Linguistic Equity: India's Path to Social Justice

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Abstract

In 2009 India passed The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act. This may be the most important legislation for democracy in India's history. As a result of this law, the people of India have demonstrated the belief that democratic education is truly the answer to freedom and equality for every Indian citizen as 96% of all of their eligible primary aged students are currently attending free and compulsory schools (Education in India, 2014). This Constitutional law and its practical fulfillment can be clearly seen through the integration of each of India's spoken and written languages on Nationwide Standardized Exams, in National Textbooks, and within Teachers' Classroom Practice which will reveal how citizenship education is redefining democracy in India through linguistic equity.

Keywords: linguistic equity, free and compulsory education, constitutional equity

Introduction

India is the second most densely inhabited nation on earth. Its population exceeds 1.2 billion citizens (Background, (n.d.)). As a result of its voluminous population, and its unique historical background, there are well over 1000 languages spoken throughout this diverse nation. Of the multitude of languages spoken in India, their constitution recognizes 22 distinctive languages in 29 different states within seven different union territories (States and union territories of India, 2014). India practices more than eight different religions which through the centuries have led to multitudinous variations and conglomerations of cultural, lingual, and ethnic practices, and even though it is united by law, by land, and by a shared history, the challenges of effectively enacting democracy in the midst of so many different languages, cultures, and religions are unique and seemingly impossible (Religion in India, 2014). In his book, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, Nirad Chaudhuri recognizes that there are many pitfalls which lie in the path of the individual who dares to discover the truth about contemporary India (Chaudhuri, 1989). These significant perils include the staggering literacy rate of less than 75% (Literacy in India, 2014), the fact that over 20% of its citizens suffer from abject poverty (Poverty in India, 2014), and the disconcerting sustained existence of the antiquated hierarchical caste system that has long subjugated unfortunate individuals born on the proverbial wrong side of socially constructed tracks. Each of these issues appear irresolvable because the

needs of many are so urgent and so dire: "The service of India means the service of millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity" (Prior, 1996, p. 63). How then can true democracy and equal opportunity become a reality for every citizen of this matchless and multifarious nation? The answer is the equitable treatment of all Indian languages in education.

Among the manifold issues with which India is confronted, the single most perplexing matter that works against democracy yet simultaneously exhibits it is the fact that there are so many different legally recognized languages spoken in India. How can the voices of all of India's multilingual population be equally recognized and united under one flag? Each state in India speaks multiple languages, yet even to this day some of the languages carry greater cultural, religious, and societal significance over others. In order to comprehend the significant role of verbal and written communication in India, an understanding of the roots, foundation, and formation of Indian languages and how this also shaped its cultural history must be acquired. There must also be concurrent consideration as to how language and religion were and are inextricably bound in the development of this dialectically diverse nation. Additionally, examination of carefully crafted constitutional directives will show how lawmakers were able to begin the process of exacting democracy through the educational system of India by equally recognizing each significant language family in schools across the nation. These laws and their practical fulfillment can be clearly seen through the integration of each of their spoken and written languages on nationwide standardized exams, in national textbooks, and within teachers' classroom practice which will reveal how citizenship education is redefining democracy in India through linguistic equity.

The Roots of Language and Its Impact on Indian Society

Samuel Johnson's assertion that languages are the pedigrees of nations fits Indian conditions perfectly. Each language reveals a specific historical past. The Indian subcontinent was once an ancient cultural crossroads that ushered in five distinctive racial groups from specific parts of the world, and as they came, they brought their languages, cultures, and customs (Dutt, et. al., 1985). Although Indian languages have basic roots in five racial groups: Negroid (Andamanese), Austro – Asiatic, Mongoloid (Tibeto – Burman), Caucasoid Dravidians, and Caucasoid Aryan (Indo – European) it is the last two groups that dominate the country in terms of the languages that are currently spoken in India. Sanskrit based Aryan languages of the North and Dravidian languages of the South have derived their writings from a common source – the 3rd and 2nd century BC Brahmi (Dutt, et. al., 1985). The influence of so many different races, languages, and religions have shaped India into an unparalleled democracy. These unique and ancient origins of Indian language and culture have profoundly influenced the way that customs in India are enacted today.

