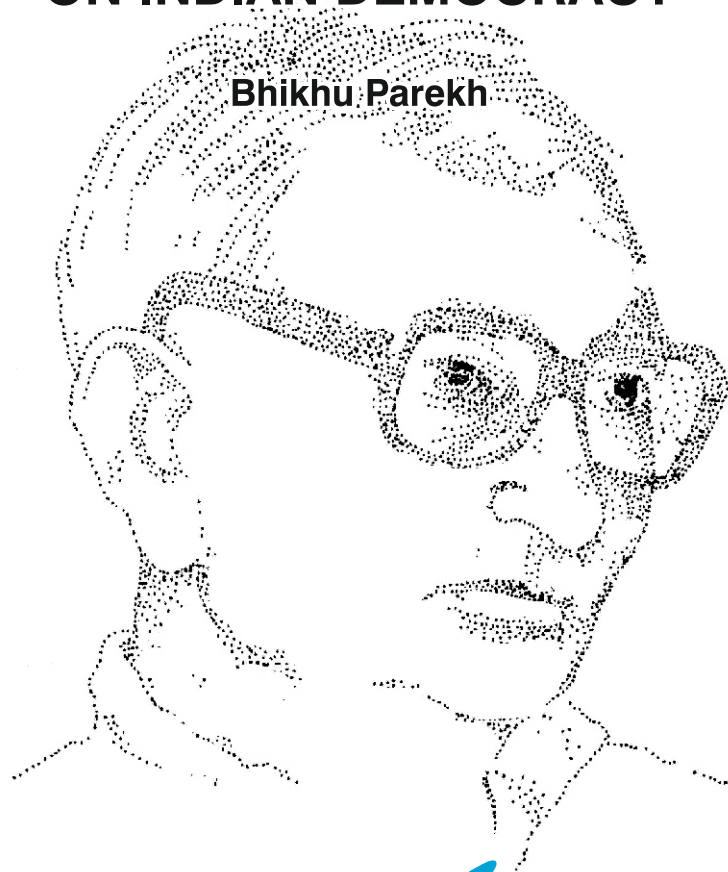


**I. P. Desai Memorial Lecture: 25**

**CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS  
ON INDIAN DEMOCRACY**

**Bhikhu Parekh**



**CENTRE FOR SOCIAL STUDIES, SURAT**

**2019**



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**2019**

## PREFACE

In the commemorative lecture series of CSS founder-director Prof. I.P. Desai, nothing is more appropriate than the renowned political thinker Prof. B.C. Parekh delivering a lecture in its Silver Jubilee Year. Prof. Parekh was a colleague and a friend of Prof. Desai in M.S. University, Vadodara. And it is also apposite that in his lecture, the internationally celebrated political philosopher has taken stock of the state of democracy in India at this crucial juncture.

In a lucid and uncomplicated manner and with ample illustrations, Prof. Parekh has elaborated his central premise that the theory and practice of democracy in any society is shaped by the culture, the economic structure, the history, and traditions of the wider society. While focusing more on the first; culture, he contends that Indian culture has shaped our understanding of the ideas and institutions that are associated with democracy. Concentrating on the dominant Hindu culture, he lamented that post-independence India has forgotten the most important thing that the founding fathers of our Constitution wanted us to be; a republic and a socialist, radical, and economically and socially equal society, along with being a democracy. Drawing attention towards the crucial process of elections, Prof. Parekh observed that they are only marginally political, and are profoundly cultural and social acts, assertions of one's equality and dignity. The phenomenon of familialization of political life too suggests how culture shapes our political life. He further mentioned that caste and family are two crucial institutions occupying central place in private and public spheres of the country's life. While showing how these two institutions dominate the political sphere, Prof. Parekh sharply points out towards their drawbacks. Power in our country, far more than in others, is highly personalized in every area of life primarily because of the preponderance of these two institutions. He ardently criticized the parochial sense of public of Indians in general, which is constricted to family and social group abysmally and hence, apathetic towards broader problems of poverty, pathetic state of education as well as health standards. Prof. Parekh summarized that Indian culture has strengths and they explain why its democracy has taken roots and even flourished. These include its tradition of public debate, respect for difference, tolerance and avoidance of ideological extremism. However, it also has its limitations that are just as great, such as its spirit of hierarchy, caste system, tolerance of the intolerable, indifference to poverty, denial of humanity to large sections of society, and a weakly developed conception of the public. These limitations which are built into its structure shackle people and prevent them from undertaking collective emancipatory actions. If India is to be a just, humane and peaceful society, a radical critique of its culture is badly needed, Prof. B.C. Parekh concludes.

