

India on My Mind

Reflections on Politics, Democracy &
History

Uday Balakrishnan

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Foreword

I am delighted to see this collection of articles by Uday Balakrishnan becoming available to a broad readership and thank Uday for asking me to write the Foreword.

I first met Uday in his capacity as Registrar of the Indian Institute of Science (IISc); he had taken charge of this onerous responsibility on lien from the Indian Postal Service. I had to go to see him numerous times to sort out one bureaucratic problem or another. I have generally had complicated relationships with bureaucrats, not because any of them were difficult persons but because bureaucrats have tied those they are supposed to serve as well as themselves in so many intertwined knots that no one really knows how to begin to untie them. My bureaucrat friends have repeatedly reminded me of JBS Haldane's lament "is the intolerable conditions imposed by bureaucrats, and not the low salaries or the lack of equipment, which cause so many Indians to take up posts abroad"¹. But Uday was refreshingly different. He solved all my problems sometimes at the cost of annoying his superiors, and especially his subordinates.

I soon discovered the secret to Uday's style of administration. He was an academic and an intellectual in the garb of a bureaucrat! I found that he published interesting articles in the newspapers; I especially enjoyed his insightful book reviews, peppered with a vast knowledge of history and politics. Then I began to meet him with some bureaucratic problem as an excuse, and we spent hours discussing everything but administration. It was clear to me that Uday needed to have more opportunities to write, and

better still, to teach. When I founded the Centre for Contemporary Studies (CCS) in 2004², I saw an opportunity. Even before he left the post of Registrar I invited Uday to become a Fellow at CCS. In addition to being very helpful for me to run CCS, Uday later began his second career as a full-time academic and teacher.

When the IISc embarked on an undergraduate programme and agreed to include Humanities in the curriculum, CCS offered to take charge of teaching Humanities³. We designed and taught six courses to students majoring in the natural sciences⁴. Of these, one was Uday's. He designed and taught for several years, a very popular course which he called Introduction to Governance In India.

In this course, Uday not only taught the structure and function of government in a democracy but also amalgamated the principles of public policy and the facts of contemporary history, in his inimitable way. One of the most unusual and innovative features of his course was that he brought into the classroom as guest speakers, retired administrators, formerly in high positions in the government, police, intelligence agencies, judiciary and even members of Parliament. The students would then interrogate these distinguished speakers in a way that only innocent undergrads can.

The articles in this collection grew out of Uday Balakrishnan's lectures to undergraduate students at the IISc. When they appeared in newspapers, they were already taking his scholarship well beyond the classroom. Now, with their reincarnation as a book, they will be accessible in an

even more comprehensive and long-lasting manner. As the title of the collection testifies, the topics covered reflect Uday Balakrishnan's very personal engagement with India's contemporary history and politics. Uday's writings occupy a rare intermediate landscape sandwiched between academic rigour and detachment on the one hand and heartfelt gut feelings and lived experience, on the other.

Grouped into six sections: Tolerance, Accommodation, Contrition; The Struggle To Be A Nation; Faces In History; Our Worrisome Neighbours; Totalitarianism; Power & Control; and Economics: The Human Dimension, there are 64 essays in this collection. They can be read with pleasure by anyone. You can tell that these essays grew out of a teaching effort, Reading these essays does not require any specialized knowledge or expertise; instead, readers will come away with considerable experience and knowledge, after reading them. Secondly, the nature of this genre of essays is such that you don't have to agree with all that the author says—indeed, that would be boring. Instead, reading them helps you put your finger on precisely what you might disagree with and why, and also what you might agree with and why.

I hope this collection is read widely and helps perpetuate the culture of teachers opening their classroom to the whole world.

1. Clark, R. J. B. S.: The Life and Work of J. B. S. Haldane. (Oxford University Press, 1984).

2. Gadagkar, R. What 's happening at the Centre for Contemporaries Studies and Why? Voices: Raise Your Voice, Let Yourself be Heard! Student Magazine of IISc. 1 (2008).

3. Ramaswamy, K. Centre for Contemporary Studies: A case for humanities. *Connect* vol. 2 15–20 (2015).

4. Gadagkar, R. & Niranjana, T. The Integrated Science Education Experiment. Centre for Contemporary Studies (CCS)-Indian Institute of Science and Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS), 2006-14. in *Breaking the Silo: Integrated Science Education in India* (eds. Dhar, A., Niranjana, T. & Sridhar, K.) 38–64 (Orient Black Swan Private Limited, 2017).

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