The heavy influence of Caucasoid Aryan / Indo – European and the Caucasoid Dravidian has made those whose derivative languages that were shaped from other racial group's languages linguistic minorities. Over time societal status in India

became associated with those who spoke more widely used or prevalent languages, and through these differences language began to separate society "by dividing states along linguistic lines and by recognizing several regional languages as official languages" (Arthur, 2008, p. 178). These linguistic divisions have shaped Indian society into the most socially and culturally diverse nation in the world. It must be understood that even today, throughout India, linguistic minorities live under state demographic and social norms that are dominated by majority linguistic groups (Bhattacharayya, 2003). For example, Tamil speakers, numbered 3,975,561 citizens or (7.1%) of India's population in 1991, and Kannada speakers numbered 1,208,296 which was (2.2%) of India's population. Although these numbers might be much more significant in less populated countries, their smaller percentages of the overall population made these languages seem insignificant.

More importantly it made the people who used these languages seem less important than people who spoke languages which were more commonly spoken throughout India. Occasionally, minorities speaking less recognized languages have demanded greater recognition and voice throughout the country with varying degrees of success. Such demands have often been made by those linguistic groups mainly concentrated in a specific region of a state where the group has a strong sense of its idiosyncratic identity. The success of such movements has depended on the strength of the political formulation of their demands by the elites and a host of other factors. Most of the states have some dominant ethno – linguistic and ethno – religious groups (Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir in the North - East), although within each of them there are religious and linguistic minorities, and this created tensions that were challenging to substantiate (Bhattacharayya, 2003, p. 153).

The formation of India by immigrants who brought their own cultures and traditions undoubtedly makes India's diversity one of a kind. Not only has language played a significant role in the formation of India as a whole, but religion has also shaped the infrastructure of India's hierarchical society. Although India is predominantly inhabited by over 82% of people who practice some form of Hinduism, generally these individuals are regionally rooted and are often recognized by their pluralistic beliefs and practices. India's populace also includes a large population of approximately 12% Muslims, as well as Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians and Jains. Not only has religion played a significant role in defining different societal rules of Indian culture, language and religion are often inseparably linked. (Bhattacharayya, 2003). Many people who practice Hinduism also speak Hindi (particularly in northern regions) which is also the official language of the Union Government, and is the most predominant mother tongue as more than 30% of the country's people speak this language (Dutt, et. al., 1985). How this plays out in classrooms across the nation will be the impetus for democracy in the twenty first century and beyond.

One of India's most difficult roadblocks to democracy is language, and the religious connections that are associated with dominant languages have created a social hierarchy known as the caste system. Democracy in India is not necessarily defined by Western notions of the "Liberal Tradition or the Civic Republic Tradition" (Heater, 1999), but many different strata of society have been shaped by language,

religion, and the connection or the link between the two. The most recognizable and infamous of these social divisions is the Hindu caste system which "may be defined as a hierarchy of endogamous divisions in which membership is hereditary and permanent" (Berreman, 1960, p. 120). It is the arrangement of transmissible groups into a hierarchal social order. The hierarchy of the caste system is divided into four classes or varnas. At the highest level are the Brahmins who are primarily known as priests and scholars. Beneath the Brahmins come Kshatriyas, the classes of rulers and warriors. Next come the Vaishyas, which are generally merchant and farmer classes. The lowest class is the Sudras, the menial and servant classes. The Untouchables are generally considered to be outside the four – tier caste system and are often referred to as "outcastes". The Untouchables were considered to be polluted and were assigned menial tasks such as sweeping and toilet cleaning.

In Hindu religious thought the four varnas emanate from the body of Purusa, the Lord of beings. His mouth was portrayed as the Brahmins, his arms became the Kshatriyas, his thighs became the Vaishyas, and his feet became the Sudras (Prior, 1996). What has remained insignificant, however, is that the figure of a complete human body represented by the four parts, symbolizes a sense of unity within diversity. The caste system was initially born with an eye to specialization in certain work fields. The Brahmins were expected to take care of education, the Kshatriyas would focus upon the safety of the nation, the Vaishyas would look after trade and commerce, and the Sudras would form the mass work force (P. Chaterjee, personal communication, November 17, 2014).

