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Tinaz Pavri

Spelman College, tpavri@spelman.edu

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Is India Becoming More Liberal? Globalization, Economic Liberalization, and Social Values

Tinaz Pavri

Abstract

Globalization and economic liberalization have created new opportunities and dislocations in India. Less is known about whether these phenomena have had an impact on changing traditional social values to reflect liberal global millennial norms. The article examines available survey data on social values on key indicators of gender, caste, religion, LGBTQ and immigrant rights, and concludes that in some areas, Indians have moved away from traditional representations towards an embrace of liberal global attitudes.

Introduction

India's economic opening is now approaching the end of its third decade. After the post-independence adoption of the mixed economy model initiated by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1947, the first steps towards economic liberalization were taken in the early 1990s. In the aftermath of India's independence in 1947, the country adopted an economic framework that integrated elements of capitalism and socialism. It was a "mixed economy" model. Foreign direct investment was restricted to buoy Indian businesses, and the government owned key sectors of the industry, such as transportation and communications. The government initiated "five-year plans" to meet key targets across different industries.

Since that time, India has seen many years of rapid economic growth and an increased volume of foreign direct investment (FDI). In 1990, India's rate of growth was 3.8% in constant prices. In 2005 it was 9.5%. In 2018, it is projected to be around 7.4% (Government of India, 2015).

Industries like telecommunications and infrastructure (held by the public sector for many decades) are being transferred in whole or some measure to the private sector. In the new millennium, the fruits of decades of economic liberalization are becoming more and more visible as multinational companies establish their presence and global brands have permeated most Indian cities large and small. Urbanization continues apace, and what were once sleepy towns are becoming metropolises. Provincial cities that remained in the shadows of megalopolises now themselves have several million residents.

The new openness fostered by economic liberalization and globalization have brought the world to India after a long period of enforced economic barriers that kept the world out for the first four decades after independence (Gottipati, 2012). A recent Pew study noted that India is a top source in both receiving and sending international migrants. In the past 25 years, India has doubled its number of migrants to other parts of the world (Connor, 2017).

The range of media and television has exploded, reaching first the middle classes and now India's impoverished masses with hundreds of channels available from all over the world in addition to accessible, widely used Internet service. A recent study shows that all Indian millennials will own smartphones in the next few years (Jain, 2017). As more Indians enter the middle class and travel all over the world (something not possible for previous generations), and enjoy long-sought access to an ever-expanding number of global franchises and digital and social media, the question arises as to how this transformation has altered and liberalized Indian social values.

While the meaning of the term globalization, including its time frame and its perceived winners and losers, has been debated and contested, for the purposes of this article, I use the term to refer to the rapid and unprecedented technological, economic, and social transformations in the last several decades that have inevitably (voluntarily and involuntarily) integrated the world's countries on different levels. One useful description refers to globalization as the "integration of economies and societies through cross country flow of information, ideas, technologies, goods, services, capital, finance and the people" (Naidu, 2006 p. 1).

Globalization and Indian Values

In this article, I ask questions regarding India's levels of social tolerance and the spread of liberal global millennial values in the context of globalization and economic liberalization. Has economic liberalization and its concomitant allowance of access to an explosion of media, global brands, and ideas also aided the country in confronting and addressing questions of equality, women's rights, race, caste, and religion? Have global debates and strides made on issues of gender, inclusivity, and diversity begun to impact and be reflected in values expressed in India?

The literature on the impact of globalization on values and attitudes, particularly in developing world countries, is sparse. Arnett (2002) has noted that as globalization has spread, younger generations across the world have developed "bicultural identities" that incorporate global trends and values and that sometimes lead to "identity confusion," particularly in non-western cultures.

Although great chasms still exist between rich and poor, and upper and lower caste, I hypothesize that the overall economic transformation has served as a great leveler, if not in actual incomes, then at least in social expectations and beliefs. On the one hand, it would seem logical to assume that economic transformation might also bring about a sea-change in India's tradition-bound culture and social mores, propelling them towards progressive global norms= diversity, inclusion, gender equality, and LGBT rights – and the Indian versions thereof. On the other hand, as some authors have noted, globalization might lead to dislocations that propel some

Indians to exaggeratedly hold on to what they perceive of as “traditional” (BBC Four’s Storyville, 2015). Steve Derne has argued that globalization has affected the classes differently, with the upper classes in India embracing new values while the masses, to whom the fruits of globalization are not apparent, have resisted change (Derne, 2008).