On behalf of CSS, I express profound gratitude towards Prof. B.C. Parekh for sparing time from his busy schedule for delivering the 25<sup>th</sup> I.P. Desai memorial lecture. CSS is immensely grateful to ICSSR, Western Regional Centre for supporting this event. We are also thankful to Prof. Ghanshyam Shah for chairing the event. I am also expressing gratitude towards Prof. P.J. Patel, the Chairperson of CSS Board of Governors who contributed and facilitated in organizing the event. Prof. Satyakam Joshi and Dr. Sadan Jha who shared most of the responsibility in organizing this silver jubilee lecture. I am indeed grateful to them.

April 2019,  
Centre for Social Studies,  
Surat – 395 007.

**Kiran Desai**

# **CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON INDIAN DEMOCRACY**

**Bhikhu Parekh**

Many thanks for inviting me to deliver the 25<sup>th</sup> I.P. Desai Memorial Lecture. I am deeply honoured and grateful. I knew I.P. over a period of many years. I first met him in 1957 when I joined the University of Baroda as a young lecturer. I.P.'s office was just across the small patch of road going past my office. I admired him a great deal, and got to know him quite well. When I returned to India as Vice Chancellor of the M.S. University (MSU) in 1981-84, there were many occasions when I.P. would come down to Baroda and we would talk about the University and related issues. I was deeply grateful for his sagely advice on several tricky matters. I hope you will allow me to mention two other things as well. When I first joined the MSU, the young man sitting to my left today, Ghanshyam Shah, was my student, and over the years I have watched his progress with great pride and pleasure. Your Chairperson, Pravin Patel, was a young lecturer/senior lecturer at the MSU when I was its Vice Chancellor. I told I.P. that I was keen to revitalize our university and asked him how I should go about it. He said that Pravin Patel in Sociology was a talented young man, there were several others, and I should identify and nurture them. Pravin has gone on to do fine things. And once again, I take great pride and pleasure in his achievements.

In this lecture, I want to talk about the cultural constraints of Indian Democracy. The theory and practice of democracy in any society is shaped by the culture, the economic structure,

the history, and the traditions of the wider society. This is why no two democracies are ever alike. The British democracy has a different feel, a different texture, to the Indian democracy. It is a mistake to talk about democracy in India because it implies that there is some transcendental universal entity called democracy which incarnates itself in different countries in different forms. This gives an essentialist connotation to the term 'democracy'. It is more appropriate to talk of Indian democracy where the word 'Indian' refers to the logical quality, the specific character, of democracy as it has developed in India. This allows us to explore the identity of Indian democracy, what distinguishes it and marks it out from other democracies.

Democracy is associated with a certain set of ideas and institutions, such as popular sovereignty, representation, elections, public accountability, and public debates. These ideas are understood differently in different societies. Take elections. At one level, they appear to be the same the world over. But that's too superficial. What does the act of casting a vote mean to an individual? What is its meaning and deeper significance to him or her? How are elections conceptualized in different traditions? Likewise, when we talk about representation, how is the idea of representation conceptualized in Britain, or the United States, or in India? What does it mean and imply? The point I'm making is that democracy is characterized by a set of ideas, the latter have to be understood, appropriated, conceptualized, and this is done differently in different societies, depending upon among other things the wider culture of that society. Similarly, democracy implies a set of institutions and

practices. And these institutions and practices or ways of structuring human relations are organized differently in different societies.

