

# India Yesterday, India Today

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India Day, Edinburgh University, 2 October 2014

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When I was a child, which is a very long time ago, and my sole identity was that of a grandson, the English song I heard sung over and over again at home, and learnt to sing, was Cardinal Newman's 'Lead Kindly Light', a great and moving song but a very sombre one, full of gloom and dark nights. Six decades on, my only valid identity being that of a grandfather, I rejoice when I hear my two tiny grand-daughters play on the iPad over and over again one particular animated song on it. I join their singing of it. It cannot be called a great song but is a greatly enjoyable song. It goes: 'If You're Happy And You Know It Clap Your Hands'. The younger of the two has a shorter name for it. She calls the song, simply, 'Happy Know Clap-Clap'. I know they will someday learn 'Lead Kindly Light' but I am glad today they are singing 'Happy Know Clap Clap'. India today has a large and growing population, happy if also somewhat obese, wearing rings and strings, charms on its arms, RayBan specs over its noses and musky perfumes in large doses. It has a growing number of the new rich, the commercially driven, industrially and technologically, especially IT-empowered, who are happy, know it and are clapping their hands 24X7. India today knows it is, literally, level with and in many ways ahead of others in the world's reach for Mars' orbit, red and beckoning, among the sky's great stars. And what is more, it has shown, in a very Indian way which Scotland will approve, that it can get to the same place, the same site, as anyone else, with the same, even better speed, at one-third, or even less the price ! Its great scientists have been led to Mars by a kindly light, and my, is India happy, and knowing it, how it is clapping !

An era has passed between the singing of those two songs.

I will share a few thoughts with you on both those eras, on this India Day.

Let me start with a self-question. Can India, so timeless, have a day marking it?

Can the Indian Ocean shrink to a grain of sea-sand, the Himalaya to a pebble?

Can 1.2 billion people of infinite variety, each group unique, each individual distinct, be captured in one mug-shot image?

If yes – even in theory – it can be only in the island that thought it could capture and hold a sub-continent. Only the British Isles can try hold India in a Day. Or, in William Blake's phrase, eternity in an hour. And be so good at it.

It is an honour to be invited by Edinburgh University to speak at its India Day.

I thank the Principal, Professor Sir Timothy O'Shea, and the Edinburgh India Institute, for bestowing this honour on me. To Dr George Palattiyil and Dr Dina Sidhva who have visualised the commemoration, I offer my sincerest appreciation.

May I be deserving of the privilege.

Edinburgh University's circling of October the 2<sup>nd</sup> for India Day links a martyr for faith, St Andrews, with a martyr for peace, Mohandas Gandhi. It revives the link between the Scots founder of the Indian National Congress, Allan Octavian Hume, with the Congress' most famous leader. But India Day in Edinburgh does something else which is very important. It helps us in India see Gandhi not just as an Indian phenomenon, an Indian possession, an Indian heritage but as one the world knows as a fresh water aquifer in the deserts of its troubled conscience.

Aquifers have their thirsts.

Gandhi found intellectual and moral re-charge in a saint the world knew as a chemist. Professor Prafulla Chandra Ray, Acharya – Great Teacher – as we call him, who studied here at Edinburgh University in the late 1880s was a path-breaking scientist. But history remembers him as a mendicant in the halls of time, a mendicant for India's greatness. The austerity of the Acharya's life was as spectacular as his discoveries of rare chemicals. 'Research can wait', he said, 'industry can wait; independence cannot wait'.

But his concept of 'independence' went beyond the lowering of one flag and the raising of another.

It meant, quite literally, non-dependence, self-reliance.

I believe he would have approved my choice of the subject for today's India Day lecture: *India yesterday, India today*.

I must explain what exactly I mean by 'India yesterday'.

By 'India yesterday', I have in mind the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when she found for herself a sense of being India, not a patchwork India of stitched-together parts, spatial or ideological, but India as India.