To determine which of these phenomena might be occurring in India, I examine available recent survey data to see what attitudes Indians, and particularly young Indians, hold on inclusion and tolerance on this range of issues. The data come from five surveys published between 2010 and 2017. They are the highly-cited CSDS-Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Survey (Madan & Freidrich, 2017); the Deloitte Millennial Survey (DMS) (Fernandez, 2015); the Gallup 2010-2011 Survey (Muslims in India); The Global Attitudes Pew Survey 2015 (Spring 2015 Survey); and the Ipsos Global Trends Survey 2017 (Ipsos Global Trends, 2017). These will be examined in detail in a later section.

Many issues of inclusion and tolerance have always faced India, but in their Indian versions – how Indians look at deep class and caste divisions, for instance, or religious intolerance and women’s discrimination. These issues are now necessarily viewed within a globalized Indian context, which forces Indians to grapple with global norms in these arenas, as well as in those that Indians have chosen to ignore in the past, such as LGBTQ rights.

Post-Independence India and Economic Liberalization

Jawaharlal Nehru led the quasi-socialist Indian National Congress Party (INC) as prime minister from independence in 1947 to 1964, when he died in office of a heart attack. As the beloved first prime minister of independent India, Nehru and the Congress had wide latitude to put their imprint on the fledgling government and economy. The Congress Party won large majorities in national elections, and opposition parties were marginalized on the two ends of the political spectrum – the socialist/communist end and the right-wing/Hindu fundamentalist end. For decades after Nehru’s death, the Congress continued to be the dominant party without major opposition.

In 1966, Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi, became Prime Minister. Groomed at the side of her father, Indira shared a similar outlook on life, politics and the economy as Nehru. Nehru’s interest in Fabian socialism was echoed by Gandhi, and indeed the quasi-socialist policies of the Congress government were dominant until her own death in 1986. Congress’s redistributive bent and secular politics assured it a wide range of support from the poor to the lower castes and the religious minorities. Despite Gandhi’s political missteps and authoritative bent, this wide-ranging coalition of support did not begin to fray until the late 1980s, when hitherto marginalized Hindu-oriented and fundamentalist parties started to assert political clout and garner electoral support.

Ironically, it was the Congress Party government of P. V. Narasimha Rao that took the first steps towards economic liberalization in the early 1990s. By 1991, the

Indian economy was in peril. India was deeply in debt and its foreign currency reserves had dropped precipitously. Against this backdrop, Rao and his finance minister Manmohan Singh (who would later become Congress (I) Prime Minister from 2004-2014) initiated bold new economic reforms (Baru, 2016).¹

India had remained relatively isolated from global influences in previous decades (Panagariya, 2005). For decades after independence, television had just one channel, the official one, and global films came to India years after their actual release. Even international news magazines, with their prohibitively expensive subscriptions, arrived weeks or months after their publication dates. With the economic opening and the increasing pace of globalization in the next two decades, Indians became exposed for the first time to an onslaught of foreign ideas and influences, in the arenas of business, economy, culture, and media. The average Indian was becoming aware of the extent of global diversity, including racial diversity, for the first time. Women were entering the workplace at a greater pace and connections to tight family structures were fraying (Raina, 2016). Indians were also more mobile than ever before, with millions traveling from remote villages to globalizing Indian cities for jobs, displaced from lives that were familiar but closeted.

Indeed, some scholars, such as Maria Misra, have explained the recent uptick in violence against different populations in India – women being violently raped, foreigners attacked and discriminated against – as a backlash against a fast-changing world that challenges the parameters of what was established, known, and accepted in the past (BBC Four's, 2015). The National Crime Records Bureau has released statistics for crime in India since the 1980s, and these data are broken down along a number of parameters, including crimes targeting lower caste Indians and women. In 2016, there was a 12% increase in crime against women over the previous year (Government of India, 2017). In 2018, the Thomas Reuters Foundation survey of experts found that India was the most dangerous country in the world to be a woman, because of wide-ranging crimes against women, including in the traditional context of demanding women's obedience and violent punishment for lack thereof (Thomas Reuters Foundation, 2018).