Indian culture has shaped our understanding of the ideas and institutions that are associated with democracy. This raises the question of what I mean by Indian culture. Culture refers to a system of meaning and significance in terms of which we understand and organize human relations. For example, we eat food. What is food? What is our relation to it? How do we appropriate it? What is edible and what is not? What makes it tasty? Or, I get up in the morning. What does getting up in the morning mean? What is the meaning of this activity? It is not just biological awakening but getting organized for the day's activities in a certain way. Culture refers to what the activity or relation means to us and its place in our scheme of life. In the Indian context, I am going to concentrate on the dominant culture, which is the Hindu culture. It is the culture of the dominant group. And in spite of India being a secular state, Hindus have exercised power at all levels, be it the economic, the cultural, the symbolic, the religious, or whatever. They have shaped the way in which social and political relations are structured. If we look at the symbols of the Indian state, every one of them is either Hindu or Buddhist. None is Christian. None is Islamic. The green colour of the flag was supposed to represent Islam. But it was decided long time ago that we should not communalize the colours of the flag, and hence there is no Islamic presence in the national symbols of the state. Again, if we look at the vocabulary of political life, the names of Parliament, the Prime Minister, the President and so on, they

are all derived from Sanskrit. The Constitution says that the official language of India will primarily draw from Sanskrit for its vocabulary. For these and other reasons, it seems right to take the Hindu culture as the dominant culture of India. Even those Hindu leaders who rebelled against the Hindu background remained deeply Hindu precisely in what it was they were rebelling against. If I rebel against something, my point of reference is precisely that which I am rejecting. An anti-Hindu remains a Hindu himself because he is 'anti' in terms of what he takes to be the defining characteristic of the Hindu background. Our question is how this dominant Hindu culture has shaped the theory and practice of democracy in India.

To call India a democracy is a half-truth, not because it is not a complete democracy in some idealized sense but because it is not intended to be just a democracy. India is intended to be both a democracy and a republic. As the Preamble says, India is a democratic republic. Why these two words? Why not just democracy? The Congress Resolution on the Objectives of the Constitution moved by Pandit Nehru, on 20 November 1946, included the word 'Republic', but not democracy. When members of the Constituent Assembly asked if India was not supposed to be a democracy, Nehru said that it was included in the word 'republic'. In a few weeks' time, when the first draft of the Constitution was introduced, the word 'democracy' cropped up, but republic went missing. When the final draft of the Constitution appeared only a few days later, it declared India 'a sovereign, democratic republic' and included both democracy and republic, raising the question 'why'?



We tend to forget that India has a long republican tradition. During the independence struggle from about 1870s onwards, there was also a powerful republican sentiment coming from a variety of sources, especially the dalits. Jyoti Rao Phule, who admired Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, declared himself a republican. He said that for a dalit, a republic was the only society worth living in. He also said that modern Europe had made enormous progress because, during the Renaissance, it had seen the resurgence of the republics. Pandit Nehru in his *Glimpses of World History* waxed eloquent about republics, including the Roman republic and the medieval European republics. Ambedkar, who was a student at Columbia, had observed the American republic at close quarters and was very fond of it. He even thought that the French Revolution and the republic that came out of it was an ideal model for India to emulate.

For all these writers, a republic had several defining features. It stood for social equality, whereas democracy meant only political equality. Caste Hindus may require dalits to form a separate queue at the polling booth. That's possible in democracy but not in a republic. Secondly, a republic stood for economic equality. Ambedkar said that a republic for him was the same as socialism. And you will recall that he was extremely anxious that India should declare itself a socialist state in the Constitution, an idea he later dropped to allow each generation freedom of choice. Finally, a republic meant that the state was a public property, a *res publica*, and was not be used for pursuing sectional interests.

Democracy stands for a form of government, republic for a social order. Democracy is a form of government, a regime. Republic stands for a social system that is committed to social equality, economic equality, a moral culture where institutions are seen as a public property. The two are quite different. This is why a republic alone is not enough because it refers to a social order and not to a form of government, and a democracy is not enough because it refers to a form of government and not to a social order. India is both, and the tragedy of post-independence India is that we have kept saying we are a democracy, and forgotten the most important thing that the founding fathers of our Constitution wanted us to be a republic as well, a socialist, radical, and economically and socially equal society.

It would be relevant here to make two general remarks about our Constitution. It is the longest in the world. Even trivial legal provisions are part of it, largely because we don't trust the normal processes of governance. The Constitution alone is supposed to be a sacred document, and only what is included in it may not be tampered with. The Constitution is not only the longest; it is also one of the few constitutions to lay down what a new society should be like. Its Preamble lays down important political values such as justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, and these are translated into a regime of rights. Our Constitution is not just a Constitution like any other, a set of rules designed to regulate the exercise of power. It is what I call an *āchārsamhitā*, which can only happen in our kind of society where there is a long tradition of this kind of writing.