Getting people to go against cultural and religious beliefs is one of the greatest and most difficult challenges that faces those who would dare to attempt democratic education in India. In order to enact it, the caste system is going to have be eliminated, but belief in a tradition dies hard. One of the only ways to eliminate the caste system is to use the same weapon that was used to create it… language. This time instead of categorizing people through language the means to equality will be uniting them through it. India is aware of this reality, and she has taken specific and definitive steps to ensure that the voices of every group are heard in the law – making process as well as in universities across the country.   "In India's education system, a significant number of seats are reserved under affirmative action policies for the historically disadvantaged scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and other backward classes. In universities, colleges, and similar institutions affiliated to the federal government, there is a minimum 50% of reservations applicable to these disadvantaged groups, at the state level it can vary (Education in India, 2014).

Ethnically or religiously based parties serve as vehicles of regional identity within a united India, but they can also threaten cultural minorities by wielding native's appeals to local 'sons of the soil' whose interests are supposedly being endangered by migrants from other parts of India or indigenous religions and linguistic minorities. Liberal democracy stands or falls according to its ability to elicit a dual commitment to both majority rule and minority rights a challenging balance to strike. The legitimacy of a majority at any given time depends on the maintenance of an open marketplace of ideas, free and periodic elections through which the majority

can be challenged, and guarantees of basic human rights for all. But how and in what form are minority rights to be protected? Liberal democracy is classically expressed in terms of individual rights, and the Preamble to the Indian Constitution embodies a commitment to justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity for the individual. Yet minority interests are typically expressed in terms of group identity, and political demands which call for the protection or promotion of language, religion, and culture, or of the 'group' more generally in ways that conflict not only with 'the will of the majority,' but with constitutional guarantees of individual rights and equal protection.

This tension, and the problems it causes, can be seen in India in three different contexts. The first is ethno-linguistic regionalism and separatism, the second is the caste – based reservation, and the third is secularism and Hindu – Muslim communal relations (Hardgrave, 1993). Although India recognizes that change is essential for democracy to thrive, it is clear that the challenge of balancing individual rights against majority rule is a daunting task. "Fifty – three years of almost uninterrupted democratic rule in India have done little to reduce the political, social, and economic marginalization of India's popular classes" (Heller, 2000, p. 484). How then can change take place in India that is genuine and long – lasting? The answer comes through laws that revolve around language equity, through national enactments of those laws in classrooms across India, and how teachers implement those laws into their teaching practice to endorse language equality for all Indian people.

How Language Equity Is Enacted Nationally

The realization that language, religion, the connections that exist between them, and how those have led to stratified social structures is key to understanding how India has strategically made the classroom the place where enacting legal equality in India a legitimate possibility. The only way that equality can exist in Indian society is through the laws that can be enforced in a broad sense and across the entire nation. The best way to enact laws that demand equity for every Indian citizen is through laws that can be followed by educators in classrooms across the nation. India has gone to the highest court in their land to accomplish the changes necessary to combat the role difference plays in their society.

"The Indian Constitution can be said to be a multicultural document in the sense of providing for political and institutional measures for the recognition and accommodation of the country's diversity" (Bhattacharayya, 2003, p. 148). The two ways these laws are enacted nationally are through nationwide standardized exams and through national textbooks that are written in all 22 constitutionally recognized Indian languages. In 2009, India passed The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act. This may be the most important legislation for democracy in India's history. As a result of this law the people of India have demonstrated the belief that democratic education is truly the answer to freedom and equality for every Indian citizen as 96.5% of all of their eligible primary aged students are currently attending free and compulsory schools (Education in India, 2014). The fact that so many eligible students are currently attending schools reveals that India knows that the answer to their issues is through language equity in schools. The 2009 law that was passed was

a culmination of laws that have been made all the way up to that time paving the way for this monumental legislation that will be their source of transformation.

Language has always played a role in dividing India. Because of this situation, the 1968 National Policy Resolution of 1968 enunciated the three – language formula. This is a formula of language learning formulated by the Union Education Ministry of the Government of India in consultation with the states. This resolution stated that children in the Hindi – speaking states are to be taught three languages: Hindi, English and one of the local languages. The children in non – Hindi – speaking states were to be taught the local language, English and Hindi. (The Three – Language Formula, 2014). The formula played a significant role in paving the way for equality for every citizen of India no matter the state from which they came or the language they deemed to be their mother tongue.