This self-awareness came from a sense, as real as it was inchoate, of something in India, something indefinable, something intangible, being greater than its circumstances, stronger than its chains, tougher than all the brutishness, both foreign and home-grown, which was holding it down. It came from a sense of injustice being suffered by it as a political totality, a geo-political collectivity, a conceptual verity, at the hands of a colonizing power that was stronger than itself rather as an intellectually challenged behemoth is, but smaller than itself in every other. And the idea of its inner bigness came also from a growing awareness that if India was feeling low it was because it was in a hundred different ways, acting low, being low.

It came from a slowly rising awareness of the scale of its self-inflicted wrongs, its own doings.

Those were times when this self-awareness became a tidal wave of great energy, turning small times into great moments, small preoccupations into great undertakings that endowed the littlenesses of her preoccupations with a new vitality, a drive to revive and to reform, to celebrate and to correct.

Those times, those yesterdays, saw most significantly, the visionary social reformer Rajah Rammohun Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar from Bengal, as brave as they were wise, lock horns with narrow orthodoxy, petty conformism. It saw the chapter-turning Jyotirao Phule and Pandita

Ramabai from Maharashtra, hold up the mirror to Indian society's exploitative and debased social practices, in particular, its hideous mistreatment of women.

'India yesterday' or yesterday's India saw the one and only such monk, Swami Vivekananda startle the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 with his exposition of the spiritual tradition of India. "I am proud to belong to a religion", he said, "which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance..." and then going on to say something we should repeat to ourselves a hundred times in India today. "Sectarianism," he said in his great booming voice, "bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization, and sent whole nations to despair..."

He could have been speaking to us in India and to our world, today. Vivekananda's erudition in the scriptures and his rootedness in religion did not blind him to the fact India was a great nation of very weak-minded men capable, nonetheless, of bullying those weaker than themselves. In a memorable comment he said to Indian youths "You will be nearer to Heaven through football than through the study of the Gita."

'India yesterday' saw Rabindranath Tagore win, in 1913, a Nobel Prize for Literature, C V Raman win it, in 1931, for Physics. The third Nobel – for Peace – eluded Gandhi to become the only Nobel that is more real in its spectacular omission than it could have ever been in its literal conferment.

India Day, therefore, has to be not just India's Day or a day for India but a day when we can and must recall the meaning, full and throbbing, of a word now hardly used, or used, if at all, as a description of something that belongs as a fleeting shadow, almost, to a past – *renaissance*.

And so, as we celebrate India Day we celebrate all that which comes to new life, must come to new life, by the germinal laws of moral endeavour, academic burgeoning, cultural fecundity and human self-renewal. When the political aquifers plummet, the ethical and aesthetic water tables rise. It is difficult to establish the co-relation; it is impossible not to notice it.

I am no blind worshipper of yesterdays which, as the great Indians that I have mentioned, knew to be deeply flawed.

Nor am I by the glories of today, awed.

Most present here must know of the incident which is recalled often, so often in fact, as to almost lose its value. But it does bear repetition, today, on India Day in Edinburgh. I refer to the event, in 1893, when Mohandas Gandhi, travelling on a first class ticket from Durban to Pretoria was ejected from the train on account of being a man of colour.

When Gandhi was evicted from the train, an Indian visiting South Africa fell; but when Gandhi rose, an Indian South African rose. And every kind of Indian became one Indian in him, the north Indian and the south Indian, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Parsi and Sikh, Brahmin and so-called untouchable.

When Gandhi fell he was, doubtless, in disbelief. Being human his disbelief must have turned, the very next instant, to fury. But the traumatic moment is an alchemist. Something transformed his

fire to light. I had the fortune of reflecting upon that incident at an event in 1996, when President Nelson Mandela gave to Gandhi, posthumously, keys to the city of Pietermaritzburg. I may be permitted to share with you what I said then: Gandhi fell with a railway ticket that was dishonoured; he rose with a testament that symbolized honour; he fell a traveller but rose a turbine; fell a lawyer but rose a statesman; his legal brief became a political cause; his sense of human decency transformed itself into a passion for human justice. The personal died within him that moment and turned public; 'mine' became 'thine'. In fact, Mohandas Gandhi was not flung from a stationary train, he was launched from a moving vehicle of destiny. No honour that has been given or can be given to Gandhi can match President Mandela's making Gandhi an honorary citizen of his country.

