

Remarks
By
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On
Nationalism, Race, Politics, Religion
and the Need to Save Democracy
At
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Thank you for that kind introduction. I want to express my deep gratitude to Prof. Sultana Nahar and Prof. Anil Pradhan for hosting this event and for inviting me to speak at this LEAP workshop. Thank you, Hasan Kamal, for suggesting my name as a speaker.

I am honored to be here. Before I give my Remarks, I want to say few words regarding AMU. It is a true and timeless treasure. It is a precious possession. AMU has always been beacon of hope, aspirations and dream. What is best in me, I owe it to AMU. AMU is where my journey began. It shaped my story. My days at AMU had a profound effect on me. AMU instilled core values that have served me in good stead throughout my adult life. These values continue to be my guiding principles. My AMU education was bridge to the future.

I must confess though that having so many professors in the audience from AMU is a bit intimidating.

To you professors, I say please do not ask me to take any tests. My math skills are not quite as good as they were when I attended AMU and left India to come to the United States to go to school in computer science at the University of Colorado.

Indeed, when I got my education in India and U.S., the slide rule was the tool of choice for calculations and when you said computer you meant main frame. Pocket calculators and lap tops were in their infancy. Using an I-phone or some other cellular device for calculating, computing or communicating had not even been conceptualized.

That said, when I was invited to participate in this workshop, I was advised that the topic for my remarks should be Nationalism, Race, Politics and Religion and the impact of those four factors on academic institutions in India and the U.S. I immediately thought that was a mouthful and it could take me a lifetime of research and writing to address those four factors appropriately.

Then, as I reflected more upon it, I concluded that I did have something to say on those topics but to do so I needed to add another topic. That is democracy. This is because democracy puts those other topics into the context for a meaningful discussion.

My invitation to speak here at Ohio State University (OSU) requested that I deliver a lecture. I know lectures come naturally to college professors. That is not the case for a lay person such as myself, however.

Lectures are not in my style nor skillset. I am comfortable though in providing my ideas and that is why I have titled my talk, "Thoughts on Nationalism, Race, Politics, Religion and the Need to Save Democracy."

In sharing my thoughts, I will:

- Begin with an overview on the state of democracy in the world, the U.S. and India
- Move on to look at nationalism, race, politics and religion and their impact upon the nature of democracy in the U.S. and India
- Conclude by examining what the current climate means for higher education and what those in higher education should do to respond to the current conditions

I will share my thoughts with you not as an expert on any of these topics, not as an academic, not as a researcher, but as a civically engaged Indian American business person whose motherland is India and whose homeland is the United States of America. I love both countries and recognize that they are by far the two largest democracies in the world and that the future of these democracies is central to the future of democracies and democratic values worldwide.

The State of Democracy in the World, the U.S. and India

With that preamble, let me start by focusing on the state of democracy in the world today. Sadly, I must report that state is not good. In fact, it could be called awful

When Freedom House released its report *Freedom in the World 2018* it declared that Democracy was in crisis saying that for the 12th consecutive year political rights and civil liberties declined and that 71 countries suffered net declines and only 35 registered gains. Things have not gotten any better in the past year. Freedom House's report *Freedom in the World 2019* declared Democracy was in retreat with 68 countries showing net declines.

In this 21st century, democracy is descending and autocracy is ascending in countries around the world. In addition to the Freedom House findings, numerous other studies are showing that trend.

For example, a Pew Research Center survey last year of citizens in 38 countries found only, and I quote, a "shallow commitment to representative democracy" and "substantial percentages willing to consider nondemocratic options" across all of those countries.

That's a bit abstract and conceptual. Let me bring it up close and personal by focusing on the two countries of my heritage - America and India.

The Pew study found that in the United States 40 percent of the respondents were fully committed to a representative democracy, 46 percent were less committed, and 7 percent preferred a non-democratic option.

That's not very good. But it is exceptional compared to the findings for India.

The Pew study disclosed that of all the countries surveyed "support for a strong leader who is unchecked by the judiciary or parliament is highest in India." Only 8 percent of the Indian respondents were fully committed to a representative democracy, 67 percent were less committed, and 9 percent preferred a non-democratic option.

