We Indians

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Khushwant Singh

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India's 1.2 billion people are descended from a variety of races. The oldest are Negroid aboriginals known as adivasis (first settlers). Then there are the Dravidians, the Aryans, the Mongols, the Semites – and innumerable intermixtures of one with the other.

Nobody quite knows how many languages and dialects are spoken in India. Twenty-two are recognized by the Constitution, but English, which is spoken by no more than 10 per cent of the population, continues to be the chief language of communication between the different states of the Union in the higher echelons of administration and the courts of appeal.

Although the vast majority of Indians are Hindus (80 per cent), almost every religion known in the world is practised in India. Next to Indonesia and Bangladesh, India has the largest population of Muslims (172 million). There are also 24 million Christians, 21 million Sikhs, 9 million Buddhists, over 4 million Jains, and Zoroastrians and Jews in small numbers.

Racial, linguistic and religious divisions are older and, therefore, more deeply embedded in the Indian mind than the sense of Indianness, which is less than 150 years old. Let me illustrate this from my own life story.

I was born in a small village now in Pakistan. It was largely inhabited by Muslims. There were a few families of Hindus and Sikhs and some 'untouchables', who lived in a cluster of mud huts a little removed from our habitation. An outsider coming to our village would never ask '*Who* are you?' but '*What* are you?'

The answer would invariably indicate the sub-caste and the family to which you belonged, never your name. If the person questioned was a Muslim, he would reply, 'We are Waddals or Mastials' (Muslim tribes of Baluchi extraction who between them owned most of the village land). If the person was a Hindu, he would reply, 'We are Brahmins or Khatris or Aroras' (a Hindu trading caste). Even Sikhs, who claimed that Sikhism did not believe in the caste system, always replied by naming their sub-caste. Thus questioned, I would answer, 'We are Khuranas [a subsect of Aroras]. We live opposite the gurdwara.' The 'untouchables', both Hindu and Muslim, would simply admit that they were 'untouchables'. In the village the individual was of little importance; what mattered was clan and caste.

When my parents moved to a neighbouring town there was a slight variation in the pattern of enquiry and

response. The caste or sub-caste was only mentioned if the questioner happened to be of your own religious persuasion. To all others you only stated where you had come from and whether you were Muslim, Hindu or Sikh. And although this town was only 65 kilometres away from our village, we described ourselves as *ajnabis* (strangers) and talked of our ancestral village with nostalgia as our *vatan* (homeland). Even in the town, the individual was of little importance; what mattered was religion, and for further identification, village of birth.

When I was twelve, my parents migrated to Delhi, the seat of the government. For the first time I met people from other parts of India including those who professed religions like Christianity or Zoroastrianism, and spoke languages I could not understand. I became more conscious of my religious identity but less of my caste and sub-caste. Also, I became aware of the province I came from and the language I spoke. When asked who I was, I would reply, 'I am a Sikh from Punjab.' Other boys at school would likewise reply, 'I am a Muslim from Bengal' or 'I am a Christian from Kerala'. Even in a large city like Delhi I have never heard anyone describe himself as an Indian.

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The first time I became conscious of being Indian was

when I went to university in England. This was not very surprising since only Englishmen who had been to India could recognize me as a Sikh or a Punjabi. For others I was just an Indian. Like other foreigners living in England, we Indians tended to herd together. We preferred to live in the same boarding house, joined Indian clubs and foregathered at Indian religious festivals. By then we also started taking interest in our freedom movement. To present a united front against the English, we suppressed our religious and linguistic separateness and insisted that we were Indians. The only group in our midst who had some reservations about being Indian were the Muslims. They had already started thinking in terms of a state of their own. In turn, we had our reservations about them.