India's History of Tolerance

Much has been written about the tolerant nature of India's majority religio-cultural identity, Hinduism. Scholars have pointed to the diversity of belief existing within Hinduism itself, the different gods and goddesses in all their physical and behavioral manifestations, and noted that it has bred widespread societal tolerance over the centuries (Dasa, 2012). Of course elements within Hinduism, such as the rigidly defined caste system, have also bred intolerance. But despite this, India has seen conquerors like the Muslim invaders of the 15th century and subsequent waves of Muslim converts become a part of the fabric of the country itself. It has played

¹ The Indian National Congress fragmented over the decades into smaller Congress parties, including the Congress (I), with the "I" standing for Indira. This moniker reflected Indira Gandhi's consolidation of power within her own party.

the role of welcoming host to refugees like the Parsis who have settled on its shores for a thousand years.² For over half a century, it has given shelter to the Dalai Lama and over a hundred thousand Tibetan refugees in Dharamshala, in northern India. After Tamils were targeted in Sri Lanka during the civil war lasting from the 1980s to the new millennium, India took in Tamil refugees. In reality, the country has had amicable ties with the outside world even before the conquests of northern India and Afghanistan by Alexander the Great's armies in 327 BCE: there is evidence of scholarly exchange with Chinese and Japanese scholars since ancient times (Liu, 2010).

The non-violent legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, which defined the Indian independence movement, underlines the generally pacific nature of the country's response to international provocations. Nehru continued this tradition of seeking the moral high ground in becoming a founder in 1956, along with Josip Broz Tito of the former Yugoslavia, and Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, of the Non-Aligned Movement. The movement sought to place its members outside of the destructive sphere of the developing bipolar world, looking instead to maintain neutrality (although in reality many members were more sympathetic to the Soviet Union than the United States) in their dealings with the world, and therefore assuming a role of "honest broker" between the two developing Cold War camps.

India has, then, certainly seemed to have been proud of a history that was more tolerant than intolerant—of outsiders, visitors, immigrants, refugees, and others. Its vast and cacophonous borders have allowed for the representation and co-existence of disparate cultures, religions, languages, and ethnicities. Why, then, has India seen a recent increase in violence against women and minorities?

And (Its History of) Intolerance

India has by no means been free of violence in recent history. Indeed, the partition of British India into independent India and Pakistan was one of the most violent historical occurrences, with millions dead and displaced. Women were targeted for violent acts, and many have written about trains full of carcasses arriving from India or Pakistan into the other country with women's bodies having breasts cut off.³

By many accounts, in the last few decades, as globalization has intensified, as jobs are being created and the world is increasingly represented in India, there is much evidence that life for women, immigrants, and religious and sexual minorities has not necessarily improved and that in fact these subsets of the population have become high-profile victims of a new and naked violence. Hostility to non-Indians, and particularly to visibly foreign immigrants like those from Africa, seems to have increased. As women's profiles in public life have risen in India's globalized cities,

² Refers to Zoroastrian refugees who fled Persia for India after the first Arab invasions.

³ One famous account of Partition and its violence is the classic novel *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh (1956).

there has been an increase in violence towards them in cities and villages. The last few years have seen the rape of young girls becoming a national crisis. For instance, there were widespread demonstrations and a deep national soul-searching in 2012 after the brutal gang-rape of a young medical student in a Delhi bus. The national conscience was aroused as Indians began to seriously ask what had gone wrong with the soul of India (The Guardian, 2017). A documentary, "India's Daughter," made with interviews of the unrepentant rapists, received international attention, and the conversation about Indian traditions, patriarchy, how men view women and how the country values them, is on-going. Heart-wrenching rape cases have repeatedly ignited debate in ensuing years. In 2018 an 8-year-old, Asifa Bano, was brutally gang-raped in Kashmir. Again, there was national outrage and spontaneous demonstrations took place all over the country (Fareed, 2018). In response, the legislature passed a law imposing the death penalty on child rape cases (Gowen, 2018). However, activists have viewed this as more of a political move by the ruling party than one inspired by a commitment to women's rights.