Another place where culture shapes our politics relates to the idea of elections. Elections take place everywhere. But what does an election mean to an Indian? What does the activity of going to a booth and casting a vote mean to him? What moral, intellectual and emotional significance does it have for him, such that it gives him a deeper sense of satisfaction? If we look at some excellent anthropological work that has been done in this area, we find that elections in India are only marginally political. They are profoundly cultural and social acts, assertions of one's equality and dignity. One stands in the same queue as the Brahmins or the high caste people who would on other occasions never let one get near them. You have people from different political parties, who once in power will treat you like dirt, coming and courting you, seeking your assent. An election, the very act of having that ballot paper in your hand, means you count for something in a society where you are nothing. It is a mark of one's dignity and equality with those men and women who otherwise are unreachable for us. Election is an ontological act, a profoundly significant cultural act and it gives us a kind of pride which it wouldn't give to many in Britain where everyone is treated as an equal and already enjoys dignity. Indians have even given the elections a religious aura. As they go into a voting booth, there is silence. There is also a magic machine in front of them. If they press the button, it will change the future of whoever is in power. Having voted they come out with black ink on their finger, like coming out of a temple with a red mark on their forehead.

In our own kind of way, we have turned the election into a typically Indian cultural phenomenon. An election in many vernacular languages is called *Choontni* or *Chunav*, a careful selection of what is right and rejection of what is wrong. The word for vote (*mat*) is the same as for opinion. I don't know many other languages in which the word for opinion and the word for vote is the same. Your vote is not a reaction to an event, an expression of your feelings; it is an expression of a well-considered judgement. In practice, few people would do that, but that is what they are supposed to do. There is also another element worth noting. Casting a vote is called *matdān*. *Dān* means a gift as in *gaudān*, *shramdān* and *lohidān*. When women voters were asked in a survey why they had voted, some of them said that this was their hard-earned birthright which they had a duty to exercise in a selfless manner. It benefited the country and brought *punya* (spiritual merit) and had to be a selfless act. It would be absurd to think that most Indians actually vote this way; rather that many of them think that this is the way they should. The belief points to the underlying moral culture and gives us insight into it.

Let me now move on to another area where culture shapes our political life, and that is what I call the familialization of political life. I don't know any other country where dynasty is so widespread and parents are succeeded by their children or their sons or daughters-in-law. George W. Bush did succeed his father, and Kennedys were a political family. But, these are occasional occurrences. For us, they are endemic. Let me give you figures. In the last Lok Sabha, two-thirds of the MPs under the age of 40 years were there

because of their parents. And if we look at MPs under 30 years, all of them were there because of their family connections. Going a little further, 70% of the women in both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha were there because of their family connections. This has gone on in one form or the other since 1952. How does one explain this?

I think it has something to do with the way in which the family has come to occupy a central place in our culture, far more than in most others. Family ties are extremely close in India. Family generates an enormous expectation and pressure that if you are somebody's son or daughter-in-law, you will succeed him. There is also a strong sense of family obligation, a feeling that if one does not help one's family, one has failed as a son or a father. I think in our kind of society, for all sorts of reasons which I don't have time to discuss, trust is limited to members of one's family and caste. You trust your family. You trust your caste members and you can give them millions of rupees without a written document in full knowledge they will be returned. Outside the narrow world of family and caste, there is a world of strangers and there is lack of trust and sympathy. The family in India is an island of trust. If I am in power and I am surrounded by ambitious people, who would I appoint? My caste members or my family members, because I know they won't let me down. Why won't they let me down? Because if they do, their wives or aunts or uncles who are often related to me can put pressure on my behalf. As a result of all this, politics in India has become a family business.