When I returned to India, the Second World War had begun. There were many pulls on our loyalties. A large majority of Indians, though they sympathized with England and its allies, thought that Indian freedom came first, concern for what happened to the rest of the world later. Most young men with leftist leanings, including myself, were of the view that it was more important to make the world safe for democracy by defeating the fascist powers than having a free India, which might soon lose its freedom to Japan or Nazi Germany. By then we also sensed that as soon as the war was over we would get our freedom; the concept of Indianness was again in the crucible. Most of us felt that India should remain one

country with its frontiers defined by the extent of British possession, containing all 350 million people, irrespective of religious, racial or linguistic differences. The only Indians who did not share this view were the Muslims. Most of them maintained that Indians were not and never had been one nation and that the Muslim-majority areas should be separated to form a new Muslim state, Pakistan. This conflict of views led to extensive rioting, which in 1946–47 assumed the proportions of a civil war between the Muslims on the one side and Hindus and Sikhs on the other. The country had to be divided. When the division came I was teaching and practising law in Lahore, which fell on the Pakistan side. Practically all Hindus and Sikhs, numbering about five million, who found themselves in West Pakistan were compelled to leave. So were the Muslims living in the new India's north-western states. A total of 10 million people crossed over frontiers, exchanged homes and properties. Nearly half a million were killed in the riots.

On 15 August 1947, India and Pakistan became independent members of the British Commonwealth of Nations. But for both, the question of what precisely being Indian or Pakistani meant remained to be defined. West Pakistan was rid of its non-Muslim population, but East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), a thousand miles away, still had 10 million Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. And though 5 million Muslims had migrated from India to

Pakistan, more than 60 million still remained in India. India also had to contend with divisive forces generated by differences of language and race.

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Before we go on to expound on the theme of Indianness, it is necessary to look back and examine what made the division of Indians into Muslims and non-Muslims so profound as to bring about a dissection of India.

History casts a long, dividing shadow between Hinduism and Islam. The shadow is of religion, not of race or language, because Hindus and Muslims are of the same race or races and speak the same language.

Arab traders are known to have come to India from time immemorial. Dhows laden with products of the desert – dates and aromatic herbs – took advantage of the easterly winds and sailed across the Indian Ocean. Their arrival on the west coast of India, stretching from the Rann of Kutch down to Cape Comorin, was as familiar to the people of the region as the flocks of monsoon birds which flew over from the African coast as heralds of the summer monsoon. These Arabs spent the rainy season in India, exchanged their wares for Indian textiles and spices, and sailed back to their homes before the winter set in. Some, however, stayed and settled down in India.

After Prophet Mohammed (570–632 CE) converted the

Arabs to Islam, these traders introduced their new faith into India. Mosques sprang up along the western coast. There is evidence to prove that these early Arab Muslims were made more than welcome by the local Hindus who gave them daughters in marriage. Descendants of these ancient traders are still found in large communities in Malabar, in the present-day state of Kerala. They are known as *moplahs* from the Malayalam word *mapilla* meaning son-in-law.

The amicable relationship between the Hindu and the Muslim changed abruptly when Muslim armies invaded India from the north-west frontiers. Early in the eighth century the seventeen-year-old Mohammed Bin Qasim overran Sind. From 1000 CE Mahmud of Ghazni began his invasions of India. He destroyed Hindu temples and made a pastime of raising pyramids of the skulls of infidels.

Mahmud's destructive zeal reached its full frenzy in Somnath in Gujarat, the richest temple of India. He slew its Brahmin priests, smashed the idols with his own hands and looted the temple coffers. He carried the sandalwood portals studded with precious stones back to Afghanistan as trophies. Ever since then, the name of Mahmud has stunk in the nostrils of the Hindus.

Mahmud of Ghazni was only the first in a long line of Muslim idol-breakers. His example was followed by the Mongols, Turks and Persians. They killed and destroyed in

the name of Islam. Not a single Buddhist, Jain or Hindu temple in northern India escaped their iconoclastic zeal. Some temples were converted into mosques; idols and figurines had their noses, breasts or limbs lopped off; wall paintings were charred beyond recognition.

