

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

**ScholarWorks @ UTRGV**

---

Communication Faculty Publications and  
Presentations

College of Liberal Arts

---

Summer 2007

## **Contested Indian Identities: The Risk of Re-Colonization as the Postcolonial Task Continues**

Gregory Selber

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/com\\_fac](https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/com_fac)



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Selber, Gregory. "Contested Indian Identities: The Risk of Re-Colonization as the Postcolonial Task Continues." *Global Media Journal*, no. Summer Issue, 2007.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact [justin.white@utrgv.edu](mailto:justin.white@utrgv.edu), [william.flores01@utrgv.edu](mailto:william.flores01@utrgv.edu).

# **CONTESTED INDIAN IDENTITIES: THE RISK OF RE-COLONIZATION AS THE POST- COLONIAL TASK CONTINUES**

Dr. Gregory Selber

The University of Texas-Pan American, USA

Like all post-colonial countries, modern India is an ontological minefield where identity at several levels is being contested on battlefields ranging from history to education to popular culture. As a former colony, it has a special burden in terms of deciding what it is and is not, as the legacy of domination continues somewhat to drive the ongoing construction process in various ways.

Peter Ron De Souza (2000) particularizes the question confronting all states in these dynamic times, and one more germane for post-colonial ones: Which India? Whose India? And who has the power to make fundamental ontological and epistemological decisions on behalf of the world's second most populous country?

The search for an identity is made more complex because there are four ID levels to consider (individual, group, national and global), with twin dimensions to each. For each level, factor in the internal dimension (how the person, group or nation imagines itself, or self-image) and the external (its reputation and image assessed from the outside, or what the world thinks), and it is apparent that the task of meaning-making is a continuous, negotiated and controversial one that remains an incomplete project at best. But one cannot speak of a single, monolithic identity, rather a murky combination whose components come variously to the fore in certain situations, receding in favor of others at different junctures.

Given the multiplicity and contingency inherent in a term such as identity, how does a post-colonial state control its own destiny? De Souza suggests that the goal for such a state should be to see itself - and be seen as well - as a state, and not an ex-colony any longer. But post-colonial theory and literature reflect the slow, arduous process in attaining such autonomy. New states - and following historical modernization standards, India can still be considered in this category despite its laudable performance since independence in 1947 - remain in thrall to their former masters in subtle ways, no longer under direct physical dominance but having been formed and defined against their will by the powers that were (Robb 2007). Still beholden to the inheritance of their former masters in some respects, such post-colonials are taking part in modern subject formation on all levels and dimensions as hybrids, combinations of their pre-colonial selves, the residual legacy of domination, and dialectically, the new identities that are made.

The key in identity construction for newly independent states is the intervening institutions that have historically mediated the process for all national entities:

history and memory, education and knowledge, power and politics, economics, and media and communication, among others.

Negotiating the contested contours of what these mediating institutions create and destroy, and understanding the formation process as it intersects with such elements as class, gender, and race/religion, are the equations set up for post-colonial states to solve.

In the particular case of India, this means taking the external identity conceptions of the state elaborated from the outside, and melding their agreeable aspects with an inclusive, internal identity on multiple levels. The state's tradition of syncretism, much debated in the past several decades and decried by many as not only false but consistently harmful to subaltern, indigenous Indian sub-cultures, is at the crux of the matter (Bharucha Rustom 2000). Is the idea of tolerance long trumpeted as the Indian mantra truly extant? If so, how has it treated with alternative populations lacking autonomy and epistemological power? Can such a syncretism be reasonably expected to exist in any real measure in any state, much less a post-colonial one? Or have modern Indian elites re-colonized the state's marginalized groups as they dominate the decision-making regarding cultural concerns, historical knowledge, and discourse vis a vis the nation's global and national intercourse?

How can modern India integrate all sub-cultures into the process of construction of identities as much as possible, and make strides toward outdistancing the colonial legacies that still define it? And finally, what is the role of mass media/communication to these ends?