What happened in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, in 1893, happened to an individual. The impact on the India that I have called in this talk, 'India yesterday' was profound.

About twenty five years later, a similar life-changing event took place in India not to one individual but to an uncountable number.

When on April 13, 1919, Gen Dyer opened, for the British Empire, ravenous gunfire in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, in the Punjab, killing in the space of 10 minutes at the very least, 379 people, as many human beings fell but they fell only to rise, the very same moment, as so many flaming torches. They became India and India became them. Tagore returned his knighthood, Gandhi unveiled his first major all-India campaign. Nothing was to be the same again after Jallianwala Bagh, not Indian politics, not Indian society, and certainly not the imagination of India's young.

That moment, that galvanic instant, remained active in what I like to think of as 'India yesterday', the India of the struggle for freedom.

The short-term became almost incidental. The only 'term' was the long term. Youths gave up their studies in the thousands, many their jobs in government and enlisted in the struggle, courting arrest for civil disobedience, for defiance of the government. Non-compliance with orders against assembly, or public expression of views led to jail terms. These were accepted with cheer and without demur. It must be said here that the British administration did not torture its prisoners in quite the same way as some other colonizers did. But it was fairly ruthless when it came to curbing freedoms and this was endured without complaint. Idealism was idealism, patriotism its own reason and its own reward.

There was no telling whether freedom would come in their life-time. No one was sure, if jailed, as to when they would come out. Some jails were a nightmare, the cellular prison in the Andamans being at the top of the notorious list.

Gandhi had said political prisoners could ask for jail reforms which would benefit all, but they should not whine about their personal discomfort, nor seek premature release on small, personal grounds. The message was simple: We are simple people in a big cause, let us be worthy of it.

It was all about the larger goal, the bigger picture.

The freedom of India deserved nothing but complete dedication.

And the goal went beyond freedom, beyond even India.

Six months before independence, heading the provisional government of India, Jawaharlal Nehru convened an Asian Relations Conference in Delhi and invited Gandhi to address it. Leaders from several Asian nations, future heads of government, attended it. Addressing the delegates, Nehru said: "... Asia is again finding herself ... one of the notable consequences of the European domination of Asia has been the isolation of the countries of Asia from one another. ... Today this isolation is breaking down because of many reasons, political and otherwise ... This Conference is significant as an expression of that deeper urge of the mind and spirit of Asia which has persisted ... In this Conference and in this work there are no leaders and no followers. All countries of Asia have to meet together in a common task".

This was another long-term goal.

This was another far-sight.

India was looking ahead, not to lead but to link, not to swagger but to support and be supported in redeeming lost opportunities, lost pathways to a shared progress towards an order that was as lofty as it was humane. Non-alignment, Afro-Asian unity, a just world economic order were in the air.

Rivalries and opportunistic alliances were at a discount, joining one or another bloc was out of the question. There was a clear leaning in Nehru towards the socialist states of the world, a desire to work with them, but this was yet an expression of his own socialist way of thought, and an expression of India's ideal for a world free from the hegemonies of the past. This view ran its risks, for hegemony is hegemony, whatever be its official colour.

There was bigness around in that 'India yesterday'

This is not to say that there was no 'smallness' to be seen. Oh yes, there was. Envy – a great Indian trait – is ever the shadow of achievement. And Envy's older sister, Ego, is ever the escort of anything undertaken. There are those who, attending a wedding, want to be the bridegroom; why, at every funeral they are at, to be in that coffin. Such men were not wanting in India yesterday but they were the contemptible exception. The rule was dedication, sacrifice.

This was renaissance.