India and the United States are the world's two largest democracies. Active and engaged citizenship is essential to keep those democracies vital and vibrant and exemplars for democracy world-wide.

Nationalism, Politics, Race, Religion and the Indian and U.S. Democracy

The Pew findings, in conjunction with other studies that I have reviewed, indicate that citizenship support for democracy is eroding rather than increasing. To a large extent, this erosion has been driven by polarizing nationalism, identity politics, blatant racism and religious discrimination and prejudice. Let me address those areas beginning with nationalism.

Nationalism has become a hot topic for political leaders, the media and academic journals over the past few years. *Foreign Affairs* magazine devoted much of its March/April issue to articles in a section titled The New Nationalism. Some of those articles point out that the word or label nationalism is being misapplied. I will explain why and say more about this latter in my talk.

For now, let me describe the primary types of "alternative" nationalism – or what I call "pseudo" nationalism - that are divisive to a nation state rather than unifying. Those types are white nationalism and religious nationalism.

White nationalism is dominant in the United States. Religious nationalism is dominant in India.

In October of 2018, at a rally for U.S. Senator Ted Cruz in Texas President Trump proudly proclaimed himself a nationalist. After that, Trump reaffirmed his proclamation in an interview with Fox News Host Laura Ingraham in which he explained: (and I quote)

I look at two things, globalists and nationalists. I'm somebody that wants to take care of our country, because for many, many years...our leaders have been worried more about the world than they have about the United States and they leave us in a mess...I'm proud of this country and I call that 'nationalism'. I call it being a nationalist and I don't see any other connotation than that.

The President might not have seen it any other connotation, but many knowledgeable observers and commentators did. His defining himself as a nationalist evoked a firestorm of criticism — most of it centering around the fact that the choice of, and emphasis on, the word “nationalist” may possibly be a dog whistle to Trump’s base and supporters, signifying and reinforcing his commitment to a discriminatory and exclusionary United States of America.

More recently in July of this year, Trump evoked an even bigger firestorm of criticism with what have been called his “racist” tweets in which he said that four Democratic women of color in the U.S. Congress should go back to their countries of origin. This followed by a campaign rally in North Carolina at which Trump supporters shouted “send her back” after he made disparaging and attacking remarks regarding one of the Congresswoman, Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, pushed the white nationalist accusations to the boiling point.

Religious nationalism in India seems relatively mild in comparison to the white nationalism in the U.S. Nonetheless, it is insidious and dangerous to the very essence of a secular democracy.

Milan Vaishnav highlighted those dangers in his monograph *Religious Nationalism and India's Future* published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in April of this year during India’s national election cycle.

In his monograph Vaishnav addresses the emergence and growth of the BJP and its apparent desire to make Hindu nationalism equivalent to Indian nationalism. He points out that:

While religious nationalist movements exhibit considerable variation, they share many common attributes: First, most religious parties possess a puritanical streak that colors their elector platforms – and subsequent methods of governance with a moral cadence. Second, in many countries, religious nationalists use moral appeals and rhetoric to advocate for economic austerity or draconian anticorruption measures. Third religious politics often betrays a majoritarian nationalism which seeks to redefine the basis of national identity in a manner that excludes or marginalizes religious minorities.

Since I am on the topic of the overlap between religion and nationalism, let me expand a little bit here on religion in India and the U.S. To my knowledge, Prime Minister Modi has never declared himself a nationalist and I am certain that he would never declare himself a religious nationalist.

Still, he is very proud of his religion and there is an encroachment of it into his governance. This is evidenced by the plans to build a wide path from the Hindu Kashi Vishwanath to the Ganges River in Varanasi.

I grew up in Varanasi, and even though it is Hinduism's holiest city is a place where youth of all religions worked and played together amicably because they were bound together in the service of others. I firmly believe this interdenominational history should be maintained and recognized by placing stations of all religions along that path.

Moving from India to the United States, the foremost religious groups supporting President Trump during his election campaign in 2016 and in his reelection, bid are Evangelical Christians. This is not because he is an Evangelical Christian himself. In fact, many individuals consider Trump to be a non-religious person who is either completely immoral or amoral in his personal behavior. This does not bother the Evangelical Christians because he unequivocally supports their stance against abortion which is the single political issue that matters the most to them. It is a wedge issue transcending everything else.

