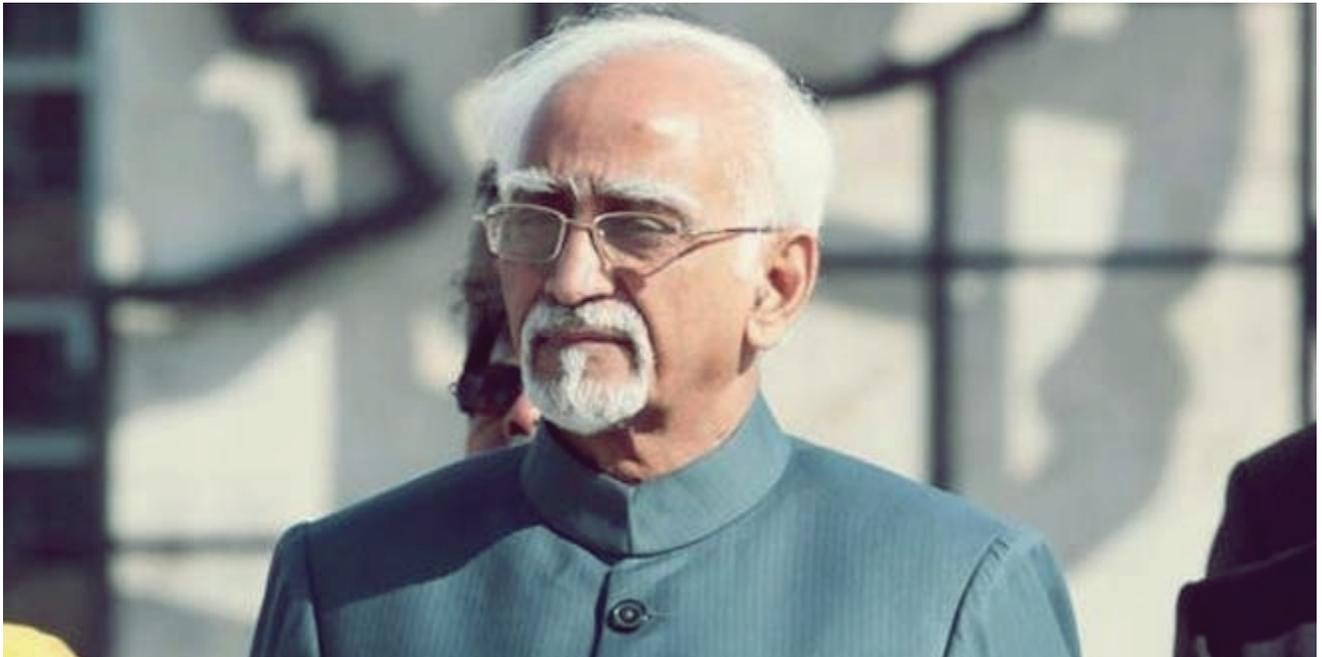


Book Review: Fighting for an India Under Communal Assault

The scholar that he is, former vice president Hamid Ansari explains most lucidly what is wrong with India today – and why – and what one can expect in the future.



Former Vice President Hamid Ansari. Photo: Reuters

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The spirited intellectual response to the communal poison trying to wipe out a liberal India could not have come from anyone more qualified. After holding the post of vice president for two terms, Mohammad Hamid Ansari could well have become India's second Muslim President but for the 2014 Lok Sabha victory of the BJP. The scholar that he is, Ansari explains most lucidly what is wrong with India today - and why - and what one can expect in the future.

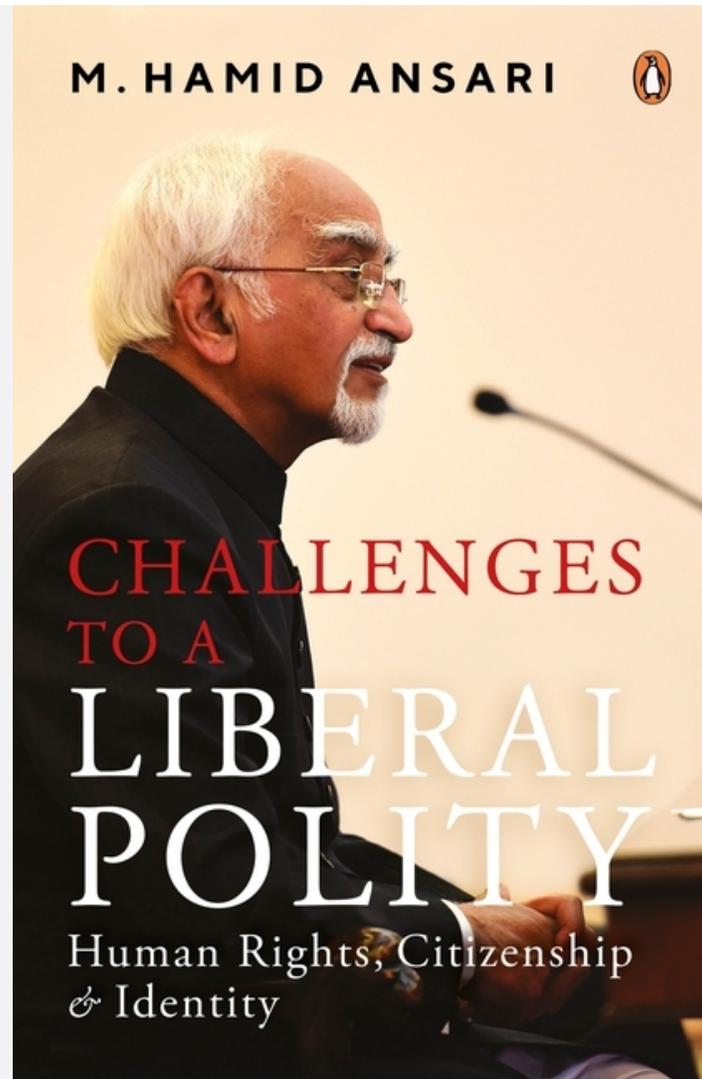
The challenge to India's known and widely respected liberal polity is both ideological and practical, says the former diplomat who was the ambassador to the UAE, Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The former is more dangerous: it requires a careful examination of the philosophical backdrop, ideological pronouncements and terminological sophistry of the political hypothesis that succeeded in the elections of both 2014 and 2019, leading to an imagined and sought-to-be-imposed version of cultural homogeneity.