Even the Mughal dynasty, which ruled India for over two hundred years and gave it the most beautiful monuments, such as the Taj Mahal at Agra, had its quota of Hindu-baiters. Babar, who conquered India in 1526, raised a ghoulish mountainheap of 60,000 heads of Hindus he had defeated in battle. The last great ruler of the dynasty, Aurangzeb, is reputed to have ordered governors of provinces to snip off the pigtails of Hindus and send them to Agra to be weighed. He imposed a tax, the jiziya, on all his non-Muslim subjects and forced many to convert to Islam.

There were peaceful interludes in these centuries of persecution, the most notable being the reign of Akbar, who ruled India from 1556 to 1605. Akbar abolished discrimination against subjects of different faiths, elevated Hindus to high positions and entered into matrimonial alliances with Hindu princes. Akbar's name is honoured with the title Akbar the Great. But Aurangzeb, who is praised by Muslim historians for his piety and the firmness with which he dealt with his non-Muslim subjects, is abominated by the Hindus.

It is little wonder that the Hindus began to look upon

Muslims as tyrants and shunned those Indians who accepted Islam. It took many long years of suffering and humiliation before the Hindus were able to hit back. The Marathas under Shivaji defied the Mughals in central and southern India and ultimately triumphed over them. The Sikhs rose in the north and set up independent principalities of their own. In the early decades of the nineteenth century the Marathas were subdued by the British. In 1849 the kingdom of the Sikhs was annexed and the whole of India became a British possession.

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British attitude towards the Hindus and the Muslims changed from time to time. For some years after the mutiny of 1857, in which Muslims took greater part than Hindus, the policy was distinctly anti-Muslim and pro-Hindu. After the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885, which began to agitate for freedom and was largely composed of Hindus, the policy became pronouncedly anti-Hindu and pro-Muslim.

The British encouraged Muslim separatism. Under the guise of neutrality, they gave Muslims more privileges in services such as the police and the army than the quota they were entitled to. The British encouraged separate educational institutions – Islamic schools and colleges were matched by Hindu and Sikh schools and colleges. In

public places such as railway stations there were separate restaurants for Hindus and Muslims. Even drinking water booths bore signs – Hindu water, Muslim water.

Hindu–Muslim riots became a normal feature of Indian life. Seldom did a Hindu or Sikh religious procession passing a mosque fail to spark a brawl. And every year, at the Muslim festival of Bakr Id commemorating Ibrahim's attempted sacrifice of his son, tension mounted. Muslims made it a point to sacrifice a cow instead of a ram or a goat. And they took good care to decorate a cow and march it through streets where Hindus lived before taking it to the slaughterhouse.

The hostility so generated affected all sections of society, even the intellectuals. An anecdote of the time illustrates the rivalry between Hindu and Muslim scholars to prove the superiority of their respective ancient civilizations. It is said that archaeologists excavating the ruins of an old Hindu temple found a rusted steel wire. A Hindu pandit immediately declared this to be evidence that the ancient Hindus had had a telephone system. This spurred Muslim archaeologists to excavate around the site of an old mosque. They could find nothing. But not to be outdone, a Muslim ulema declared this to be evidence that the ancient Muslims had known everything about wireless telegraphy.

The British government set the scene for political separatism when it gave Muslims, and later other

religious minorities, separate electorates in elections to legislative bodies. This policy encouraged political parties that represented only the interests of their respective communities. With separate electorates, the British gave Muslims special privileges and thus kept them from joining the nationalists. Another reason for the Muslims keeping aloof from the nationalists was the fact that some of the leading figures in the movement, for instance, Bal Gangadhar Tilak of Maharashtra and Lala Lajpat Rai of Punjab, were also associated with Hindu revivalism. British patronage and suspicion of Hindu nationalism gave birth to the Muslim League, which in 1940 demanded an independent Muslim state, Pakistan.

