

Re-Imagining India: A Critical Analysis of Javed Akhtar's 2017 TED Talk

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Abstract: A renowned poet, lyricist, and social commentator Javed Akhtar's TED Talk was delivered in 2017, offered a compelling vision for the future of India. The theme of the talk was on the deeply rooted perspectives in the Indian society, such as pluralism, diversity, and the progressive ideals enshrined in its Constitution. In this talk, Akhtar, explored the critical challenges facing by Indian society, such as intolerance, religious dogma, and social division. He called for the re-imagination of India, has urged the citizens to embrace the secular and inclusive principles that define the nation's democratic ethos.

This paper critically examines Akhtar's argument, situating it within the historical and contemporary context of Indian society. It explores the themes of nationalism, secularism, and identity, and evaluates how Akhtar's vision contributed to the ongoing discourse on India's future. Through a close reading of his talk, this research seeks to understand the potential for a re-imagined India, one that transcends religious and cultural barriers to build a more harmonious, progressive, and equitable society.

Key Words: Javed Akhtar, Re-imagining India, Secularism, Nationalism, Diversity, Pluralism, TED Talk.

1. INTRODUCTION :

TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Talks, founded in 1984, is a global platform dedicated to the dissemination of "ideas worth spreading." Initially a conference that brought together experts in the fields of technology, entertainment, and design, TED has since expanded its scope to include a vast range of topics such as science, art, culture, politics, and social issues. The TED format typically features short, powerful talks—usually 18 minutes or less—that aim to inspire, inform, and provoke thought on a global scale. TED Talks are made available online for free, enabling them to reach millions of viewers in the worldwide.

Over the years, TED has become a significant cultural phenomenon, hosting influential speakers such as former U.S. President Bill Clinton, writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and entrepreneur Elon Musk. TED's global reach and diverse range of topics have made it a powerful tool for sparking conversations, encouraging innovation, and promoting social change. The platform's ability to address complex issues in an accessible and engaging manner has made it an invaluable resource for people seeking to understand the world from multiple perspectives. Through TED Talks, speakers can present their ideas to a global audience, influencing public discourse and inspiring action across various fields of human endeavours.

Javed Akhtar, in his 2017 TED Talk titled "*Re-imagining India*" presented a powerful and thought-provoking vision for the future of India, one that emphasizes the need to reclaim the country's secular, pluralistic, and democratic values. As an influential public intellectual, Akhtar uses his platform to highlight the growing challenges of religious intolerance, cultural insularity, and rising nationalism that threaten to divide Indian society. Drawing upon India's rich tradition of intellectualism, cultural diversity, and historical legacy, Akhtar called for a re-imagining of the nation, one that reasserts the values of its founding fathers and embraces diversity as a core principle.

This paper tries to analyse Akhtar's 2017 TED Talk and examines its relevance to contemporary discussions about India's identity, democracy, and the direction the country is heading. By placing Akhtar's ideas in the context of India's historical evolution and current political climate, this paper also aims to uncover the deep connections between his vision and the ongoing challenges that India faces in its future.

2. The Central Themes of Javed Akhtar's TED Talk:

2.1. Secularism and Pluralism: India's Constitutional Promise

Akhtar's TED Talk is rooted in a deep belief in India's secular and pluralistic values. He underscores the importance of secularism as an essential principle that binds the diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic communities in the country. For Akhtar, secularism is not just a political doctrine but a way of life, one that acknowledges and celebrates the multiplicity of identities within India.

Akhtar critiques the rising wave of religious intolerance and the dangers of religious majoritarianism that threatens to undermine India's secular fabric. He argues that secularism is not a threat to religion but is, in fact, a safeguard that ensures the freedom of all religious groups. He invokes India's founding principles as enshrined in the constitution, which affirms the nation's commitment to diversity, equality, and justice for all. By emphasizing the need for secularism, Akhtar called on Indian citizens to reclaim the inclusive spirit that is central to the country's identity. India's Constitution, drafted in 1949, represents a progressive blueprint that recognized and respected the country's rich diversity. Akhtar draws on this foundational document to argue that India must continue to honour its secular nature, which guarantees equal rights to all citizens, regardless of religion, caste, or ethnicity.

2.2. Nationalism: A Rejected Form of Exclusivism

A significant theme in Akhtar's talk is the critique of the current rise in religious and ethnic nationalism. He expresses concern about a narrow, exclusionary form of nationalism that defines India in terms of religious or cultural homogeneity. This brand of nationalism, he argues, poses a threat to the pluralistic and inclusive values that have historically defined India.

