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## Beyond Cultural Aphasia. A Conversation with Ganesh Devy on Indian Adivasis

**Abstract:** Ganesh N. Devy is a renowned literary critic and activist for the human and cultural rights of Adivasis in India. He is the founder director of the *Bhasha Research and Publication Center* and *Adivasi Academy* at Tejgadh (Gujarat) established to create a unique educational environment for tribal communities. He led the *People's Linguistic Survey of India* in 2010, which has researched and documented 780 living Indian languages. Formerly professor of English at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, among his many academic assignments, he has held fellowships at Leeds, Yale and Jawaharlal Nerhu Universities. He has been awarded several Prizes and Awards for his works and researches and in recognition of his work for the conservation of the history, languages and cultures of denotified and nomadic tribes (DNTs). Along with Laxman Gaikwad and Mahasweta Devi, he is one of the founders of 'The Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group'. He returned his Sahitya Akademi Award in October 2015 as a mark of protest against intolerance towards differences of opinion and in solidarity with other writers who see a threat to Indian democracy and secularism. He is taking part in the Dakshinayan movement that has sprung up through a collective desire to forge a new solidarity between cinema, theatre, literature and the arts in defense of freedom of expression and the dignity and spirituality of the human. What follows is a conversation on the main issues concerning the condition of Adivasis in India today.

**Keywords:** *colonial, post-colonial, development, caste, gender, indigenous languages*

Colonial, postcolonial, neocolonial. Historical precedents, post-millennial Indian politics

**RC** The first question I'd like to discuss with you is about a possible ongoing colonial legacy on the system of inequities still suffered by Indian Adivasis. I mean, starting from the objective observation that the most part of India's eighty million Adivasis, after 68 years of independence, still live below the poverty line, lacking education, economic support from the state and access to healthcare, do you see a sort of historical continuity in the passage from the colonial archive where tribals figured often as rebellious and sometimes even as 'habitual offenders' to the postcolonial scene in which they are presented usually as 'backward' and not rarely as threatening actors in insurgent movements against national security?

**GD** Though humans are gifted with the twin power to remember as well as to forget, memory as well as amnesia, histories invariably continue to stick to our every-day existence. The way we walk, eat, exchange opinions, form thoughts, create what we call beauty – all of these carry invisible but multiple layers of

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history, many pasts that the mind may forget but life does not. The colonial experience in India was protracted and pervasive. It affected most aspects of how we know ourselves and how we conduct ourselves. Our idea of justice and our perception of injustice too were deeply affected by the colonial notions of law and order, fairness and impropriety. Besides, after independence, it was not as if India started on a blank page. Neither the colonial process nor the experience of decolonization in India can really be compared – except superficially – with those processes and experience in Australia or Canada. For civilizations that have long-standing legacies, these things work differently. In India, there already was a surplus of inequality prior to the colonial rule. The colonial rule compounded inequality by bringing in agents of change not known before. These included a notion of regulated citizenship that worked less through affection and more through economic norms. Those who could pay taxes, or had land related occupations, were more easily acceptable to the colonial imagination of citizenship (as subject). The nomads and the Adivasis fell out of that framework and came to be seen as distant from the State. During the post-independence period, this distance was sought to be reduced (not entirely eliminated!) by creating a 'Schedule of Tribes' and a 'Schedule of Castes' for receiving positive discrimination. But, the mindset of the people did not change in tune with the spirit of equality enshrined in the Constitution. Besides, India's transition to a technological and industrial economic power required an unopposed access to the areas in the tribal forests for mining. The scale of this operation has been really massive. A lot of displacement and disempowerment arise out of the post-independence industrial activities. But, carrying out those activities remained easy as the Adivasi had come to be seen as 'a distant citizen' during the colonial times. One can therefore say that the alienation of Adivasis from the Indian state, and the vast inequality with which they are saddled have roots in the colonial structures, but these have seen a rapid increase in the last half-century. In every age and every society, those who are most deprived of the economic means and access to improved life conditions come to be seen as potential 'dangerous' section of the society. Think of the Gypsies in Europe. The 'denotified' communities in India have faced a similar challenge. It combines social stigma with economic deprivation.

