

# India is diverse and a 'union of states'

*Assault by RSS on India's history and culture is not just deliberate and short-sighted but is also based on false premises*

**W**e are unaware of the beginning and the end of the world; the first and the last pages of this old book have fallen off." The epigram comes from Abu Talib Kalim, an important figure in India's literary history, though forgotten now.

Born at Hamadan in Iran in 1585, he arrived in Bijapur exactly five centuries ago, in 1621; he lived in India till his death in 1651. During these years, he produced some 24,000 verse couplets, distinguished by their pithy wisdom. I was drawn to his witty couplet on history some 25 years ago when I was working on literary history of India. The title of my book was '*Of Many Heroes*'. I chose Kalim's lines as the epigraph for my book.

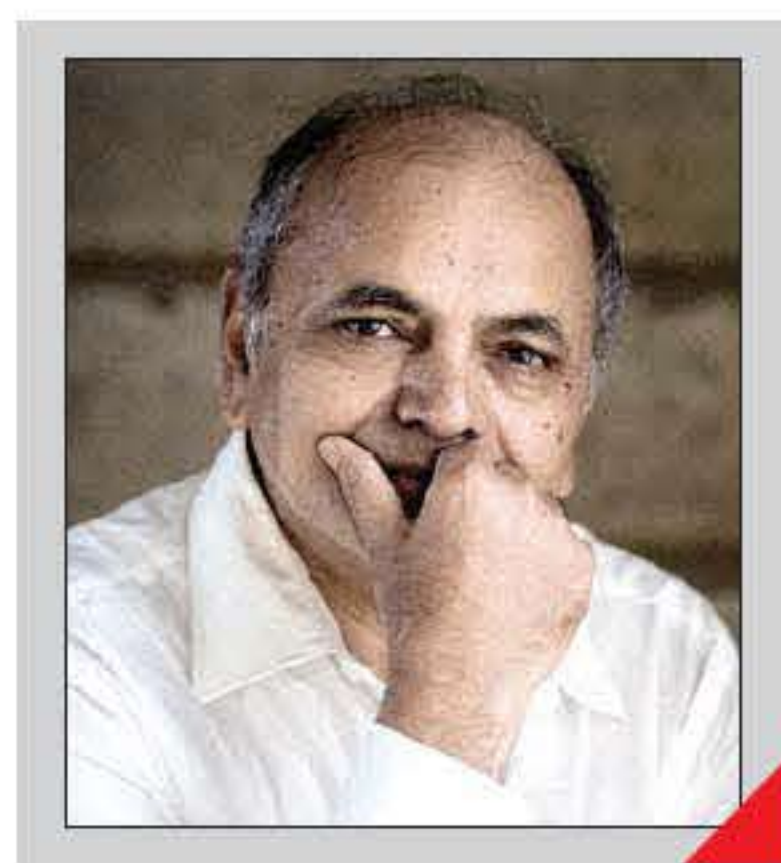
The title of my book was drawn from a line in the *Kavyamimansa* by Rajashekhara, a 10th century poet, dramatist and scholar. He worked in the court of the Pratihara kings in Gujarat. While pointing to the difference between the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Rajashekhara had said that poetry can be of a single hero, but history has to be of many heroes. Therefore, I titled my book '*Of Many Heroes*'.

Rajashekhara of the 9th-10th century wrote in Sanskrit and Prakrit. Abu Talib Kalim of the 16th-17th century wrote in Persian. Despite being separated by seven centuries and despite their different linguistic and religious traditions, the two distinguished Indian poets had a shared view of Indian history. They both knew that for any authentic representation of India—historical or literary—one must think in terms of many origins of this civilisation, in terms of diversity rather than a forced superficial unity.

**W**hen I was working on my book in 1990–91, I was not as acutely aware as I am now that the question of history would assume a disproportionately high centrality to the political discourse in India. As I look back in retrospect to arguments and debates during the last quarter century, the replacement of old myths by new myths, of old deification by new deification and displacement of logic by wishful reconstruction of the past, I notice that the element of diversity in India's past has been deliberately overlooked.

The struggle for independence in India was also a struggle for decolonising our minds. M. K. Gandhi's '*Hind Swaraj*' (1909) is its most articulate statement. Our freedom struggle was a struggle to create a new nation with a humane society that would be ready to uphold the ideas of equality and dignity of every individual. B. R. Ambedkar's '*Annihilation of Caste*' (1936) was the most passionate plea to bring about this transformation in India.

In some sense, the two founding fathers of India had indicated between them how it would be necessary to reject the entire baggage that the West brings to us in the name of modernity,



**GANESH DEVY**

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or the past brings to us in the name of a nation driven by the idea of a superficial unity.

During the post-Gandhi-Ambedkar era in India, their ideas were gradually turned into a ritualistic memory and were subverted.

The rejection of the oppressive West came to be seen as an unquestioning adherence to the past, and the freedom from the oppressive past came to be seen as alienation from the past, together with an unmatched enthusiasm for imbibing the West. This has reduced the India of today to a society without any great central idea, an idea that will free us further and move us forward in history.

We are caught between the tyranny of a reductive nationalism and a coercive vision of a unified past. Acceptance of diversity may help us in going beyond the present reactionary era. Diversity can be an ideal useful for deepening our democracy, securing our biodiversity, cultural plurality and for setting right our perspectives on politics, culture and history. Federalism needs to be turned into the guiding star of our public discourse with the identity marker 'India, a union of states' in our Constitution made its most iconic statement.

**I**n recent times, three issues which are not even remotely connected with the life of Indians in the 21st century are being given undue importance. First among these is the place of Sanskrit. The RSS-inspired history likes to place Sanskrit as the origin of all knowledge and culture in our past, despite the fact that knowledge traditions in India have emerged from Pali, Prakrit and Dravidic as well.

Human inhabitants of the subcontinent had their languages prior to the emergence of Sanskrit and those languages found continuation in the form of Pali, Prakrit and ancient Tamil. Sanskrit brought to ancient India a different world-view, memory-tradition and social-structure. There were active exchanges among the languages existing in the subcontinent. Yet, the RSS insists that all other languages were derived from Sanskrit and even during the Indus civilization era, it was Sanskrit that dominated thought and life.

The second folly is its perception of the medieval ages in Indian history as the era of 'invasion' and 'cultural destruction'. It is true that contact with Islam marks these centuries in Indian history. However, it is also true that exchanges and trade with the countries to the west of India, from Afghanistan to Turkey has been a phenomenon ever since humans have inhabited Asia. Besides, what is seen as 'destructive invasion' was in reality a new synthesis in arts, literature, ideas, architecture, law, medicine and theology. All of that is deliberately demonized, for Islam provides the most convenient 'enemy' metaphor for Hindu nationalism.

The third misconception that has gained ground is the nature of the freedom struggle and its major protagonists. BJP's propaganda machine has been active in deliberately portraying discord among leaders like Gandhi, Patel, Subhas Bose, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. A lot of false information about them is spread in order to make them look small, selfish, pretentious and unmindful of what is good for India. The flow of misinformation about them has a scale that is difficult to counter.

However, in future, when India recovers from this assault on its history and culture, these flawed arguments are bound to look deliberate and short-sighted. India with a single origin, with a single linguistic and cultural mould and a country of only one kind of people, adhering to only one religion would be far from what it has been over several millennia.

Linguistic, cultural and social diversity is its definitive identity marker and as a nation, it can continue to be India only so long as we perceive it as a 'union of states'.

*(The writer is an eminent academic and cultural activist)*