## POWER, KNOWLEDGE, AND SUBJUGATION

Historical memory, as a guide to the past and a road to the future, has always been at the forefront in identity construction, as originally outlined by Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s (Lewis Coser, 1992). How a state sees its development and achievements leads to the erection of a collective consciousness inculcated through the mediating institution of education, as young people are instructed and socialized based on conceptions of the state's founding mythology, traditions, and rituals. Historical memory here then acts as the impetus and material for teaching Indians who they were and are, but it is also a situation tied intimately to notions of power.

According to Michel Foucault (1978), historical remembering is associated with the modality of power automatically, as those in charge of a state's institutions are granted the naming power and sorting mechanism that adjudicate the important ontological and epistemological questions. In India's case, during its 200-plus years of colonization by the British, there were periodic attempts made by the colonizers to assess its history, and thus identity. Romila Tharad (2000) argues that such an historical exercise on the part of the powerful implied an ahistorical assumption in regard to India itself. In seeking to define their possession, British historians considered the thousands years of Indian existence prior to the onset of colonization to be part of the so-called dark period, before Enlightenment civilization came to the

region. Even more nettlesome for those who struggled against such enforced reductionism, Tharad notes that the process of “rediscovering” Indian history often asserted itself as well in the service of legitimizing colonization, and of strengthening administrative control over helpless, culture-less peoples who “needed to be shown the light.”

Here is a classic example of what Antonio Gramsci (1971) referred to as the interplay between ruler and ruled. While its masters sought to define India, the people turned to their own history, lacking true autonomy but salving the wounds of domination by use of symbolic power through retention and remembrance of personal narratives.

Still, while some of this internal autonomy did take place in colonial India, pace Foucault (1978), across the board in colonial situations, the correlation is nearly absolute between power and the constitution and political application of knowledge. Thus, while Peter Robb (2007) asserts that Indians chose to reject some British conceptions of them and accept others, the blunt truth was that through control of all mediating, socializing institutions, the British defined India and these definitions to a great degree constructed the identities of the subjugated peoples, from their style of government down to the ilits in their language use which persist to this day.

#### THE POST-COLONIAL RECENT PAST AND PRESENT

While there are certainly vestiges of colonialism remaining in the landscape, the state has forged its own way for 50 years, and has gone through a number of transition phases in that period. One such concerned the so-called Transition Debates of the 1960s and 1970s. How should the post-colonial India handle its free status, not only in terms of identity but also decisions about more tangible, pragmatic issues such as economics and industrialization? The embrace of the phenomenon of globalization, which truly came full circle only in 1991 with sweeping economic reforms, has had a series of impacts on every facet of life.

Here it is wise to reference the various sociological theories on modernization in the attempt to understand the state’s engagement with post-colonial status. In 1937, Talcott Parsons published the classic, “The Structure of Social Action,” in which he wrote that individual action is somewhat circumscribed by mediating institutions which ensure order and equilibrium by transmitting value systems along with the infrastructures therein. So while developing societies transition from traditional to modern status, or in the communal terms of Ferdinand Tonnies, *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*, certain traits are retained, others created, and others lost. Michael Latham (2000) suggests that while there is a considerable resilience to traditional cultural forms despite industrialization and urbanization, the attendant losses can include a lessening of genuine, personal relations leading eventually to a troubling ethos of atomization-consumption-competition.

With increased output and consumption through industrialization, various results are engendered for individuals, groups, and the state. Exposure to

modern institutions such as urbanization, literacy, media use, and political participation situate the state *in* the global world and thereby inculcate citizens with the modernization ideology (Daniel Lerner, 1958). This worldview's implicit assumption is that taking such steps is vital to an evolutionary trajectory that is seen as unproblematic and natural. Somewhat like the mindset once in play during colonialism, this ideology suggests that following the stages of growth outlined by Walt Rostow (1960) will aid the *underdeveloped periphery* in joining the world of nations undergoing gradual transformation toward a *better life*.

The intended consequence of this process is to enable the new state to compete in the world market economy and improve the standard of living for its people, augmenting production and consumption alike. One major unintended consequence is a growing dependence on economics, which begins to shape non-economic areas of life such as the maintenance and production of cultural forms (Arthur Lewis, 1962). Instead of being dependent on colonizing powers to help drive the train, post-colonial states subscribing to the modernization ideology become dependent on the world market, including foreign investment, education, and inadvertently, cultural forms from other regions.