There have been cases of violence and discrimination against and intimidation of African immigrants reported in cities/regions where one finds the largest concentrations of them, for instance in Delhi, Mumbai, and Goa (BBC, 2018). Two cases that became flashpoints for the African community were the murder of an African in Goa and the arrest and humiliation of several African women in Delhi for supposed drug smuggling, a charge later dropped for lack of evidence (Al Jazeera, 2017).

The last two decades of globalization and liberalization have also coincided with the slow decline of the long-ruling Congress Party, the party that led India to independence and shaped its post-independence polity and economy. As pointed out earlier, it was also the party of secularism and a professed commitment to progressive values with regard to class, caste, religion, and gender. Replacing the Congress as the single largest political party and one that has met with resounding success in the last few years, is the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), a party with its roots in Hindu fundamentalism. It has a troubling history of encouraging adherents who engage in minority-baiting, gender discrimination, and sometimes violence. There is little doubt that the strong majorities that the party won in the 2014 national elections have emboldened regressive elements within India. With the BJP's leadership and approval, a national ban on the sale of cows for slaughter was imposed in 2017. Although officially enacted to prevent animal cruelty, the law in reality sought to appease fundamentalist Hindus who take exception to the sale and consumption of beef by other religious communities, lower caste Hindus and indeed, other beef-eating Hindus. Many states had already initiated anti-slaughter laws prior to this bill. In the last two years, anti-beef zealots with the tacit approval of certain BJP government elements, have imposed vigilante-style justice on those suspected of slaughtering or eating beef, killing the suspected perpetrators (Sinha, 2017).

What Do Indians Believe? Insight from Recent Survey Data

Within the context of India's past history of tolerance and recent upheavals brought by economic liberalization and globalization, one is interested in finding out what India really believes. I examined available survey data to see what Indians, and particularly young Indians who have known the full fruits of economic liberalization, believe on important social issues, particularly with regard to issues of gender, religion, caste, and LGBTQ rights. In the last several decades, survey data on Indians' opinions and values have been scarce, and those that exist tend to be centered around consumer, economic, or political values, including surveys conducted by financial and economic powerhouses like PriceWaterhouse Coopers and Deloitte. It is only in recent years that we are seeing social values surveys beginning to be conducted. Hence, while comparative data across time-frames are not readily available, the data that are available provide a snapshot of Indian values in the new millennium. Below, I present data from the five surveys listed at the beginning of the article.

One in particular, the Youth Report by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) is wide-ranging and comprehensive, and has an extensive reach. The 2016 CSDS/KAS surveys 6,000 respondents from 15 to 34 years of age in 19 states. Although CSDS/KAS have conducted opinion surveys in 2007 and 2011, the questions asked have been different, so it is not possible to conduct a scientific comparison to account for change in values (Madan & Friedrich, 2017). Another 2015 survey, the DMS was more limited (Fernandez, 2015). Yet another survey, from Gallup in 2010/2011 was illustrative in capturing Muslims' attitudes towards life in India.

Because India is slated to become the "youngest country" by 2022 with more millennials (those born between the years of 1980 and 2000) than any other country, their opinions become even more important in making predictions about the future. Their opinions are captured in the CSDS-KAS survey in particular. Here are opinions on key "values" issues, which I have grouped under the headings of women's rights, minority religion, caste, and LGBTQ issues.

Women's Rights

The results for attitudes on women's rights and opportunities are mixed. In general, women in the workplace don't believe they will be held back, with 76% believing that they will be given top jobs in their offices compared to a global average of 49%. However, 74% of women also felt that opportunities for the sexes were not equal (Fernandez, 2015). In a 2015 global attitude Pew survey, 71% of Indians believed that women have the same rights as men, the second highest in the Asia-Pacific region (Pew Research Center, 2015). This seems to be reflected in the CSDS-KAS survey, with only 8% of women reporting gender discrimination. The number is only slightly higher for lower caste women.