Not surprisingly our politics has suffered gravely. Some disagree. In their view, the family has kept Indian democracy going. If Sonia Gandhi was not there, the Congress would have fallen apart because they would not have agreed upon any particular leader and the party would have disintegrated even before 2014. In their view, it is good to have somebody whose authority doesn't come from consent, but from heredity. I don't accept that argument. Because of familialization of politics, several things have happened. The pool of political talent is severely limited. Furthermore, it is easier to cover up government misdeeds. If I am succeeded by my son, I can count on him to make sure that my misdeeds are not exposed. And it also weakens public norms because I know that even if I don't observe public norms, nothing is going to happen to me.

Yet, another area where our culture has influenced our political life relates to the caste hierarchy. You may have less money than I have, but that doesn't affect the fact that you are a human being on exactly the same basis as I am, that your dignity is as inviolable as mine. This doesn't happen in India. Unless you are somebody, you are nobody, and people can be treated as dirt, without even having the courage to stand up. A small example will illustrate my point. There was a rich man in my village. When I was six years of age, my father took me to see him on some business. While we were there, his shoe-smith who had made his shoes came to see him. The rich man tried one shoe and found it a little too tight. Instead of telling the shoe-smith that the shoe needed to be adjusted for size, he threw it at the man and hit him in the forehead. The man was bleeding profusely.

Instead of giving him a piece of his mind, the shivering shoemaker profusely apologized, asked his pardon, and took the entire moral burden of their encounter on his shoulder. I saw cases after cases like this during my childhood and adolescence.

Under the caste system, an individual's dignity is highly precarious. I can only count on you to respect me if I am somebody, which is part of the reason why an individual's calling card lists almost every position that he has ever occupied in his life. It is not enough to say that you are so and so; you have to say that you are ex-this and ex-that. I once asked a group of army officers to explain this phenomenon. They all said that this was necessary because they wanted to be treated properly, in a manner suited to their past status. Anything less would be seen as an insult. Caste has profoundly skewed our self-consciousness. We find it difficult to relate to somebody without constantly comparing ourselves with him or her. As caste declines, wealth is taking its place. Wealth is not something you just enjoy, it's something you flaunt. Foreigners often rightly remark that rich Indians show vulgarity, which only goes to demonstrate their inferiority complex. If you carry your wealth in your stride, you don't have to wear five rings on your hand studded with diamonds or dress your wife like an expensive doll. There is also another basis of the caste system, namely power, and that's where politics comes in. If you have power, you are a political Brahmin. A security officer who dares to ask for identification from a man wearing a white cap is finished; he will lose his job. To have power in

India is to be exempted from rules to which all others are subject.

One important consequence of this is that power in our country, far more than in others, is highly personalized in every area of life. The Chief Minister treats even his ministers as his subordinates. In other mature societies, power is impersonalised and governed by norms. The basic human dignity of the person over whom power is exercised is never forgotten. I can't talk to or treat him in a certain way because he is my moral equal. The minimum constraint that this imposes on the exercise of power is missing in our society. For us, greater the power, lesser the constraints. This is not new, and did not start with Narendra Modi. It was noticeable when Pandit Nehru was the Prime Minister. Once the old stalwarts were gone, his Cabinet was run like a group of school boys with Panditji as a Head Master. His letters to Chief Ministers have the same kind of preachy tone in them. As C.D. Deshmukh said, when the future of Bombay was discussed in the 1950s, Nehru decided the matter on his own. Here was a man who had liberal sensibility and was deeply courteous, and yet he could not shed his habit of asserting his power in this way. Going a step further, a similar attitude was displayed even by Mahatma Gandhi. When he said that after his death, Nehru will be his heir, what right did he have to decide who will succeed him? I am not saying that Vallabhbhai should have been his choice. That is a different story. The point is that when Gandhiji said that Jawaharlal was his political heir, the entire legitimacy of the independence movement, the authority of the Mahatma, was passed on to Nehru. Why did he pre-empt the choices



of the people of India? Or at least sought to influence them in a particular way?

The way in which the notion of public appears in our culture is interesting to analyse. It is striking that the Prime Minister of a country, on the independence day, should tell people to keep their environment clean and not throw their garbage everywhere. If somebody had to tell me that I should keep my backyard clean, that dog dirt should not be thrown around, I would feel small, diminished or at least angry. Not so in India. I remember listening to Nehru in the 1950s. I was a student at St Xavier's College and Panditji had come to inaugurate the National Union of Students. He went on for 45 minutes and I remember him saying that if one ate a banana, one should make sure that one did not drop its skin on the road as somebody might slip. The remark where the Prime Minister of a country had to teach us how to eat a banana stayed with me for a long time. Evidently, Panditji failed because after 67 years, Narendra Modi has to say the same thing to us.