And this renaissance knew that, in *that* India, there was so much that was not right and so much that was, in fact, wrong, grossly wrong and unworthy of those great times. Chief among these, was the sectarian tension Vivekananda and Jyotirao Phule had warned India about – Hindu-Muslim differences and those between the so-called upper castes and the millions who were regarded as lower castes and even 'untouchable'. Congress as a party under Gandhi's leadership, tried to erase these differences and the discriminations they led to. One man above others, from a tradition of protest different from Gandhi's and Nehru's, came to the nation's call. Dr B R Ambedkar, from India's most oppressed classes, with his legal training and conceptual acuity, began framing a constitution for India. This was a living document if ever there was one, with words as sharp instruments, not hollow sounds.

But the nation as such had been soaked too long in the dead hand of custom and prejudice. Sectarian strife had only gone into hiding, yielding place to the better instincts and higher

impulses of renascent India. It had not been overcome. With the result that on the bigger picture came to be super-imposed a set of small pictures with the result that even as the picture of independent India was unveiled the canvas got divided.

Spaces shrank, time scrunched itself.

And in one moment, the present became the past.

Trusts became anniversaries, leaders became statues.

The glowing horizon became a dull and boring background.

The future became a 'was', the ideal a memory, the dream a page in a book, material for speeches, like this one.

The long term shrivelled into the short term, the distant scene became the immediate.

Gandhi had said he was born in India, but made in South Africa.

Nelson Mandela said famously, as only he could, with moral height, to India "You sent us a lawyer, we returned him to you as a Mahatma" And then he added with his famous twinkle "But you did not look after him !".

Those were true words coming from a true man.

'Looking after Gandhi' is of course not what India became free for; it was for looking after those who needed looking after.

Has India done that?

In many quite remarkable ways she has.

The most striking thing about India today is her incredible advance in scientific research and development. India's space programmes and the mission at Mars is only the most spectacular symbol of our advance in what may be called cutting-edge or frontier sciences. This is about the skies. The other no less significant if less dramatic achievement of the scientific endeavour in India is on terra firma. It lies in the near-universal immunization of new-borns. Our birth rate has come down, and, more importantly, so has our death rate. Life expectancy has doubled from what it was when Britain left India. India is no longer, in the words of the Lankan author Tarzie Vittachi, 'the country where they breed like rabbits; it is the country where they do not die like flies any more'. Health care, especially in the towns and cities, has become unrecognizably better through hospitals and medical clinics with up to date equipment though still with deplorably poor maintenance, a poor work-ethic, and the old die-hard ogre of work-shirking. In every Indian home and work establishment you will find one or two individuals, miracles, no less, working away with zeal, with devotion, the very epitome of responsibility but with the rest, slovenly, sluggish and parasitic.

India is, all said and done, a nation of irreconcilables. We have the noblest of workers, a golden few who lead by example, and a vast assembly of shirkers, a leaden multiplicity. We have pioneers, a millennial band, and we have parasites a millennial baggage.

Thanks to some pioneers, Indians live well longer now than they ever did. And of course those in the upwardly mobile middle classes live much better than they did. There is scarcely an Indian today whose feet lack footwear, very often very designer footwear, no matter that the design comes as a perfect fake. A perfect fake is as perfect as it is fake. An improvisation is a design!

If there are wrists to be seen without watches it is only because time is now checked on mobile phones which virtually every Indian carries. And all of India including a large number of its minors, carries mobile phones, smart phones, some multiples of them.

But even as modern technology grows and enters the lives of average citizens, old superstitions have tightened their hold on the Indian mind. If a billion men and women wear watches and carry cell-phones, they also now, much more than their ancestors did, wear strings and rings, charms and totem-bits on their persons, propitiating old deities and new voodoo obsessions. Many here would have heard of *vastu*, a force governing buildings. *Vastu* is said to be a super-natural energy governing the fate of built structures and thereby determining the welfare of its occupants. You will find the most modern, internationally-travelled persons in India today drawing plans for their houses in ways that are vastu-cleared even before they are cleared by the town planner.