This re-colonizing by capitalism and its production-consumer logic has been described in various post-colonial theories authored by Edward Said (1978) and Gayatri Spivak (1988), among others. Cultural imperialism, or the imposition of values from without by more powerful producers of content, has been well documented and argued. The replacement of traditional cultural creations and forms with those represented in forms from the West is a risk that modernizing states take. Identity formation, dependent on the repetition of cultural forms through education, media use, and historical knowledge construction, is then engineered increasingly by producers from outside the state, or by elite producers in-state who have the power to construct materials leading to such identities. This implies that while individuals and group members can retain some autonomy and authorship - mainly through perpetration of local cultural forms - their national and global Indian identities become a hodge-podge of influences from the West and from Indian entities largely implicated in a cultural imperialism from within, so to speak.

Which India begins to dominate the depictions and cultural forms that illustrate and define the various identities? Whose India comes to signify India to the world? In examining the mass media as one of the mediating institutions that Parsons elucidated, one can illuminate two ideas: the impact of exposure to the world of cultural and commodified forms, and the outcome of such a process on disenfranchised, marginal groups in India. The identities of these powerless groups become largely circumscribed by others; they become re-colonized, in part by their fellow Indians and in part by the West's idea of what makes a modern culture.

MEDIA, COMMUNICATION, AND THE POWER IMBALANCE

John Thompson (1995) writes that while classic sociologists have focused on rationalization and secularization as the key engines to modernization and social change over time, the media and communication have played a role but have been understudied to this end. The social organization of symbolic power through media has been integral to the rise of modern societies; as the networks of communication expand, their effects are interwoven with other forms of power. Thompson's point is that scholars must not underestimate the impact that communication has had on the development of modern states and their self-images.

With modern communication, citizens are bombarded with exposure to foreign cultures, political worldviews and economic ideologies, e.g. modernization. Such exposure causes new ideas to proliferate, and contact with the world stimulates the mechanisms that can effect social change (Latham 2007).

The mass media have been important to the growth of the post-colonial state. B.G. Verghese (2000) notes that the spread of communication was utilized in the 1940s by Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, to foment and mobilize non-violent activity that eventually led to the abatement of British domination.

Just as the media have made their presence count toward the attainment of freedom, there have also been times in recent national history when control of communication, such as in the case of Indira Gandhi's censorship campaign during The Emergency of 1975-77, have greatly retarded this process.

Clifford Geertz (1973) asserted that people are implicated in webs of significance as they live their lives, and he adds that these webs are largely of their own making. But to some theorists, notably the subaltern writers like Spivak (1988), a vast majority of indigenous peoples are less likely to participate in the spinning of such webs. So for identity construction on various levels, these marginal sub-cultures are much more likely to find their self-images managed by state hegemony or cultural imperialism from without. Subaltern and indigenous peoples are thus yoked to a new dependence on their elites, or on the conceptions made by Western cultural producers.

The *kisan sabhas*, or peasant societies, and *dalits*, or untouchables, find very little solidarity because they have no autonomous institutions with which to accumulate and perpetuate texts or traditions of their choosing. Buffeted by an economic system that looks outward to the global market, and increasingly taught by an educational apparatus that has recast many of their understood notions of Indianness, the powerless remain so, and find that their traditional ways are falling by the wayside in the process. They are defined by what they are not and begin to internalize an absence from the cultural discourse, in effect becoming colonized once again, but by different masters. Instead of taking their turn at self- and group/national-definition, such marginals are often limited to a symbolic television voyeurism (Rustom 2000). The imbalance of culture transmission from active in-state elites and Westerners constructs a passive internal identity for powerless peoples, substituting modern forms for traditional ones. The breakdown of the social ecology of the disenfranchised means their experiences are increasingly empty and symbolic, not lived and

self-generated. In the absence of naming power, the groups in question have little to fall back on save for *dharmashastras*, the social and ritual obligations of caste (Tharad 2000).