This brings me to identity politics. Identity politics is when people are defined or define themselves by religion, race, sex and some other characteristic and then political campaigns are conducted and policy positions are created to respond to those characteristics.

Noted political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote a long article for *Foreign Affairs* in 2018 titled "Against Identity Politics". In that piece, he argues that politics of this type harms democracy. Fukuyama further asserts that in the U.S., perhaps the worst thing about left-wing identity politics (that would be Democratic) is that it has stimulated the rise of right-wing identity politics (that would be Republican).

I don't know if that is the worst thing. I do know that identify politics as the primary mode for communicating and legislating is not the basis for a healthy democracy because it does not provide a solid framework for reaching common ground, achieving a compromise, or the building of a consensus.

I have now looked briefly at the intertwining of some forms of nationalism, politics, race and religion and the deleterious effect that they can produce for a democracy.

Conservative journalist Jonathan Goldberg described the current situation aptly in a book published last year titled *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism and Identity Politics is Destroying American Democracy*.

As I have attempted to illustrate, it is not just American democracy that is at risk, it is the Indian democracy, and the very conception of democracy of itself. If democracy dies, the world as we know it and want it to be will never be the same again.

The Impact on Higher Education: Observations and Recommendations

I may be overstating the case just a bit but as we convene here at Ohio State University in September of 2019, there is a struggle for the head, the heart and the soul of democracy. What does this mean for you as professors, as researchers, as academics and what role should and can you play in that struggle?

Let me preface and qualify my comments in this regard by stating that I am not on the ground and do not have an insider's perspective on what this means to you individually. I have had the good fortune to visit AMU on several occasions over the past decade and to speak at many institutions of higher education in India and the United States and to also sit on several boards.

So, it is from that perspective that I offer my observations and recommendations. My overriding recommendation is simple and straightforward.

It is to keep on keeping on. Continue to do what you have been doing because India and the U.S. needs you to be there now more than ever.

As I have said before in other speeches, I see the role of higher education in this 21st century to be that of Shaping Studies, Shaping Students, and Shaping Society. Those of you in this audience know far better than I do what needs to be done to shape studies and students given the current environment. The one observation that I will make is that I know that there are critical needs to expand vocational and technical programs and opportunities for students in India and to increase the outreach to women and minorities and others in the weaker sections.

You professors can be leaders in ensuring these needs are addressed. By doing so, you will be helping to shape society and the Indian democracy through your civic engagement.

As I said earlier, India is the largest democracy in the world. Through your increased civic engagement and with the assistance of those from other institutions and organizations you can enable India to become the leader on the world stage for democracy.

What is civic engagement? The best definition of civic engagement that I have seen comes from a collection of readings titled *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*.

That definition states:

Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.

Some times when I say civic engagement people mistakenly think I mean political engagement. I do not. Political engagement is a form of civic engagement – but just one form.

In my opinion, civic engagement takes five primary forms: Individual Engagement, Organizational Engagement, Political Engagement, Community Engagement, and Social Engagement

Let me define each of those forms briefly

- *Individual Engagement* is being the best one can be and personally responsible for one's actions
- *Organizational Engagement* is contributing to the success of the groups to which one belongs such as the place where one works, the place where one worships, and the places of affiliation.
- *Political Engagement* is participating in those processes that shape the structure and nature of government
- *Community Engagement* is collaborating to make the locale and the world in which we live a better place
- *Social Engagement* is advocating for justice and equality of treatment and opportunity for all

Let me springboard from those five general forms of civic engagement to talk about three specific areas which you professors can assist in promoting. They are:

- The Indian democracy

- A unifying Indian nationalism
- A state of interdependence

In May of this year, as the national elections in India were drawing to a close, I wrote an article published in the *Economic Times* titled “May 23: A Day to Celebrate India’s Democracy”. In that article, I cited several sources on the unparalleled scope and substantial strength of India’s democracy. I concluded the article by stating:

...the Indian democracy is not perfect – far from it. But India’s democracy shines as a beacon of light in a world that is becoming increasingly darker. India has the potential to become a champion of democracy around the globe. If it realizes that potential it will bring about a new dawn for democracy in the 21st century.