India yesterday, poor as it was, less educated than it is now, was moving away from superstition. India today, linked in to the fastest technologies, using fast moving vehicles, listening to fast music, eating fast foods, is fast-forwarded and – re-winded. If any country in the world can zoom forward and lunge backward, in real time, India can and is doing. Does that – fast-forward and re-wind – mean India today is stuck between progress and stagnation? I cannot rebut that confidently but I do believe, with complete certainty, that the India of Rammohun Ray, Vivekananda, Tagore, Gandhi, Prafulla Chandra Ray and Nehru is not meant to be stuck. Belief is not subject to testing.

But we are, all said and done, a nation of paradoxes. India today has men and women re-spelling their names with impossible multiple vowels and consonants to conform to the nostrums of numerology. Vehicles' registration numbers are also often chosen or requisitioned with reference to 'auspiciousness'. It is another matter that the owner of the divinely approved number plate is a horrendous offender of traffic rules. Traffic on Indian roads is a grand terror, the motor-cycle being the grandest of all. The overwhelming number of motor-cyclists are restless young men who have come into ownership of a powered vehicle for the first time. They ride the two-wheeled orthopaedic cruncher not just to reach destinations double quick but to assert themselves.

The intellectually un-superior if not downright inferior but physically stronger, socially privileged, financially self-loading, professionally preferred and impossibly self-righteous Indian male is an embarrassment to human intelligence. As a father until old age makes him slow down, as a husband until increasing infirmities and decreasing incomes make him depend more and more on his wife, as a son who assumes the position of bread-earner, the insensitive Indian male would

have been a Disneyland animator's delight had he not been so capable and so culpable of hurting the Indian woman.

Hurtling above speed limits, winding his wheeling bone-breaker through and past the narrowest opening between poor pedestrians and expensive limousines, to get from everywhere to everywhere, the motor-cyclist is the most representative symbol of short-sighted, short-tempered, short-termist male aggression in India today.

Today's India is vehicular, not pedestrian. Not in numbers, for pedestrian India forms a majority. But in terms of *force majeure*, vehicular India rules.

In the three countries that make Scandinavia, the King or Queen are often pedestrians. But more pertinently, if the King there is a pedestrian, the pedestrian there is also King, or Queen. Limos, cars, buses, containers and trams will grind to a halt at a pedestrian crossing for a lone pedestrian on Oslo's streets, no less than a person might on beholding a tusker cross his path.

Norway, Sweden and Denmark are monarchies. India yesterday was a colony in part, and under native kings in the other part. India today is a democracy. The majority must rule in a democracy, or at least have the bigger say. But pedestrian India, the majority, defers to vehicular India, the hugely powerful minority. The pedestrian way, the footpath as it used to be called, or the side-walk, is becoming non-existent.

In the developed world the pedestrian has rights. In India today the pedestrian has luck.

Why this difference?

In India, the dynamics of a society that is emerging from poverty are at work. They turn a vehicle, any vehicle, into something other than a means of transportation. They turn it into a form of self-confidence and of self-assertion. For a poor youth, to own a bicycle is progress, to own a motor-cycle is empowerment. And to acquire access to the steering wheel of a lorry or a car, with or without a driving licence, is to move into lunar space. So, like a child that finds a three-wheeled toy car thrilling only when pedalling it faster and faster, vehicular India wants to race. Vehicular India today, is on a race.

Where to?

Who is winning and who is losing?

The whirligig of manufacture is so like a race, with each automobile giant running to make more, make fast, make better, make, make, make. It wants to sell more, sell faster sell better, sell, sell, sell.

Does this massive race in manufacture, in production, of which the throbbing and thick infusion of fuel guzzling vehicles each day onto our roads are a striking sign, have a flipside?

'Safe pedestrian crossings' is a phrase I used in the strictly physical context of our roads. The phrase was used as a metaphor by a former President of India, K R Narayanan memorably and meaningfully. He, incidentally, knew what being a pedestrian meant. In his Republic Day address in 2000, President



Narayanan said: "The unabashed, vulgar indulgence in conspicuous consumption by the nouveau-riche has left the underclass seething in frustration. One half of our society guzzles aerated beverages while the other has to make do with palmfuls of muddied water. Our three-way fast-lane of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation must provide safe pedestrian-crossings for unempowered India also so that it too can move towards 'Equality of Status and Opportunity'."