In order to understand how this plays out nationally, the structure of the Indian educational system has to be defined. Pre – Primary children attend what is considered to be kindergarten in the United States at the age of five. After pre – primary comes the primary grades which include grades one – five. The upper primary are grades six – eight and traditionally at the end of the eighth grade year most students have reached the age of fourteen which is also the year that the government no longer funds a child's education, and the reach of the 2009 Act ends. The next step in the Indian educational process is the secondary level which includes grades nine and ten. Finally, eleventh and twelfth grade students attend upper secondary school. (P. Chatterjee, personal communication, November 17, 2014).

At each level of schooling, there are two common threads in terms of democratic citizenship education in India, the first is civics education which could also be termed social studies that explores the inner workings of the government, and the history of India from ancient times to the present both in a local and national context. Students in grade one begin this process by getting to know their local history through speaking with their elders, and by the end of grade four students thoroughly explore a history of their own locality. By the time students reach the fifth grade, they start to examine India in the world with a focus on unity and ways to unite such a culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse nation. The curriculum always mentions that classroom teaching must highlight the secular, democratic, and culturally integrated spirit of India. Traces of the tracking system also begin to emerge in the ninth and tenth grade secondary levels as students take all of the same classes, but the curriculum is often subtly and sometimes overtly dissimilar. (P. Chatterjee, personal communication, November 17, 2014). "The National Curriculum for Elementary and Secondary Education developed in the 1988 crystallized government efforts to ensure objectivity in the classroom by requiring that the teaching of history to be free of communal, religious or class bias" (Antal, 2008, p. 89).

It is incredibly important to point out that even though the law states that the teaching of history should be 'free of communal, religious or class bias' that is not always the case, this fact shows how important individual teachers are when they are teaching history. If the teacher is affiliated with certain religious groups, and also has any bias with which they were raised, the practice of this law may be lost in

translation. Teachers in India must be the ones who truly want to bring about equality for all.

Even if some educators do not want to bring about the kinds of change necessary to transform India, the government has seen to it that secondary students are exposed to linguistic impartiality through standardized examinations at the end of the secondary and the upper secondary levels that determine students' college selections and ultimately their career paths. This example of language equity can be seen through a nationally recognized standardized exam overseen by the Central Board of Secondary Education that all students take at the end of their tenth grade year. It is fascinating and exceptional to note that this exam is administered in all of India's 22 constitutionally recognized languages. This is a very powerful statement because it speaks to a level playing field for all students no matter their lingual background. (P. Chatterjee, personal communication, November 17, 2014).

In addition to the exam students take at the end of their secondary year in school, the higher secondary students take a national exam known as the Joint Entrance Exam which assesses students whose aptitudes suggest they are suited to pursue scientific, technological, engineering, or mathematical fields. Although it is less inclusive as the post – secondary examination that accounts for all 22 languages, this test is still administered in five different languages: English (the official second language of India), Hindi (the national language of India), Nepali (the language of the dominion state), Urdu (the language most spoken by Muslim people), and Bengali (as candidates from Bengal are in abundance) (P. Chatterjee, personal communication, November 17, 2014). The recognition of multiple languages on nationally administered standardized exams that determine the collegiate and ultimately the professional paths of students who graduate from schools in India is one way they have tried to demonstrate equity through language. Every state in India has multiple colleges which students can attend whose dominant language is spoken by students in that state; consequently, students who attend colleges in India have the chance to demonstrate their knowledge of specific content in a language they grew up speaking so that they can show what they truly know - not how well they have mastered a language other than their mother tongue. (P. Chatterjeee, personal communication, November 17, 2014).

Another way that democracy can be seen through equity in language is through the publication of state textbooks. In the 2005, the National Curriculum Framework the three – legged language policy was further defined and clarified. The recognition for ending inequality in India through democratic citizenship education can best be seen through its administration of textbooks in the dominant languages spoken in each state. Take for example West Bengal which publishes textbooks in Santhali, Nepali, Urdu, English and Bengali. Or another state such as Kerala where textbooks are published in English, Tamil, Malayali, and Hindi. Each state publishes textbooks in dominant languages of that state as well as English (a common linguistic thread throughout India). Additionally, when it comes to 'National Textbooks' printed by the National Textbook Council, all textbooks come in all 22 nationally recognized languages (P. Chatterjeee, personal communication, November 17, 2014).