Now, these are trivial examples. What I am interested in is how the idea of the public enters our consciousness. There are many languages in which there is no word for public. There is an idea of 'mine' and 'ours', or 'mine', 'yours' and 'ours', but that does not generate the idea of the public. The public refers to what is impersonal, common to a group of people, shared by them but also transcends them. The idea of 'public' is critically important in politics because politics is a public activity. A university is ours but it exists independently of us. The Vice Chancellor runs it but does

not own it. In fact, no one does. It involves its own ethics and its own norms. In our tradition, as far as I can see, by and large, we have not been able to develop the concept of the public and an attitude appropriate to it. Public in the physical sense does not matter to us. We keep our houses clean but throw the garbage out on the street without any sense of guilt, or walk past such accumulated rubbish without being outraged by it. This virtual blindness is replicated in the political sphere where we pursue self-interest in disregard of public norms or without asking how this damages the fabric of our public life.

Let us now turn finally to our cultural response to poverty. Just consider the following facts. On any calculation, between 25% and 62% of Indians are poor. If you take the multi-level poverty index developed by the Oxford University's Institute of Development, 645 million people are poor in the sense of not having enough to eat. If you take infant mortality, our number is 150 out of 194 countries. And it is worse than Bhutan and Nepal. If you take children below 5 years, we have the highest percentage of under-nourished children in the world; 44% of our children below 5 are under-nourished, compared to China's 5%, Brazil's 2% and sub-Saharan Africa's 21%. Every year, 17 lakh children under 5 years die of diarrhoea or other preventable diseases. And of those who survive, 48% remain stunted for lack of nutrients. And this is worse than Pakistan. If you take rural medical care, it is even poorer than what happens in Bangladesh. As for toilets in schools, over a third of our schools don't have them. So, either girls don't go to school, sit cross-legged until the end of the day, or lose control and spoil their clothes.

Even more disturbing is the fact that no Prime Minister has ever thought that this was something worth talking about.

One could go further. Let us look at education which is one area where people can liberate themselves from the vicious cycle. Let me just give you two facts which I find deeply disturbing. OECD countries invited different countries to participate in an international survey of how well their children did at school. In India, the two highest performing states were Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh. They entered their secondary school pupils for the survey. India came last but one, just above Kyrgyzstan. All other countries, Pakistan included, had done better than us. Even the poorest of our people prefer to send their children to private schools because state schools have let them down. In England, 10% of children go to private schools. In Canada, it is 6%. In the United States, it is 17%. In India, it is 33%. If you look at states like Kerala and Meghalaya, it's 66%. This is a drastic vote of no confidence in our municipal or state schools by those who have no money even to meet their basic needs but feel compelled to send their children to private schools or private tuition.

The situation has gone on for 68 years. Government after government has come and done nothing. When Indira Gandhi talked about *garibi hatao*, she insulted us by turning poverty into a slogan. Is it *garibi hatao* or *garib hatao*? And, is *garabi* such a thing, that you can talk about it without any kind of programme? All these years, we have paid no attention to how the other India lives. We know little about it and don't even want to know more. There are several

explanations for this, but the most important explanation has its roots in our own culture. Given the caste system, it doesn't bother me how somebody else lives. My moral universe is limited to my caste. If I do feel concerned about others, I blame their *karma* in their past lives and consider their suffering well-deserved. If I do manage to get past this common explanation, I do not think it is government's responsibility to do anything about poverty. If I do hold the government responsible, I do not know how to put pressure on it, especially as all political parties are venal and self-serving, and the various groups are too deeply involved in fighting for scarce resources to unite on a common platform. As a matter of moral fact, others' suffering does not move us. We are either indifferent to it or shed a sentimental or real tear and move on. I may be completely wrong but cannot find a single example in our epics or *puranas* of men engaged in fighting against social inequality or even making a public issue of it.