Akhtar acknowledges that nationalism can be a force for unity, but he warns against using it as a tool for division. He cites the dangerous shift towards majoritarian politics, where religious identity becomes the defining feature of what it means to be Indian. He points to the rise of divisive rhetoric and the marginalization of minority communities as symptoms of a larger problem. In this context, Akhtar advocates for a form of nationalism that is rooted in the idea of India as a diverse, multi-religious, and multi-cultural society, rather than one that privileges any single identity or religion.

The idea of nationalism in Akhtar's talk challenges the growing influence of Hindu nationalist movements, which, in his view, are reinterpreting India's identity in ways that exclude non-Hindu communities. For Akhtar, a re-imagined India must embrace a nationalism that is inclusive, based on shared values of democracy, secularism, and human rights, and free from the narrow confines of religious identity.

2.3. Cultural Identity and the Politics of Memory

Akhtar also delves into the politics of cultural identity and how it is shaped by historical narratives. He speaks about the need to reclaim India's rich cultural heritage, which he believes has been distorted or misrepresented by contemporary political forces. Akhtar warns against the manipulation of history to serve political ends, particularly in terms of religious identity and cultural purity.

In his talk, Akhtar stresses that India's identity is inherently plural. He draws on the nation's historical traditions of syncretism, where diverse cultures, religions, and philosophies have coexisted and influenced one another. The notion of a singular, homogeneous cultural identity, he argues, is a construction that serves to divide and alienate. Instead, he advocates for an inclusive narrative that celebrates India's multi-faceted identity.

Akhtar's critique of the politics of memory also touches on the current efforts by certain political factions to reinterpret India's history in ways that favour a particular religious or cultural perspective. This revisionism, according to Akhtar, threatens to erase the pluralistic traditions that have historically defined the Indian subcontinent.

2.4. India's Future: Moving Forward with Progressive Values

At the heart of Akhtar's TED Talk is a call to action, one that encourages citizens, especially the youth, to take ownership of India's future. Akhtar believes that a re-imagined India must embrace progressive values, including social justice, gender equality, and the protection of individual rights. He emphasizes the role of education and critical thinking in shaping the future of India, urging the younger generation to push back against narrow, divisive ideologies.

Akhtar's vision for India is one where democratic principles are strengthened, and secularism is not just a constitutional mandate but a lived reality, and where diversity is not only accepted but celebrated. He encouraged people to think critically about the direction the country is heading and to work collectively towards a future where India's pluralism is seen as its greatest strength, rather than a challenge to its unity.

3. Contextualizing Akhtar's Vision: The Political and Social Landscape of India

To appreciate Akhtar's vision of re-imagining India, it is important to situate his ideas within the broader political and social context of the country. In recent years, India has witnessed a rise in religious and cultural nationalism, particularly with the rise of Hindu nationalist movements that advocate for a vision of India defined by Hindu religious identity. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), have been associated with promoting such a vision, which has sparked debates about secularism, religious freedom, and minority rights.

In this context, Akhtar's TED Talk serves as a counter-narrative to the growing influence of Hindu nationalism, advocating for a vision of India that upholds the values of democracy, inclusivity, and secularism. His call for a re-imagined India is not just a philosophical exercise but also a political statement aimed at preserving the core principles that India's founding fathers envisioned. These principles, rooted in the ideas of equality, justice, and pluralism, remain a critical point of reference for those who seek to navigate India's evolving identity in a changing global landscape.

4. CONCLUSION :

Javed Akhtar's 2017 TED Talk offers a powerful and timely reflection on the state of India's democracy and identity. Through his critique of rising religious nationalism, Akhtar calls for a re-imagining of India that reaffirms its commitment to secularism, pluralism, and democratic values. His talk serves as a reminder that India's strength lies not in its homogeneity but in its diversity, and that the country's future must be rooted in the values of inclusion, social justice, and equality.

In re-imagining India, Akhtar invites citizens to reclaim their shared history, to resist divisive ideologies, and to work together towards a future where every individual, regardless of their religion or background, is afforded equal opportunities to thrive. As India continues to navigate the challenges of modernity and globalization, Akhtar's vision remains an important guide for those seeking to shape a more inclusive, democratic, and progressive society.

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