The government's responsibility for free and compulsory education ends at the age of 14 or the eighth grade year for students in India, and so the argument that standardized tests which cater to college bound students is not as strong as the fact that all textbooks are printed in the dominant languages of every state. Leaders of minority groups (particularly Muslims) may argue that primary and secondary textbooks have portrayed all communities other than the Hindus as foreigners in India as well as wrongly describing the medieval epoch as the Muslim period and following the footsteps of the British by portraying the period as one of great oppression and decline. These books, in the name of instilling patriotism and valor among Indians, spread falsehoods, treat mythological religious figures like actual historical figures and make absurd claims. (Delhi Historians Group, 2001). The state could certainly use these textbooks to perpetuate major party supremacy (as textbooks often do), but the fact that students can read them and process the information can and ultimately will lead to the change necessary in India through equity in language.

How Language Equity Is Enacted Locally

National and official enactment of legal demands in the classroom are often sound in theory; however, the way they are carried out in the classroom boils down to how teachers interpret and disseminate their understanding of the laws as well as the curriculum that they are given to teach which can often be politically charged and hegemonic in nature. So even though the inclusion of multiple languages on standardized exams and within the pages of textbooks is a great start, how can teachers bring about the modifications that India desperately needs? There are three specific means teachers can accomplish genuine change in their daily instruction and in how they assess their students in the classroom.

The first of the ways that teachers can change India one student at time is in the language they choose to instruct their students. Indian teachers have not always had a choice in what language they could instruct their students, but since they have been given clearance to teach students in their mother tongue (even if that language is not the dominant language of the state) they can reach all of their students. The verbiage in chapter five, section 29, subsection two (*f*) of the 2009 The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, states that the "medium of instructions shall, as far as practicable, be in child's mother tongue" (The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, p. 9). One significant roadblock to this notion occurred in 1992 when the government stated that all instruction must be in English, and Indian students were immersed in English; however seeds of legal change for the 2009 The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act began in 2005 in the National Curriculum Framework that stated "care must be taken to honor and respect the child's home language(s) / mother tongue(s)" (National Curriculum Framework, 2005). Teachers in India not only needed to understand that the judicious use of the mother tongue was important to reach all of their students, it was also used to scaffold important linguistic divides that would give Indian students the ability to better learn any content (P. Chatterjee, personal communication, November 17, 2014).

This significant legal change gave teachers the freedom they needed to reach all of their students… no matter what language they spoke. Additionally, research has demonstrated that an education which begins in the mother tongue and builds competence in the second language before using it as the medium of instruction, reduces the linguistic and cultural barriers faced by students when entering school, as such this is a key component in increasing the educational attainment of speakers of minority languages (Mackenzie, 2009).

The second way teachers can exact the kind of subtle change to make India an egalitarian society is based upon how they assess their students. Whenever teachers create assessments in their classrooms, they must write their questions in all of the languages that their students understand so that the teacher can assess what they know and not whether or not students have mastered the dominant language of a given state. Not all teachers use all of the languages that their children speak on their assessments, but when they do so more readily, the message that is communicated to students is that no matter what language they speak, they (the students themselves) are of value. In the past it would not be unusual for teachers to include only the dominant languages on assessments, but when teachers step out of their comfort zones into a realm of love, compassion, and care for all of their students, then real long - lasting change can occur (P. Chatterjee, personal communication, November 17, 2014).

Creating manifold assessments in multiple languages seems highly impractical and arduous. It is difficult enough to create quality classroom assessments, yet asking teachers to create additional assessments on top of the ones that they have already created is a daunting task, but this is another subtle yet powerful means of bringing about impartiality through language equity.