If a culture doesn't have shining examples of this kind, there is a built-in resistance to collective or even individual action against injustices. Mark Tully once saw that there were no full stops in India and that the most common Indian word is '*chalta hei*'. These are the ways of the world, why worry? *Chalta hei*. The person who spoke on this point with great force and which has moved countless Indians is Swami Vivekanand. He said that no other culture, no other society, crushes the necks of the oppressed as much as ours. With all its strengths, our culture has blinded us to poverty and inequality and left us largely helpless in their presence.

Let me sum up. I have argued that along with other factors, a society's culture shapes its politics, including its theory and practice of democracy. Indian culture has strengths and they explain why its democracy has taken roots and even flourished. These include its tradition of public debate, respect for difference, tolerance and avoidance of ideological extremism. But, it also has its limitations that are just as great, such as its spirit of hierarchy, caste system, tolerance of the intolerable, indifference to poverty, denial of humanity to large sections of society, and a weakly developed conception of the public. These limitations which are built into its structure shackle people and prevent them from undertaking collective emancipatory actions. If India is to be a just, humane and peaceful society, a radical critique of its culture is badly needed. And that is where a centre like this and people like those assembled here have a vital role to play.



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Centre for Social Studies (CSS) is an autonomous social science research institute. With a focus on understanding processes of development, CSS is dedicated to the study of Indian society with a firm belief that this can contribute to the social transformation.

Founded by late Professor I.P. Desai in 1969 as the Centre for Regional Development Studies, CSS receives financial support from the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR, Government of India) and the Department of Higher and Technical Education, Government of Gujarat. A multi-disciplinary institute, CSS formulates ideas, undertakes empirical studies, theorizes and disseminates knowledge through training and publications in vernacular and English languages.

With an emphasis on empirical research and Gujarat as its core research region, Centre also undertakes studies related to other parts of the country. The key areas of research in CSS include marginalized communities, social justice, civil society, women, labour, land, rural credit, migration, culture and conflict, urban landscapes, public health, education, governance, and environment and resources. Theoretical contributions of CSS have been well-recognised in the fields of social stratification, agrarian relations, social movements, sociology of education, dalits and tribes, and development studies.

**Renowned political thinker Lord Bhikhu Parekh** earned his bachelor and master degrees from University of Bombay. He joined the famous London School of Economics (LSE) in 1959 and received his Ph.D. in 1966 from there. He taught at the London School of Economics and at the University of Glasgow before finding a long-term position at the University of Hull. He was the Vice-Chancellor at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda between 1981 and 1984. He also held the Centennial Professorship in the Centre for the Study of Global Governance at the London School of Economics and a professorship of political philosophy at the University of Westminster. In 2002, he served as president of the Academy of Learned Societies in the Social Sciences. Prof. Parekh has also served on the Commission for Racial Equality (including a tenure as vice-chairman) and has held membership of a number of bodies concerned with issues of racial equality and multiculturalism – most notably as Chairman of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain from 1998 to 2000. The report of this body (often referred to as the "Parekh Report") has been the basis for much of the debate on multi-culturalism in the UK in the early 21st century.

Prof. B.C. Parekh has been conferred several awards and honours. Notable amongst them are: Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in 1988, the Academy of Learned Societies in the Social Sciences in 1999; in 2000 as Baron Parekh, of Kingston upon Hull in the East Riding of Yorkshire, Fellow of the British Academy in 2003, honorary doctorate by the University of Essex. He was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India in 2007. In 2008, he was awarded an Honorary D.Univ. from the University of Hull. In 2011, Prof. Parekh was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Social Sciences (D.Soc. Sci.) from Nottingham Trent University; was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy from Edge Hill University in 2011. Some of the best work Prof. Bhikhubhai Parekh has authored includes: *Jeremy Bentham: Ten Critical Essays*; *Bentham's Political Thought*; *Marx's Theory of Ideology*; *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*; *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A critical examination*; *Hannan Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy*; *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: Report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*; *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*; *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*; *European Liberalism and 'the Muslim Question': Does Intercultural Dialogue Make Sense?*; *A New Politics of Identity: Political Principles for an Interdependent World*; *A Concept of Socialism (ed.)* and *Colour, Culture and Consciousness: Immigrant Intellectuals in Britain (ed.)*.