**RC** Considering your peculiar historical knowledge is there a shared logic in the various 'Criminal Tribes Acts' (1871, 1921), 'Land Acquisition Act' (1894) and 'Indian Forest Acts' (1865, 1878, 1927) of the colonial period and a sort of internal neocolonial present in which, however 'denotified', Tribals are still deeply affected by an unfriendly legislation? I'm thinking for example of the Special Economic Zones Act (2005) or, for different reasons and cases of enforcement, of the various Armed Forces Special Powers Acts (1958, 1983, 1990).

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**GD** It needs be understood that the basis of the ‘Criminal Tribes Act (s)’ was not moral. These Acts, beginning with the 1871 CTA, were not made in order to rescue humanity out of degradation. They were a cumulative result of various steps towards suppression of perceived potential risks to the ‘society’ that had accepted the normative framework of the British Raj. Thus, the primary interest was to keep the social order safe, for the colonial rule was justified as a ‘giver of law and order’ to India. The Forest Act had to be brought in not because the Indian forests were dwindling. Had they really been facing the risk of depletion, the sports like Shikar and Tiger-hunt would have found no support in the colonial notion of leisure. The primary aim was to bring under the government’s command a valuable source for ship-building, timber. Hence, a special forest authority and code had to be created and the concept of forests as ‘productive sites’ had to be popularized. This was a big shift from the idea of forest as ‘sacred zones’ – under divine control rather than the regal order – that Indians had traditionally valued. Land, forest and the subject population – all of them – were for the colonial rulers a single spectrum of a larger economic activity which brought wealth to England. And the laws regulating Nature and Man were conceived to serve that single goal. The more recent SEZ (*Special Economic Zones*) activity and the ‘simplification of law’ to support that activity are of a slightly different nature. In the previous lot of Acts, law was worked to consolidate the authority of the State. In the legal network supporting SEZ, the primary idea appears to be effecting a transition from the authority of the State to the authority of Capital (or call it the Corporate).

**RC** In the recent past, activists and political parties have made multiple attempts to address the predicament of Adivasis through mass protests and political activism. In some cases this has also led to armed insurgency struggles. At a certain moment it seemed that a way out of injustice and a possibility of freedom from feudal bondage was to be found only in the Naxalite movement, or in other similar guerrilla factions, but in the end, do you agree that this produced only a long series of brutalities and in certain areas the creation of a sort of perennial ‘state of exception’ with the systematic violation of human rights?

**GD** Naxalism is the name given to a mood of ‘disaffection towards the State’, particularly the one that promotes violence as the means of communication. Since violence is involved in it, it is not surprising that it meets with counter-violence from the state. On both sides, this has unleashed a protracted process of brutalization, dehumanization and an absurd lack of any desire for dialogue. This gives rise to numerous cases of affective victimization and violation of humans rights. On the other hand, it also gives rise to a destructive tendency hampering development of the tribal villages and to exploitative leadership that is incapable of working the existing democracy to people’s advantage. It is a sad situation and I hope it comes to an end through consultation, dialogue and respect for Adivasi dignity as well as respect for human life and civilization.

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## The long agenda of social issues

**RC** As you said, both before and after independence, Adivasis have also been the object of a well meant affirmative action through a set of legislative acts aimed at protecting their cultural heritage and at promoting their inclusion in the social body (via for example the policy of special reservations for the Scheduled tribes in education and government jobs and through reservation of seats in legislatures). At the same time the general sensation is that the post-independence narration of universal citizenship finds in the condition of the Adivasis its most acute and sour disavowal. What's your opinion on the quota politics and its application?

**GD** The affirmative action is a good idea, but its address has remained somewhat vague. For example, the successive governments have been trying to cut down positions (vacancies) in category III and category IV (services). Thus, 8 percent positions are reserved for Adivasis; but precisely those positions where they would typically join are curtailed. It is the same with the field of education. In Gujarat, where I have spent time with Adivasis for the last twenty years, there are 7 million of them. But, for these seven million, there is not a single dedicated university. There are a very few pre-college high-schools for science subjects. Obviously, Adivasis do not get into Engineering or Medical colleges (in larger cities). So, we have favorable laws for reservation of seats in education and employment. But, the provisions remain inadequately used (or are used by the creamiest layers). But this 'quota' tends to become a volatile and emotional issue. The poorer sections among those that do not have the benefit of quota have legitimate grouse against the quota system. This gets translated into a blatant stereotyping of Tribals and contempt towards them. It is the same with the Scheduled Castes.