By constructing a unifying Indian nationalism and achieving a true state of interdependence India can realize that potential. Near the outset of these remarks, I noted that the word nationalism was being misapplied or misused. Because of that “alternative” or “pseudo” forms of nationalism such as white nationalism or religious nationalism come to mind when people say nationalism.

Those forms are not nationalism at all. In fact, they are the opposite. They are more populism which is a political approach designed to appeal to a group of people based upon what they perceive to be their common interests.

What then is nationalism? The Webster dictionary defines nationalism as “loyalty and devotion to a nation especially: a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups.” Patriotism is a form or twin of nationalism.

Several years ago, American historian Thomas Bender stated, “Nations are among other things a collective agreement, partly coerced to affirm a common history as the basis for a shared future.” More recently, Andreas Wimmer, professor of sociology and political philosophy at Columbia University, wrote,

At their core, all forms of nationalism share the same two tenets: first, that members of the nation, understood as a group of equal citizens with a shared history and future political destiny should rule the state, and second, that they should do so in the interests of the nation. Nationalism is thus opposed to foreign rule by members of other nations, as in colonial empires and many dynastic kingdoms, as well as to rulers who disregard the perspective and needs of the majority.

Each of those statements supports the need for and importance of nationalism.

India was founded with a strong sense of nationalism. Omit Shani, a scholar at the University of Haifa explains that in her book, *How India Became Democratic: Citizenship and Making the Universal Franchise*. In her book, Ms. Shani details how India was

established from the outset as a country empowering its entire and extremely diverse population as voters.

In his Independence Day speech this year, Prime Minister Modi proclaimed, “One nation, one constitution – this spirit has become a reality and India is proud of it.”

Prime Minister Modi is correct when he says that “one nation, one constitution” should be the goal for the Indian democracy. The Prime Minister is incorrect, however, when he states “this spirit has become a reality...”

Achieving the goal of “one nation” requires a unifying nationalism. What India has achieved through the increasing influence and control by the BJP over the past several years instead is as I have described and discussed earlier in my presentation is religious nationalism.

Many pundits both in India and in the free press around the world have criticized the Modi administration’s recent actions in seizing control of Kashmir and revoking Articles 370 and Article 35A of the Constitution which gave considerable autonomy to Kashmir as an example of religious nationalism.

The justification for this move was that Kashmir’s autonomy had “encouraged corruption and nepotism”. There has undoubtedly been some corruption and nepotism in Kashmir through the years – as there has been throughout India and its states.

I must confess that the question in my mind becomes why the radical step was taken to address this condition in India’s only state with a Muslim majority. I do not know what is in Prime Minister Modi’s mind. I do know unequivocally that this act does not bring India and the Indian people closer together as one nation.

That is why in 2020 and going forward, India needs to reinforce its commitment to a unifying nationalism. One way that can be done is by stressing the interdependence of all the people of India.

For this Independence Day in India I wrote an article published in several Indian Newspapers titled “Celebrate Interdependence on Independence Day”. That article is a bookend to my May 23 election day article I referenced earlier.

The first article celebrating India’s democracy was directed at recognizing all that India has achieved. The second article celebrating interdependence day is directed at recognizing all that India can become.

I begin the Interdependence Day article as follows:

My wish for India on this Independence Day is that it be used as a day to recognize and celebrate the interdependence of all Indians. This wish can be addressed by coming together to promote the unity of India as one nation under God on this important holiday.

I close the article this way

Those are the items on my wish list on this Independence Day.

I understand that it will be up to us as mere mortals to pursue them.

We can do that not by looking to the heavens and to the gods whom we worship. But, by looking at the earth and the people and the family that we are.

We all have a role to play in that pursuit. Each citizen should engage in small acts of kindness by reaching out to those less fortunate and to the downtrodden, by extending a helping hand and a hand up. Some people have special contributions to make.