In other areas, the CSDC-KAS survey found less encouraging results, with 51% of young Indians agreeing that “wives should always listen to their husbands” and 41% believing that women should not work after marriage (Madan & Friedrich, 2017). Even less encouraging is the finding in the 2017 Ipsos Global Trends Survey that 64% of Indians believed that the role of women is to become a good mother and wife (Dutt, 2017). On the other hand, comparative data from CSDS/KAS are available for attitudes on marriage, and from 2007 to 2017, the percentage of young Indians who said that marriage was important in life had declined from 80% to 52% (Madan & Friedrich, 2017). In the same vein, 81% of Indian men now believe that men should take on greater responsibility in the home and in the raising of children (Dutt, 2017), reflecting modern values.

Religion

The Pew Global Attitude Survey 2015 found an astonishing 83% of Indians believe it is very important for people to freely practice their religion (Venkatachalam, 2015). The CSDS-KAS 2016 survey found that while only 5% reported discrimination on the basis of religion, 13% of Muslims did, and 27% of Muslims living in small cities reported it. It further finds that almost half of respondents were opposed to inter-religious marriages, while only 28% supported them. As previously mentioned, a poll conducted by Gallup in 2010/11 of 9,518 Indians found that Muslims were more likely than Hindus or other religious minorities to report dissatisfaction with their lives and economic situation and less likely to experience “positive experiences” in daily life. Their confidence in India’s judicial system is also lower (Muslims in India, 2011).

Caste

The 2016 CSDS-KAS survey found that 48% and 46% of respondents, respectively, support the government’s efforts to reserve seats for government jobs and college admissions for lower castes.⁴ However, there is not as much support for extending a similar system of benefits to Muslims. Only about a third of respondents found nothing wrong with inter-caste marriages, with another third finding them completely wrong.

⁴ Through its post-independence period, the Indian government has followed a system of “reserving” certain seats in college and university admissions and in government bureaucracies, for lower caste Indians. These castes and sub-castes are listed on a “schedule,” thereby prompting the term “scheduled castes,” which is also used to denote lower castes. This system of reservation has sometimes met with opposition from elements of the upper castes, and in recent times, there has been greater vocalization against reservation among BJP voters.

LGBTQ Rights

In 2013, India's Supreme Court de facto reinstated a colonial-era penalty for homosexuality activity. This has galvanized gay rights activists all over the country, and there is a proposition for the court to take up de-criminalization again in 2018. In the meantime, India constitutionally recognized a "third gender" in 2014, in part a result of the acceptance of the traditional/historical roles for India's "hijra" or transgender community. Public opinion continues to reflect pervasive homophobia against the gay community in India, with 61% of respondents to the CSDS-KAS survey believing same-sex relationships to be wrong and another 10% considering them to be only "somewhat right."

What Do the Survey Data Show?

What the survey data show appears to be out of sync with the horrific incidents of violence against marginalized communities and the general increase in violence coming out of India on a regular basis in the last decade. The data also run counter to the sentiments that often go hand-in-hand with the large-scale support given to the BJP in general and Narendra Modi in particular in recent elections at the national and regional levels. Both the party and the prime minister have fostered a climate of impunity within upper-class male Hindus, and incidents of violence against minorities and women that sicken and outrage many Indians are often met with silence from the top, until they are forced to issue statements that seem weak. For instance, the organization India Spend reported that 25 Indians have been killed in 60 separate incidents surrounding vigilante justice against purported "beef eaters" since 2014, the year Modi came to power (Saldanha, 2017). Of the 25, 84% are Muslims. This kind of beef-related killing was unheard of prior to recent times, despite the fact that many states ban beef.

In the surveys, however, in general Indians appear to hold more tolerant attitudes on caste, religion, and women's rights than the numerous incidents of violence and discrimination have led us to believe. The extremely high percentage holding progressive views on the supporting role of men in marriage, for instance, is surprising. Further, many of the economic surveys also show that India's millennials share socially conscious attitudes on environment and employment goals with global millennials. Indians seem tolerant of reservations for lower caste Indians, and astonishingly high levels purport to uphold freedom of religion for all Indians, which recent incidents of intolerance against the Muslim minority would seem to belie.