**RC** In *A Nomad Called Thief*, you state that the upward mobility registered in the last years in Hindu-caste society has left a social vacuum at the very base of the social pyramid and that the tribals are pushed, willingly or unwillingly, to fill up that gap. Do you confirm this is still going on? And anyway, what do you make of the increasing application of caste paradigms to the social fabric of tribal communities? In more than one occasion Adivasi people, like in the atrocities in Gujarat in 2002, were even involved in communal atrocities, fomented by caste or religious extremism, traditionally alien to tribal social culture. What do you make of these episodes ?

**GD** Sociologists use the term 'sanskritization' for a commonly shared social process of ascension to a higher economic status. Adivasi communities close to urban (or urbanized) centers of economic activities are now widely affected by the tendency to 'sanskritize' themselves. In my initial years of work with Adivasis, I used to get deeply disturbed whenever I heard from them any indication or statement of desire for a life-style that was at par with the 'modern, urban, middle-

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class' style of life. I was keen that they preserved their unique social structures, their famed innate sense of equality, etc. Slowly, I started seeing the element of unfairness to Adivasis in my own response. I have now come to accept that it is by no means wrong for Adivasis to expect to get benefits of modern medicine, education, well-protected habitat, drinking water and leisure. But, this is not to say that either the Adivasis become like the others or the others become like Adivasis – and that this is the only solution for removing the inequalities. I now believe that 'essentially Adivasi' is more of a mental frame – a matter of values and beliefs – rather than an 'ethnic' identity. So, I imagine some of the non-Adivasis may like to move closer to nature as Adivasis in remote villages are, while some of the Adivasis will move into urban middle class. There is no harm if the borders slacken. The induction of Adivasis in the riots in Gujarat was a political advantage drawn upon the newly emergent desire to sanskritize. But far more important is the fact that at the root of their unfortunate involvement in riots was their being lured by the money-lenders to whom they were indebted. Much of the 'involvement' was under coercion and not as a clear acceptance of the politics of hatred and violence. Soon after the riots, in the Assembly elections, the percentage of the Adivasi vote to the rightwing party was way below what it won in the urban centers.

**RC** And what about the very delicate religious question, both with regard to Hinduization and Christianization of Adivasis and their episodic involvement in religious fundamentalism?

**GD** The worst loss of Adivasis due to the transition through which they are passing is the erosion of their idea of the sacred. They have not known organized religion. They have not known patterns of worship where a godhead or a god's representative is cased within a man-made building, a temple or a church. For them, being with nature in itself has been a form of worship. When they shift to faiths with a different idea of prayerfulness, the most inspiring notions of sanctity and divinity preserved in their practice, memory and word run the risk of being wiped out. But as affiliation to various other religions in the country imply political affiliation too, by and large, the Adivasis who lose their own moorings tend to free-wheel and gravitate close to those religious groups that have a political ascendancy. Alas!

**RC** Gender is another topic which seems relevant with regard to the social pressures which the Adivasis are experiencing nowadays. Is it true that the regime of relative freedom and social dignity that, at least in some groups, the Adivasi women were able to enjoy is increasingly threatened by new forms of gender discrimination deriving, at least in part, from caste politics and the fact that women are easily targeted by police repression or political organizations trying to make electoral inroads among the Tribals by every possible means, intimidation and rape not excluded?

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**GD** The most conspicuous is the fact that Adivasis whose land is reduced (every passing generation) due to indebtedness, unfair practices of external agents, multiplication of claims on land within the family, tends to treat the woman's body as a replacement of land. I have known hundreds of Adivasi young women who were asked to shift to the nearby cities, just a day after their weddings, and get working on construction sites. This is done, apparently, to recover the sum of dowry paid by the bridegroom to the girl's family. But, in effect, the girl becomes a construction labourer and has to work in harsh conditions till the sum is gained from her wages. The body has now replaced land as a means of production. This situation has come to a boiling point and may soon explode in the form of a movement for women's rights. I hope it does and changes the situation of the Adivasi women. I have spoken to a large number of Adivasi men to pay attention to this issue; but normally I have met with a cold reception from them, even those whom I have known as friends and colleagues for two decades. Perhaps, an external feminist leadership is required.