The pedestrian cannot be taken to be an all-time and all-place submissive. He or she may cower before traffic waves in our cities. But not every pedestrian lives, unempowered, in the city. He is to be found, the metaphorical pedestrian, in our forests and in our villages near forests, and in villages all over India. That pedestrian must not be left to turn into a fury. Unempowered India's furies have acquired mobility in the Maoist movement. Not that long ago in West Bengal on police personnel saw Maoists come not on foot but on that wheeled arrow of fury, the motorcycle. They came on a convoy of motorcycles. Their deed done, they disappeared as quickly, in a cloud of dust, smoke and blood. And they were led by a woman with the gaze of fury.

If every Indian is to be given equality of status and opportunity in India today, as every Indian should be, then status quo cannot continue. Corporates and bulk consumers of water and fuel and electricity will have to forego some digits in their graphs so that others below them can move up an inch.

This reflects a physical law. Metaphorically speaking, vehicular India will have to turn partly into pedestrian India if our resources are to spread over many more. Again, metaphorically speaking, if our resources, including metal, coal and fossil-fuels have to suffice for all Indians to have a bicycle, a great many to have motor-cycles, and many to be able to drive and own lorries and cars, those who have a multiplicity of cars will have to cutback on their fleets and descend from their chariots of excess. If all of India is to have water and energy, bulk users will have to cut waste for a start, reduce consumption next.

That is where we are in trouble.

No corporate honcho or political leader is going to do a Gandhi or a P C Ray and advocate frugality, controlled consumption, sharing, equity.

The name of the game in India today is 'Go, go, go go for it, fast, faster'. India today needs development. But instead of 'development for India', it is more like 'India for the developers'.

'Pietermaritzburg 1893' gets re-enacted ever so often in the broken lives of disempowered citizens, at the invisible hands of those with social, political and economic clout. This happens in the villages; it happens in our towns and cities, creating new classes of the under-privileged below the poverty line and below what P. Sainath has described as the 'destitution line'. Time is running out for India today. Experts may debate the cubic foot measures of glacial shrinking. The fact is indisputable that nothing less than life-style and workstyle changes will have to be made by the water-splurging, power-splurging, fuel-splurging classes if life-style revolutions are not to be visited upon them.

Imagine a situation which, believe me, is not only not inconceivable but imminent, when monsoon failures dry up dams and rivers to an extent when we have to bathe not twice a day but once in two days, drink not half the amount of water we do but half of that half. No big deal there, if you think of

it, considering that unempowered India manages with such quantities any way. But I am imagining, for a moment, the rationing of water. And extending that to food, simply because we as a people did not act in time.

Who will suffer when climate change-driven sea-level rise threatens the Lakshadweep, the Sunderban and coastal Bengal and Orissa with submersion? Who will suffer when cyclones lash the Andhra and Tamil Nadu coasts? We have heard of climate refugees. These need not be from across borders. They could be inter-State, intra-State. It all depends on the gravity of the displacement.

But dizzied by its techno-commercial races, India's political, industrial and scientific leadership is being grossly negligent, dangerously lethargic and, in fact, culpably unmindful of what it should be doing for climate justice. Our short-termism is unbelievable. It does not realize that development will eat into itself unless it is climate compatible. Our short-termism is notching up a debit card bill our children will have to pick up without the means to do so. Who will suffer?