Some thinkers, like Thompson, have suggested that the cultural imperialism model, initiated by Herbert Schiller (1969) and later refined by Said, underestimates the active nature of the audience. Reassessments of the imperialism model insist that supposedly powerless cultures actually possess more potential for agency than has been assumed, but again, it would appear that this proposed autonomy is made manifest largely in symbolic ways, as opposed to in real exchanges of power, i.e. the ability to name and define. The flaw in the conception of an active audience is that it seems to imply that viewer choice of programming, for example, is as efficacious as political participation, a notion that is highly problematic at best.

It can be argued that while indigenous citizens have freedom of choice, including selecting Bollywood films over those from the West, the important decisions on epistemological matters - such as the character of Indianness, history and culture portrayed in Indian films - are made by the elites and not by the common folk.

It is here that the national identity of tolerance, embodied by the Hindutva slogan of "one nation, one language, one culture," begins to seem for the disaffected like colonialism all over again, under different masters. Many post-colonial writers have described the belief that India is a multicultural state giving credence and productive capacity to all sub-cultures as pernicious. De Souza analyzes this lingering and powerful conception of a tolerant India as oppressive when juxtaposed against the ubiquitous signature of caste. Rustom adds that the diversities of the state are managed and bordered by state hegemony that controls exchange and production of various cultural forms. So while the ideas of diversity and multiculturalism have become part of the national identity, the fruits of these laudable elements may not be enjoyed on an equal basis by the powerless.

The use of mass media and communication to maintain the national identity coalesce with education and historical knowledge accumulation, illustrating what Parsons characterized in the 1930s: mediating institutions keeping order and equilibrium by circumscribing value systems through the transmission process. The degree to which this systematic power is appropriated by elites and/or gerrymandered by outside sources will vary. But in most cases, recent history has shown that the scale of domination and its attendant lack of autonomy and productive capacity by those outside the state power structure are consistently ironclad.

Still, there have always been sites of resistance and contestation in terms of the power to construct identities and have a voice in the development and maintenance of mediating institutions. Stuart Hall (1982) wrote extensively about the possibility of various readings of cultural texts depending on one's worldview, and his notion of dominant, oppositional or emergent interpretations of materials in education, history and popular culture are

theoretically emphatic. However, in terms of cultural production or true epistemological force, Hall's ideas remain untapped resources to a great extent. The sub-cultures of a developing state often do not possess experience in mobilizing for change, are deficient in basic educational ability that might further facilitate such activism, and spend the majority of their time scratching out a living in extreme poverty, making the possibility of grass-roots efforts to effect social change unlikely. Even if such groups were able to overcome these nearly endemic obstacles, their residence outside the power structure of state society means that they will have few opportunities to try anything significant. They are stuck with symbolic choice, which does little to alleviate their plight or ascribe to them any real power.

Occasionally, subaltern efforts to rearrange the power differential in regard to cultural valorization, indigenous production and balanced exchange show progress. The recent "We Are One" campaign seeking to infiltrate communal spaces with billboards and other media stressing racial and religious diversity have met with some surface success. Countering what Verghese (2000) calls the "desaffronization" of most religious festivals, such efforts are designed to carve out a niche for previously marginalized sub-cultures, giving them an opportunity to create their own cultural forms and identities.

The SITE program of 1976-77, which employed 400 rural villages in a pilot activity involving direct satellite television programming to integrate traditional and minority religious forms into mainstream cultural consumption, was another positive step.

However, it must be noted that such alternative efforts are hamstrung by the institutional factors previously discussed, and further limited by the continuing power differential between state elites and Western producers of content on one hand and the 70 percent of the Indian population that is rural, illiterate, or poverty-stricken, at times all three, on the other.

## CONCLUSION: BACK TO ONTOLOGY, AND THE SYSTEMS DEBATE

In the end, sociological theories like Parsons's social action configuration appear to have an inescapable logic in the real world. Modern societies are driven by industry, economics, political power and increasingly, mediated communication. This last, through the universal, internal logic of the market, dictates that the strong shall survive and prosper, through the propagation of their ideologies and identity conceptions strengthened through production and repetition of cultural forms.