#### Between development and 'slow violence': economic/ecologic issues

**RC** In post-liberalization India, the traditional areas of tribal settlements have increasingly become key sites of economic development and infrastructural modernization. To make way for industrial corridors, mega-dams, extractive installations or parks, that essentially benefit transnational corporations and the metropolitan elites, tribal communities are continuously displaced and, without a serious relocation policy, very often left completely deprived of their livelihoods. Bonded labor, begging, pilfering, and prostitution are common ensuing phenomena. Besides, another effect of 'development' is that kind of delayed destruction, which contaminates habitats and affects the very possibility of survival, defined by Nixon<sup>1</sup> as slow violence: a violence that occurs gradually and usually out of sight because perpetrated in rural areas and without media coverage. In all this, do you think that the role of the forest tribes is only that of casualties, or do you believe that, defending themselves and their lands, they could possibly become active actors of a new conception of sustainable progress, respectful of environment but at the same time also of their economic needs? I mean, don't you think that to fight against the exploitation of natural resources without being able to provide new schemes of ecological development is too weak a position, liable to be easily defeated? Don't you think that in the future of Adivasis there should be a key role for technology? On the other hand, is it true that sometimes Adivasi people have found themselves in the position to compete with protected species and protected areas for their livelihood? What's your position in relation to this sort of apparent contradiction?

<sup>1</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard U. P., 2011).

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**GD** I am acutely aware of how severely marginalized and cornered the Adivasis feel in the context of a market driven and globalised economy that has multiplied inequalities of all kinds. I have seen at close quarters the devastation caused by the sheer incompatibility between the tribal ethics and the modern economics. In the case of tribals (as in the case of Scheduled Castes and farmers), the intolerance is embedded in the economic outlook. But despite several thousand farmer suicides, the long-standing rural distress does not attract sufficient attention, and any movement of tribals gets to be labeled as ‘anti-national’ and at once caricatured as ‘Naxalite’ and dealt with brutally.

However, I do not think that violent opposition is the only means of opposition with the tribals. I firmly believe – and I have put this belief at the centre of all my work with the Adivasis – that violence can generate only a counter-violence and one that is far more destructive. On the other hand aping the caste India can lead Adivasis to a complete destruction of their own culture(s). Therefore, it would be best to start building the Adivasi communities from within, to make them self-reliant, not dependent on government patronage or NGO alms. The ability of the Adivasis for deciding for themselves has to be enhanced. Let them decide what is good for them and what is not good. Then they will be able to cope *on their own terms* with the challenges and stress created by the market led modernity. Sooner or later this must happen. Sooner the better as they are rapidly running out of time.

### **Beyond Cultural Aphasia. Performing Indigeneity: Opportunities and Dangers**

**RC** In the *People’s Linguistic Survey of India*, the first comprehensive survey of Indian languages in postcolonial period you supervised, you declared that, among other things, language is a marker of the welfare of a community. Bringing attention to Indian languages with small numbers of speakers, you said, is a way of bringing attention to the societies that speak them, along with the wellbeing of their people. With reference to the Nomadic communities, what could you say in particular about the status of health of their languages and of their cultural identities?

**GD** The languages of the nomadic communities in India are among the most affected by the identity issues of these communities. Imagine any stigmatized community. The first thing that the community likes to do in order to secure its survival is to try and conceal its identity. Language is an identity marker for any community, but for nomadic communities it works as an identity marker far more pervasively. When these communities try to conceal their identity in order to escape the stigma attached to them as ‘criminal communities’, one of the most obvious steps they take is to avoid using their language in the presence of an outsider. Thus they use a state language (other than their own) for all activities in which anyone from outside the community is involved, as in the market place,