India yesterday saw Indians move in multitudes from depression to hope, from ignorance to knowledge, from medievalism to modern thought. India today sees Indians move from villages to cities, from poverty in a languishing agriculture to uncertain livelihood in whimsical self-employment, but from despair to desperation, changing one kind of frustration to another. India today has a powerful political-technological-entrepreneurial leadership manning its engine that sees land as factory-sites, water as electricity, trees as timber, granite as potential cement. It sees villages as potential towns, towns as cities, cities as metropolises. India today sees neighbours as traders, visitors as tourists, countries and continents in terms of groups of interests. It sees monsoons as trade-winds, oceans as homes to sea-floor minerals, natural gas, hydro-carbons. It sees space as capital, time as money. It places clout above influence, strength above stature, bi-ceps above brains. India yesterday wanted India to be just country in a world that had no super powers; India today wants India to be rich and a super power in itself. This inorganic change-over in self-image is about bettering life for a growing minority at the expense of a dispossessed, disconsolate majority. And that is unjust, unethical; it is wrong.

I will conclude now with a reflection on another 'majority'.

The greatest laurel on the broad forehead of 'India today' is that it is the world's largest electoral democracy. India elected to office, in Kerala, the world's first popularly elected communist government headed by E M S Namboodiripad. India electorally dismissed a government, headed by Indira Gandhi, that had placed the country under a national emergency in which all civil rights had been suspended. India today brings parties to power with generosity, sends them packing without mercy. This is more than an achievement; it is a magnificence.

But here too, we see the fast-forward and re-wind paradox happening. As in any wholesome democracy, a political majority determines who is to form the Government of India. That person who commands a majority in the House of the People is invited by the President of India to be Prime Minister. That political majority has nothing to do with India's ethnic majority, its linguistic or religious majority. But there is in India today a real possibility of the political majority getting fused and confused with its ethnic-religious majority. There is in India today a reflexive possibility of India's religious minorities forming political outfits on the basis of religion. This is a retrograde development, for democracies are meant to be about policy choices, not prejudice choices. The

mutation, through the sanctification of the ballot box, of electoral options into religious polarizations can bring a secular democracy to the doorstep of a majoritarian theocracy. This will be not a fruit of the democratic tree but an unrecognizable mutant, wholly alienated from 'India yesterday' in its vision and in its methods.

There is an allied danger in this.

India yesterday was committed to nuclear disarmament. It still is, but thanks to the grim realities of today, more in theory than in substance. 'We cannot afford to disarm when we are surrounded by nuclear war-heads' is a convincing argument and I see its point. The existence of violent, barbaric terrorist organizations in India's neighbourhood speaking the distorted language of Jihad, makes India and Pakistan, both, vulnerable to non-State entities' nuclear blackmailing. The theory of nuclear deterrence is a theory of faith, faith in a dormant volcano's commitment to endless sleep. It is a lullaby that is proof, perhaps, against nightmares but not against the night itself. Religious polarization between Hindus and Muslims fluxing into political antagonisms is a recipe for communal riots which mimic war. They are in fact, dress rehearsals for war. And so I lament the entering of iron into the soul of India today, Pakistan today. Pakistan with its history of the army telescoping into politics has been pre-disposed to armed engagement for long but I lament the conversion of one part of India's mind into a permanent War Department. It makes war that much closer and militarizes our reflexes.

There is a danger of religious revivalism in both countries, and in Bangladesh, bringing back all the sectarianism, the bigotry and the fanaticism Vivekananda had warned the world about. This is where the world of scholarship, the universe of knowledge, is so potent. And this is where a university like yours here can send a powerful message to India today.

Peace is not pious. It is not prayerful. It is embattled. It is surrounded by its enemy which is not war but the mentality of war. Peace is tough to maintain, tougher to return to, once it has been lost. And it is in the safeguarding of the climate of peace in the world that the world of scholars, the universe of learning has a task to perform.

Gandhi was asked in London on his last visit to England, in 1931:

'How far would you cut India off from the Empire?'

'From the Empire, entirely', he said, 'from the British Nation, not at all.'

'Empire-ship must go', he said, '(but) India should love to be an equal partner with Britain sharing her joys and sorrows...But it must be a partnership on equal terms'.

India Day in Edinburgh University is not India's Day as much as it is a day for that which is civilized and civilizing as against all that is brutal and brutalizing within India and everywhere. It is a day for partnerships to make our yesterdays when 'troubles seemed so far away' redeem our tomorrows.