This disconnect between what Indians are saying in surveys on gender, caste, and religious issues and the evidence of continued violence against marginalized Indians could be occurring for a number of reasons. For instance, pollsters universally caution against respondent bias, where survey respondents answer in ways that they believe the researchers want them to and that are socially more

acceptable. Hence, Donald Trump received a higher percentage of the final vote in the 2016 election than almost every poll had indicated he would; one explanation for this polling failure was that given Trump's politically incorrect profile, many voters may not have wanted to reveal that they intended to vote for him. However, because of the general lack of pressure to voice politically correct opinions in India, I don't believe this to be the case. What may be more likely is that these incipient surveys are inadequate in terms of representation of the sheer numbers and diversity of Indians that they need to include, and may not be a true reflection of what Indians believe.

It may also be the case that the surprisingly small percentages of women who report feeling discriminated against in the workplace might reflect a context in which many women are not aware of the full extent of their rights in the first place, and have no expectation of complete equality in the workplace, in any event. This might therefore actually reflect a pervasive climate of low expectations for women's opportunities and the acceptance thereof, rather than genuine gender equality in the workplace.

The more optimistic analysis of these survey responses, and one that we must also consider, is that Indians, and especially young Indians, do in fact hold opinions that reflect moderate and inclusive values on critical issues of caste, religion, and gender (although not sexual orientation). If this is the case, then we will see fewer of the horrific acts of violence and marginalization that have become a sad and regular recent commentary on life in contemporary India. These acts may constitute the dying gasps of a patriarchal society that has seen an upheaval in its social structure from the forces of globalization and has lashed out in ways that they thought would push the new forces back. Indian media, for the most part bold and independent, have continuously exposed each act of violence against marginalized communities and provided multiple and continuous fora for discussions. Collective outrage has been expressed on numerous television shows and in newspaper editorials even though historically during the Emergency period (1975-1977), significant restrictions were placed on the media. And, in recent times, there have been complaints both of big business influence on the media, as well as some sections of the media pandering to the ruling BJP party, thus compromising their independence. Overall, Indians seem to be constantly examining themselves and their values to understand recent acts that have shamed the country. If so, it is not impossible that the moderate values exhibited in these survey are actually held by many Indians.

The New India: "Miles to Go"

India has undergone an unprecedented transformation in the last 25 years, resulting in rapid economic growth, a growing middle class, a sea-change in the variety of jobs available, migration from rural to urban areas, and access to global ideas. It has also achieved a consolidation of democracy as the long-ruling Congress Party has lost badly in recent times and moved out of the centrality of Indian politics to allow for new actors on the political stage, even if the new actors hold regressive views. We have already noted that one of the new political parties, the ruling BJP

(and its partners), has had a troubling track record that has touted the notion of Hindu supremacy. Prime Minister Modi has himself flirted with these extremist ideas, emboldening the extremist fringes of his own party and other right-wing Hindu parties and organizations. This is one of the less salubrious consequences of democratic politics.

The country still has “miles to go,” as Nehru was often fond of saying, especially in the area of human rights and civil society (Gandhi, 2016). The old mindsets, biases, and stereotypes that discriminated against women, religious and ethnic minorities, and lower castes and classes, continue to exist, but are being confronted and challenged by the new forces of growth and globalization. These new forces, in their turn, have created new displacements and new scapegoats of their own. Dislocations from the new economy have inevitably created economic winners and losers, and the losers have legitimate grievances that must be addressed. For instance, the last few years have seen an epidemic of suicides by farmers in key agricultural states who have felt pummeled by the new economic forces and hopeless to change their situation of indebtedness and inability to compete.

Although there is not much current research into this question, I believe that the tolerant nature of India’s history and culture will eventually reassert itself as Indian society becomes increasingly acclimated to the ongoing process of globalization-induced mobility and transformation. The process of questioning and examination has already begun and will hopefully move the country in directions where not just legislation protects the rights of all, but also the political culture and societal values do so. However, it can’t be denied that until then, globalization has created hitherto unknown tensions in India that are often resulting in the denial of the civil and human rights of women, religious and sexual minorities, immigrants, and groups that are conceived of as out of the mainstream and the “other.”

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