For the vast majority of peoples in any state, but especially in developing, post-colonial ones, the opportunity to engage in identity construction at anything but an individual, largely symbolic level is drastically limited. These marginal sub-cultures are thus doomed to a re-colonization by elites in their midst, and by onrushing hordes of cultural imperialists looking for new markets for their Westernized products. Many of the cultural forms in question pertain to the powerless only by fashioning the external identity (what the world thinks of India) and over time hammering out to a striking degree the marginalized groups' internal self-images.



While there may be sites of resistance, and junctures of contestation, most of these liminal moments in post-colonial states are dominated by a small number of elites. Adjusting the institutional apparatuses of administration, i.e. education, popular culture, and history, to reflect truly inclusive pluralism is a daunting task, one that so-called “fully developed” nations like the United States are just now beginning to understand and address.

There has been constant disagreement about the supposed organicism of societies, with some scholars insisting that per Parsons, there is only so much change that can be expected, and that the historical path of development - with its evolutionary trajectory of improvement of mediating institutions - represents the only sure way to ensure stability, order, and the possibility of effective competition in the global economy. Many of these functionalists do not necessarily harbor either disdain or disregard for the powerless, though some do. They simply suggest that societal growth and maintenance possess an inner logic that cannot be deviated from to a large degree without creating utter chaos and eventually, the deterioration of the state.

Others, from the humanist camp, counter by saying that while there may be an historically vindicated process of development, such systems are open to change based on various mitigating factors that point to flaws in the system, one of the more prominent being inequality. These thinkers suggest that deterioration of the state might take place on the basis of what the functionalists warn against. But they add that eventually the state will find itself crumbling when Gramsci’s emergent masses reach a tipping point of such frustration with what they see as an exclusive, exploitative system that they are ready to take up arms in mobilization against the neo-colonizer. The interplay between evolution and revolution, it appears, could in time yield a middle ground that will enable more participation in identity construction and institutional power while maintaining the productive capacity, stability, and order that modern states require.

#### WORKS CITED

Coser, Lewis, ed. Halbwachs, Maurice: *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1992).

De Souza, Peter Ron, ed. *Contemporary India: Transitions* (New Delhi: Sage, 2000).

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973)

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers, 1971)

Guha, Ranajit and Gayatri C. Spivak. *Selected Subaltern Studies* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988).

Hall, Stuart, "Recent Developments in Theories of Language and Ideology," in Culture, Media and Language, ed. Hall et al (London: Unwin Hyman, 1980) 157-162.

Latham, Michael F. Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and Nation-building in the Kennedy Era (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2000).

Lerner, Daniel. The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East (New York: Free Press, 1958).

Lewis, Arthur W., "Economic Development with Unlimited Labor Supplies," *Manchester School* 22 (May 1954) 139-91.

Parsons, Talcott. The Structure of Social Action (New York: Free Press, 1937).

Robb, Peter. Liberalism, Modernity, and the Nation (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007)

Rostow, Walt. The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960)

Rustom, Bharucha, "Cultural Transitions in India Today: From Himalayas to Dharavi," in De Souza, ed. Contemporary India: Transitions (New Delhi: Sage, 2000), 49-58.

Said, Edward. Orientalism (New York: Vintage, 1979)

Schiller, Herbert. Mass Communication and American Empire (New York: August M. Kelley, 1969).

Tharad, Romila, "Interpretations of Indian History: Colonial, National, Post-colonial," in De Souza, ed. Contemporary India: Transitions (New Delhi: Sage, 2000), 25-36.

Thompson, John. The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995).

Tonnies, Ferdinand. *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (Leipzig: Buske, 1935).

Verghese, B.G., "The Media in Modern India," in De Souza, ed. Contemporary India: Transitions (New Delhi: Sage, 2000), 302-312.

(Dr Gregory Selbar is teaching in the University of Texas-Pan American, USA)

[Back](#) [Home](#) [Top](#) [Next](#)