The final way teachers can foster democracy through linguistic impartiality is by being multicultural practitioners through including multiple cultures and languages into classroom instruction. In most societies it is generally acceptable and conventional for teachers to select content that highlights the accomplishments of the dominant culture of the place where they are teaching. Few would fault a teacher for teaching things with which they feel most comfortable, or are more acceptable in a given place. It takes courage to step out of acceptable curricular norms to highlight works from cultures that have been hidden in the shadows of the principal party of society. Teachers must be willing to take carefully selected and purposeful risks in their curricular selections. This may require extra work that will not necessarily be rewarded by administrators, people within the dominant culture, or students who come from that same dominant culture, yet this is how teachers can impact each and every one of their students. Becoming multicultural practitioners is one additional way Indian teachers can boost the self – esteem of those students whose families have been subjugated for far too long. These specific and definitive teacher choices will also give students within the dominant culture a broader view of their local world (P. Chatterjee, personal communication, November 17, 2014).

Because of India's significant population, the teaching force in India is insufficient, and more teachers are needed. Additionally, there needs to be ongoing

fortification for current teachers and minimal training must become readily available for untrained teachers who hold positions without any pedagogical preparation (Shah, 2013).   When instructing their students, trained and untrained teachers alike are going to do what worked for them when they learned, and they are going to go with what they feel most comfortable teaching. Teachers in schools across India are the ones who are charged with getting their minority students to believe that they matter, all the while demonstrating to their students who come from dominant cultures that their peers are of value and that minority students should not be categorically dismissed from front and center conversations just because that is the way things have always been.

> The good news is that in the past progressive legislation has provided an impetus to social transformation – not a guarantee. The study of social struggle has shown that a change in discourse does not automatically lead to structural transformation – more simply put, talk does not always lead to action. Moreover, we know that legislation that seeks to end inequality and injustice more often than not has come about through progressive social movements and other forms of popular or collective participation (Thapliyal, 2012, p. 65).

Those reformists in this case are educators. The languages in which they choose to instruct and assess their students, as well as the content they choose to use to communicate in their daily lessons will be the means of taking legislation and putting it into practice. Since most teachers are local, they know the local languages and cultures; as such they are the ones who will bring about true social change in India through linguistic equity in their classrooms.

Conclusion

Practical application of Indian law is being realized through the incorporation of multiple constitutionally recognized languages on nationwide standardized exams, in national textbooks, and within teachers' classroom practice. Each of these different means of linguistic equity within Indian classrooms will be the impetus necessary to redefine social justice in a country that is notorious for social injustice and cruelty to its own citizens. The linguistic diversity of India poses complex challenges, but it also provides a vast range of opportunities. India is unique not only in that a large number of languages are spoken there, but also in terms of the number and variety of language families that are represented in those languages. There is no other country in the world in which languages from five different language families exist. Even though they are so structurally distinct as to merit classifications as different language families, (Caucasoid Aryan (Indo – European), Caucasoid Dravidian, Austro – Asiatic, Mongoloids (Tibeto – Burman), Negroid (Andamanese), and Dravidians) they constantly interact with each other. There are several linguistic and sociolinguistic features that are shared across languages that bear witness to the fact that different languages and cultures have coexisted in India for centuries, enriching each other despite their fundamental differences. (National Curriculum Framework, 2005). Even though, language has been a roadblock to equality in India, it can become the forward motion to true unity in a country that has used language, religion, and the connection between religion and language as a means of oppression, stratification, and social order.

Indian students of today enjoy a tremendous advantage over their peers in other countries because of the role that language plays in their lives. Their complex linguistic culture allows them to be cosmopolitan citizens who are diverse and versatile enough to go anywhere in this world and blend in to that society. It is known for certain that bilingualism or multilingualism confers definite cognitive advantages (Adesope et al., 2010). India's three – language formula is an attempt to address the challenges and opportunities of the linguistic situation in India. It is a strategy that should really serve as a launching pad for learning more languages and for leveling the playing field for all Indian citizens no matter what language they speak (National Curriculum Framework, 2005). Regardless of the challenges that confront India from realizing true democracy, it is certainly a lighthouse that all other nations should look to in order to bring about social justice and equity. Former ambassador to India Robert Blackwill could not have said it any better as he left his post in India in 2003: "India is a pluralistic society that creates magic with democracy, rule of law, and individual freedom, community relations and cultural diversity. What a place to be an intellectual! I wouldn't mind being born ten times to rediscover India" (Guha, 2007, p. ix).

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