brown-coloured” people have become the targets of racial and Is-
lamophobic attacks regardless of their diverse national or religious
backgrounds. As a warm up to his act, Peters deconstructs the general
ideological climate in North America by reducing the fact that in pass-
port photos “people are no longer allowed to smile”. Does this make
a brown person, who does not even smile – and looks “pissed off” as
a result – a more likely suspect for terrorism than those who do smile?
Peters juxtaposes this climate of suspicion with another scenario in-
volving white people who are terrified by the very presence of brown
people in airports. He implores the “white folks” to consider the place
and context of their encounters with terrorists before they make wild
assumptions. He, then, goes on to narrate his own encounter in a
small twenty-seater jet operated by Jet Blue in which the “white lady”
next to him was petrified by the idea of him maybe reaching for a
bomb trigger when he bends down. “Relax”, reassures an amused Pe-
ters, “I am just reaching for my CD-man”, and with a deliberate pause,
delivers his punch line: “got to listen to the instructions”.

Here, although the punchline “got to listen to the instructions”
ambiguously overdetermines the idea that Peters might actually be
“listening to the instructions” on how to blow up a bomb, he foils the
implied equation with brown men and terrorists with an insidiously
rhetorical question: “what am I – a low self-esteemed terrorist? I don’t want to kill a lot of us today. I will start off with thirty. Tomorrow, Southwest.” At this point, the audiences are not only left with the vague concession that Indians/brown people might actually be terrorists – a perception that may not sit well with many non-diasporic Indians – but also with the improbable distinction between “low” and “high” self-esteemed terrorists with its inanely comical effect.

Yet, Peters’ set takes on a more rational tone when he appeals to the world to distinguish between terrorists and Indians. “They are not the same. They don’t even hate the same people. Terrorists hate Americans. Indians hate each other. A terrorist will blow up an Airport. Indians like to work at the airport. That would be counter-productive.” Again, Peters' invocation of Indian stereotypes in the act above may not confer to the views or the diverse positions of non-diasporic Indians, but for a diasporic comedian, his complex relationship to the host country urges him to invoke his cultural identity, and even push it to such extremes that it lays bare the counter-intuitiveness of all cultural stereotypes.

Clip 2: Goodness Gracious Me (1988) Season 1 Episode 1, 12:50-14:30

The second clip, entitled “Guru Maharishi Yogi”, takes stack at the famous figure by the same name who came into prominence in the United States in the late 1950s and the 1960s. The act centers on an Indian guru, who is surrounded by his unassuming British devotees, anticipating the words of his ancient wisdom. The guru acknowledges the source of his knowledge to its culture: “many people in the West think that in my country India, because of religions, because of our history, because of I don’t know what, somehow we are more in tune with our spirituality, more at one with the forces of nature. Well we are! So well done all those people who said that.”

An Indian guru delivering these words in an exaggerated East London accent to a crowd of what appears to be Indianized Londoners posing themselves in a yogic gait, submissive grimace, and hunched over devotion, does more than invert the Orientalist reception of India; it nullifies all the Orientalist valence of gurus and mysticism by satirizing their putative powers as fake and fraudulent. For instance, in the very next scene the Yogi goes on to claim that “one of the ways we Indian gurus express our spirituality is through Sanskritic hymns. These are very similar to your Christian hymns, but these are very
catchy tunes, with more chipa (sic).” And he recites “Sanskritic” hymns ad infinitum – by tossing in a jumble of names from the Indian and English cricket team, buzz words from TV ads, catchy phrases from rock lyrics, and downright nonsensical blurts.

These comical takes on their own culture by diasporic Indians produce what I have called an external difference to the understanding of India. Such difference, while representative of divisive values of the diasporic subjects in relation to the values of the home country, is nonetheless absorbed into the construction of Indian imaginary – as an idea, as a map, as a collection of cultural variables – at large.

Given the complex interplay of historical factors, ideological influences, and the manifestations of divisions and differences at various levels – structural, internal, and external – the examples presented in the chapter serve as a hermeneutical grid to uncover the hidden histories, buried cultural anxieties, suppressed communities, and repressed social desires of an idea that came to be known as India.

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Bibliography