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school, public places, etc, and they use their own language only among themselves, as a kind of a 'code language'. The natural consequence is that their own languages are getting skeletal by the day. In some of the languages of the nomads, the speakers are not able any longer to mention names of all the seven days of the week or name more than two or three color terms. Linguists will describe this condition of language as 'severe endangerment'. Recently, as I was preparing the People's Linguistic Survey in Maharashtra, I came across nearly a dozen DNTs (Denotified and Nomadic Tribes) that had great difficulty in recalling even a single song from their oral tradition. Maybe, about half a century ago, they had numerous songs and stories used on all occasions and social functions. This is so sad. This imposition of silence on those communities, forced because the stigma is not by their own choice – I call 'aphasia'. Alas, so many languages are facing this threat. When the languages of communities are treated as a liability, the communities too tend to become economically further disempowered. One marginalization adds upon another, cumulatively turning such people into 'the scum of the world'. Whose life is worse than that of beasts. This is a 'lived experience' of the communities and far more worrisome than a 'painful' theoretical position.

**RC** The predominance of orality in Adivasi culture and the lack of official institutions adopting tribal idioms for their activities seem to condemn the tribes to a condition of growing cultural aphasia. On the other hand, since Independence, tribal cultural heritage has repeatedly been paraded in state rituals such as the Republic Day celebrations or exhibited in state-sponsored institutions such as tribal arts museums or festivals. The existence of specific forms of knowledge and the relevance accorded to the arts are usually seen as the distinct mark of tribal contribution to the cultural mosaic of the nation. But, while for long Adivasi culture has been the passive object of ethno-anthropological inquest, more recently it has also become the privileged object of narration of artists who are also political activists, like Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, Laxman Gaikwad and many others, interested in defending Adivasi way of life. What is more interesting is that nowadays it seems that many Adivasi artists are increasingly taking upon themselves the task of representing their worldview and asking, more than in the past, for a specific artistic recognition. I am referring to a whole range of experimentations with video making and art cinema, or the output of a new literacy emerging from orality, generated for instance after the textualization of tribal societies in the wake of Christianity, like in the North East.<sup>2</sup> But above all I am thinking of the performing and dramatic arts and the visual arts in which the Tribals seem to find their favored form of expression. See for example the great success of *Warli* art at global level. Could you explain why? And tell us something about the role of the arts in your work with the Adivasis? And finally what do you think about those who see in the national and sometimes international success of

<sup>2</sup>Specifically on this: Margaret Ch. Zama, ed., *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India: The Dynamics of Culture, Society and Identity* (New Delhi: Sage, 2013).

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Adivasi artists, mostly painters, the danger of an evisceration of their cultural authenticity under the threat of commodification and desecration?<sup>3</sup>

**GD** In 1998, I went to the Chhara ghetto (*Chharas* are a denotified community). Mahasveta Devi was with me. This locality is situated on the outskirts of Ahmedabad (not too far from the Sabarmati Ashram where Mahatma Gandhi lived from 1917 to 1930). No one from the city of Ahmedabad was willing to accompany me as the Chhara locality (*Chhara-nagar*) was seen as a den of crime. That was the stereotype. With very great difficulty, we could enter the ghetto. On repeated visits, I could manage to make a few friends there. These were young men and women. When I asked them if they required anything as a gift from me, they responded asking for a library. We managed to create a small library in one of the houses there. At that time we were fighting for compensation for the widow of a tribal killed in police custody. The Chharas created a play (in the street theatre genre). It became a new sensation in the theatre world. As they performed again and again, the group of actors widened. The *Budhan Theatre* took birth. Over the last 18 years, this theatre has performed regularly and a wide range of plays including the Italian Dario Fo and the French Jean Genet. Hundreds of small groups spread over many cities throughout India have gone to them to learn theatre from them. A few of their actors have graduated from the National School of Drama, some have gone to England for training (and returned to their own theatre), some have taken to film production. Dakxin, the lead person of *Budhan Theatre* won the *National Human Rights Commission's National Award* for his autobiographical book (*Budhan Bolta Hai*) last year. Today, the world looks at Chharas as artists and not as criminals. Several research dissertations and books and articles have been written on the *Budhan Theatre*. For me, to be the cause for creation of the *Budhan Theatre* has been a source of immense satisfaction and a continued inspiration. So, indeed, theatre, performance, cinema – these are the means by which the expression of pain of the DNTs can be turned into a creative energy that can challenge and change the society (without taking recourse to the violent ways of the Naxalites).