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Although Muslims belong to the same races and speak the same languages spoken by other Indians of the region in which they live, their customs and ways of living differ in some respects. A Muslim child is given a distinctively Muslim name, for example, Mohammed Ali. Sikhs and Hindus of northern India, particularly Jats, Rajputs and Gurkhas, often have similar names, for example, my own surname, Singh. Even Christians in most parts of India retain their Hindu names; only conversion to Islam requires a change.

A Muslim boy is circumcised and learns verses of the Koran from a mullah. A Hindu boy has his head shaved, and if he belongs to one of the three upper castes of Hinduism, he wears a sacred thread and is taught Sanskrit texts by a pandit.

The dietary laws of Hindus and Muslims are different. Hindus worship the cow. The Muslims eat it. Hindus, if non-vegetarian, eat pork. Muslims are seldom vegetarian and, like the Jews, consider the pig unclean. Muslims only eat the flesh of an animal slain by being bled to death. Hindus prefer to decapitate their goats; Sikhs go further and consider eating the meat of an animal slain in the Muslim fashion to be sinful. There are certain differences in the style of dress of the two people. Hindus wear Gandhi caps and dhotis. Muslims prefer wearing fezes or caps made of lamb's skin and usually wear loose-fitting pyjama trousers. Hindu women wear saris and sport a little red dot on their foreheads. Muslim women prefer the Punjabi salwar-kameez or the baggy gharara. Muslim women are often veiled. Hindu women seldom veil themselves.

Hindus worship a multiplicity of gods, read many sacred texts and venerate innumerable avatars. Muslims worship the one and only Allah, honour Mohammed as His one and only prophet and read the Koran as the only true revelation of God. Hindus go to many places of pilgrimage and wash off their sins in India's sacred

rivers. For the Muslims the only places of pilgrimage are Mecca and Medina or, if they are Shia Muslims, Karbala in Iraq.

When a Hindu falls ill he consults a Hindu vaid, learned in the Ayurvedic system of medicine. When a Muslim falls ill he consults a Muslim hakim, learned in the Yunani or Greek system of medicine. When a Hindu dies, he is cremated and his ashes immersed in a river or the ocean. When a Muslim dies, he is buried with his face turned towards Mecca.

Muslims look upon Hindus as mean, cunning and cowardly, fit only to be babus (clerks) or banias (shopkeepers). They dismiss Hindu scholars as sanctimonious gasbags. 'The only language a Hindu understands,' say the Muslims, 'is the language of the sword.'

Hindus look upon the Muslims as dirty, incapable of hard work, and grasping. 'Give them one thing and they'll be asking for another,' say the Hindus. 'Their mentality is that of the Arab Bedouin. They are not the sons of the desert but its fathers, because wherever they go they create a desert. Look what they did to Hindustan!'

In every Indian city there is a Muslim locality distinct from the Hindu. Even villages where the two live together are more often than not known by their religious identity – Muslim village, Hindu village, Sikh village. For a while, the sense of euphoria generated by Independence

obliterated the differences of race, language and religion. Most people, particularly the young, made it a point to describe themselves as Indians and refused to divulge their racial, religious or provincial background. They were proud of being Indian primarily because India was the land of Gandhi and would prove that a people as diverse as they were could be one nation. There was also a generally shared conviction that in following the path of Gandhi India would prove to the nations of the world that international dispute could be resolved by honest, open, peaceful methods instead of by cunning diplomacy or war.

The process of disillusionment began very soon. Hindus and Muslims continued to kill each other. When Gandhi tried to stop them, he was assassinated. People said: 'We have killed Gandhi but we will keep Gandhism alive.' Even that did not happen. Indian troops invaded and annexed Hyderabad. (Indian politicians called it 'police action'.) Indians fought the Pakistanis in Kashmir. In 1961 India invaded Goa, expelled the Portuguese garrison and annexed all Portuguese-occupied territories in India. In 1962 India fought a brief war with China and suffered a humiliating defeat. In 1965 there was another war with Pakistan which ended in a draw. And in 1971 a third confrontation of arms with Pakistan in which India gained a decisive victory. These wars with their neighbours made Indians very conscious of their Indianness but they

also realized that by resorting to violence they had proved false to their professions of Gandhism. Gandhism was as dead as Gandhi.