Religious leaders should promote interfaith dialogue. They should bring together followers of different persuasions for meaningful conversations. They should promote a dialogue of understanding and a shared sense of community with other faiths. They should call attention to the fact that an attack on one religion is an attack on all religions.

Political leaders should promote a framework of unity and civility. They should ensure that all laws are fair and fairly enforced. They should take affirmative actions to promote an atmosphere of communal peace and harmony. They should promote hope not fear.

Civic and business leaders should promote collaboration. They should toil together transcending their creeds to plant the seeds for doing good deeds. They should invest in programs that cut across and eliminate racial, religious and socio-economic divides.

Being here with those of you in higher education today, let me signify upon the pivotal role you can play in helping India achieve interdependence. I say pivotal because you can influence studies, students and society through your good work.

Your impact through research, writing, and teaching goes far beyond the walls of Universities. It can go across India and because of the growth of the Indian diaspora into the United States and around the world.

You are difference makers empowering others to make the difference. I stand before you to say in all humility that the difference AMU made for me is enormous and that difference prepared me to make a difference.

I know that you are already doing good and excellent work and committed to doing more through the Indo-US Center for STEM Education and Research. You are building that bridge and my wife Debbie and I are building others by establishing the Frank and Debbie Islam Management Complex at AMU. We will be going back to AMU in October

to inaugurate the Innovation Center in that Complex and to dedicate the auditorium in our names in the Mass Communications Department there.

Through our civic engagement we are all involved directly and indirectly in efforts that can help save and preserve democracy. Over the past few minutes, I have focused primarily on the need to promote the Indian democracy, a unifying Indian nationalism, and a state of interdependence in India.

There is a similar need to promote the democracy of the United States of America, a unifying American nationalism, and an American state of interdependence. Unfortunately, the need here in the United States in these areas is greater – far greater than in India.

This is true because in addition to suffering from white nationalism, populism and identity politics, the U.S. democracy has a serious case of Trumpism. This malady has infected the United States because President Trump captured the hatred, prejudice and discontent that was present in the country and injected into it his own narcissism, self-interest and promotion, and ignorance of things governmental and the democratic process and then spread it across this country and throughout the world.

I do not want this case of Trumpism to be fatal for the U.S. democracy and that is one of the reasons why at the beginning of 2019 I established the Frank Islam Institute for 21st Century Citizenship.

I created the Institute to address an increasing civic engagement deficit in the United States and around the world and to enhance the concept of citizenship for the challenges and opportunities of our times. 21st century citizenship is the active civic participation of citizens of all ages by being interested, issue-oriented, informed, independent and involved.

The Institute has a website, publishes pivot point blogs monthly on important topics, issues a monthly newsletter, and will make annual civic engagement champion awards in collaboration with the National Association of State Boards of Education to middle school teachers from across the United States who are empowering the students in their classrooms to be the citizens and civic leaders of the future.

I have covered quite a bit of ground in sharing my thoughts with you today, in closing I want to leave you with one final thought. That thought takes us out of the college classroom, away from the earth and into new territory.

As you know, 2019 was the 50th anniversary of the U.S. sending the Apollo 11 spaceship to the moon. When astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped out of the lunar module from that ship onto the moon's surface, he famously said, "That is one small step for man and one giant leap for mankind."

And, it truly was. As you all know, the lunar lander from India space ship Chandrayaan-2 was unable to land on the moon successfully at the end of Chandrayaan's long journey.

This was disappointing but should not be viewed as failure. It should be seen as a step forward towards India's making that giant leap at sometime in the future. The leap will be an important one in terms of India's national pride, scientific capabilities, and proof of the nation's engineering prowess.

In my opinion, however, the more important giant LEAP will be made by those of you participating in this LEAP workshop and by your predecessors and successors in these workshops. More important than what is learned in these workshops is what will be done with that learning afterwards.

This LEAP workshop positions each of you for a giant leap. What you do with that leap will be up to you.

I have every confidence that you will use your leap to find new ways to benefit the Indian society and to propel democracy forward. I hope the thoughts that I have shared with you today will be helpful to you on your journey.

Thank you for listening to me. May God bless you and may God bless India, the U.S.A. and democracy worldwide.