<sup>3</sup>Rashmi Varma, "Primitive Accumulation: The Political Economy of Indigenous Art in Postcolonial India", *Third Text*, 27.6 (2013), 748-761.

**RC** Could you tell us something about the 'Adivasi Academy' experience?

**GD** Over the last two decades, the Adivasi Academy has carried out several experiments in the area of Adivasi development. It has initiated major policy debates in relation to the economic, social and cultural rights of the DNTs and the Adivasis. However, the vision inscribed in these experiments has always been that of the communities themselves. The campaigns and the enterprises were more oriented towards generating the process of self-reliance rather than achieving quantitative success. There has been a conscious attempt at recovering the cultural memory of the nomadic and Adivasi communities, and investing it into economic and social dynamics in such a way that culture could be 'monetized'. These

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experiments have, from time to time, faced the orthodoxy of funding agencies in that the ‘projects’ that could not promise a direct economic output were rarely supported by them. This has, however, been seen by the Adivasi Academy as an opportunity to become self-reliant rather than as a stumbling block in ‘development’. It is therefore that the Adivasi Academy has not stopped functioning even for a day despite long spells of having no external funding support. Irrespective of the nature of the interventions, each and every intervention has been fully owned by the Adivasi and the DNT community for which it was conceptualized. This is probably the most significant and ‘valuable’ feature of the Academy’s experimentation. It can therefore be replicated in the context of any community in the world which faces lack of access and marginalization. Similar experiments elsewhere, taken together with the learning at the Adivasi Academy, will help us in developing the precise method of working out the conversion between economic capital and social capital.

**RC** Prof. Devy let me ask you one last question. In your letter to the *Sabitya Akademi* returning the 1993 Award given to your book, *After Amnesia*,<sup>4</sup> you write “I do this as an expression of my solidarity with several eminent writers who have recently returned their awards to highlight their concern and anxiety over the shrinking space for free expression and growing intolerance towards difference of opinion”. To what particular conditions of “shrinking space for free expression” were you referring to?

**GD** Writers like Perumal Murugan had to publicly declare that he would cease writing. Thinkers like Narendra Dabholkar and M. M. Kalburgi were shot dead. Activist Govind Pansare was killed similarly. Those who protested were hackled or humiliated in a variety of ways. Any public statement in favour of tolerance and inclusiveness of diversity at once generates massive ridicule in social media with trolls forcing many to withdraw from the FB or Twitter. Faces of speakers are blackened publicly to silence them and to terrify their audiences, artists are told to march off to another country if they even murmur protest – all these together lead me to say that free expression has become difficult, a dispassionate and rational view of events in the country is under attack and any dissenting view is an invitation to getting ridiculed.

The sudden outburst of anguish from so many writers and artists has taken the country by complete surprise. It has occupied substantial media space and engaged the curiosity of citizens. Various political parties have commented on it by placing themselves as allies or adversaries. But the most important element of the *Indian Writers Discontent* (IWD) is that it is not an organized movement, nor a conspiracy. One of the politicians commented that this is an engineered disaffection for the state with backing from a political party. This view has the fatal flaw in understanding of the IWD as a social or a political movement. It is neither.

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The writers who responded to this suddenly manifest cultural impulse are not from any single political background or affiliation. What matters the most is their emphasis on the increased intolerance in social life. In my statement sent to the Sahitya Akademi I have described them as “writers and thinkers who have come forward to rescue sense, good-will, values, tolerance and mutual respect. The great idea of India is based on a profound tolerance for diversity and difference. They far surpass everything else in importance”.

At the heart of our great democracy is the idea of diversity and respect for that diversity. Respect for those who are not like oneself requires an ability to listen to different voices, a high level of tolerance. Democracy can be deepened by tolerance, and conversely it can be weakened by intolerance. Civilization can be enriched by respect for life and other ways of looking at life. Writers today have stood up to remind the country that weakening the foundations of democracy will be at our own peril.

**RC** Thank you very much.