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India's internal affairs also started going awry. The population increased at an astonishing rate – from 350 million in 1947 to 541 million in 1971, to 1.2 billion in 2013. The pace of development in agriculture and industry was much slower. There were famines in Bihar, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. India had to go begging for food and foreign aid. How can a beggar nation have pride? India continues to be among the poorest and most unlettered countries in the world. Fissiparous tendencies began to re-manifest themselves. Southerners who are Dravidians clamoured for a separate Dravidistan, the Sikhs in the north-west agitated for a sovereign Sikh state and the Nagas in the north-east for an independent Nagaland. There were demands for the redrawing of the state boundaries, first on linguistic grounds, then because one region was richer or poorer than the other. Divisive demands seemed endless and were often pressed at the expense of national interests. In different states new definition was given to the expression 'son of the soil'. It did not mean son of India but one born in that particular state. The government

set up a National Integration Council to counteract the resurgence of these anti-national tendencies.

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What then does it mean to be an Indian today? An exaggerated sense of historical importance as a people who attained an advanced state of civilization before any others – Indian scholars vie with each other to push back the dates of their archaeological finds and ancient texts. A sanctimonious feeling that we are a spiritual people because we gave the world its two important religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, and continue to be more engaged in religious practices than the materialistic West. Gandhism is added evidence of our other-worldly pursuits. A legitimate sense of pride that though we were ruled by a colonial power for 150 years and started our career as an independent nation with many handicaps we have not done too badly. The life expectancy of an Indian has gone up from 27 years in 1947 to 66 years today; the literacy rate from 13 per cent to 74 per cent. Our green revolution has made us self-sufficient in food. We are making rapid strides in industry. We are among the leading nations in harnessing atomic energy for industry; we make our own fighter aircraft, automobiles, telephones and bicycles. And above all, we are the world's

largest democracy and our people (including women) enjoy a measure of political freedom unknown to any other developing country of the world.

2

The Ugly Indian

Before we set about analysing Indian character we must take cognizance of the circumstances in which that character has been moulded. We Indians have bitter memories of the despoliation of our land by a succession of savage conquerors followed by a couple of centuries of economic exploitation and racial humiliation. From our forefathers we have inherited fear of the strong man; and being among the poorest of the poor of the world we also have a gnawing sense of insecurity and an exaggerated fear of a low bank balance. Consequently, it is only those who don't give a damn about consequences nor are bothered about providing for themselves or their families, who are free of fear of the strong and the powerful as well as of the future: such are the sanyasis who have renounced the world. It is significant that India has a larger proportion of world renouncers than any other country in the world. The timid *grihastha* (householder) and the reckless sanyasi are both deeply ingrained in our make-up. Gurudev

Tagore summed up these opposite characteristics in a few inimitable lines:

> India has two aspects – in one she is the householder, in the other a wandering ascetic. The former refuses to budge from the cosy nook, the latter has no home at all. I find both of these within me. I want to roam about and see all the wide world, yet I also yearn for a little sheltered nook, like a bird with its tiny nest for a dwelling and the vast sky for flight.

However, when dealing with the Indian character we do not take its sadhus, sanyasis and other ascetics into reckoning: they are a breed apart. We shall only deal with the Indian who has to face the rough and tumble of life.

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In the ultimate analysis a man's character is formed by two things: what he believes to be good and proper in his dealings with his fellow beings and how he puts these beliefs into practice in his daily life. What then is the code of conduct which an average Indian accepts, and how far does he go in conforming to it?

The code of conduct towards other people is largely based on religious beliefs and traditions. There is a basic difference between our (largely Hindu) attitude towards society and