Is it patriotism? Nationalism perhaps? Nationalism itself can be of two kinds. Liberal nationalism requires a state of mind that advocates tolerance and respect for diversity; but if nationalism places cultural commitments at its core, it will end up promoting intolerance and arrogant patriotism. One consequence of the latter is the much-lauded acts of vandalism presented as "cultural regeneration".

Also Read: [Nationalism and Patriotism: Words of 'Unstable and Explosive Content'](#)

For someone who was a core part of the political system, a job profile that made him oversee the Rajya Sabha for 10 long years, Ansari laments in this collection of writings and speeches - spread from 2002 to 2021 - that we have a system of governance within the framework of a functioning constitution but parts of it seem to be partially dysfunctional. The last few years have shown that mere

statements of foundational principles have little impact on state practice.



M. Hamid Ansari

Challenges to a Liberal Polity: Human Rights, Citizenship and Identity
Penguin/Viking (August 2022)

India for centuries has been a kaleidoscope of religions, cultural practices and languages even if these often ran into serious and at times mindless squabbles. Religious minorities, now sought to be put in their place by those who claim to be more Hindu than most Hindus, constitute a little over 20% of the country's population. Of this, 14.2% or

nearly 200 million are citizens of Muslim faith with a long and diverse history.

Ansari could smell some of the problems ahead of others. Writing in mid-2007 when few could have dreamt of an electoral revolution seven years away, he warned that there can be no stable equilibrium in any country so long as an attempt is made to crush a minority or to force it to conform to the ways of the majority. The same year, he warned that homogeneity is essentially a limiting concept, that diversity in society as in nature is a fact of life, and that the central challenge is not diversity but the management of diversity.

The diversity is of course more than real. India's religious minorities are almost 20% of the country's population - or in other words, every fifth Indian belongs to a religious minority. The total number of communities in the country is 4,635 which are diverse in biological traits, dress, languages, worship, occupation, food habits and kinship patterns. And besides the 22 languages listed in the [Eighth Schedule](#) of the constitution, there are 100 other languages and thousands of dialects in the country.

Speaking in 2013, Ansari worried that communal tensions appear to have re-emerged in different parts of the country, and the conclusion is inescapable that our communal fabric is under pressure. In August 2017, he underlined that tolerance maybe a virtue but it alone was not a strong enough foundation for building an inclusive and pluralistic society; it needed to be coupled with understanding and acceptance of the 'other'. Months later, after highlighting the dangers of the "poisonous haze of ignorance" and "unreasoned prejudice", Ansari asked: Can we visualise an India that is non-democratic, non-plural and non-secular?

The next year, by when he had stepped down as vice president, Ansari pointed out that historically religion has

been used to motivate, denigrate or divert attention from real issues. He also referred to “unease among minorities”. He turned to larger issues during a later talk: India was slipping in the World Press Freedom Index, and the Freedom House had dubbed the country “[partly free](#)”. As one more year passed, he spoke about the dangers of the law on [sedition](#) – which the government was frequently trapping its critics with.

As the BJP returned to power in 2019, Ansari called both religiosity – making it clear that religiosity is not religion – and strident nationalism undesirable. “Nationalism in its strident form is inseparable from the desire for power. It is an ideological poison that has no hesitation in transcending and transgressing individual rights.

2019 saw Ansari become more anguished about what ails India. “The India of today, I confess, appears to be a very different place in its perception, articulation and practice... Sections of opinion are purposefully involved in disowning the past, rewriting parts of it, and distorting it to create new idols and ideals.” He went on to ask: Has populism and demagoguery resulted from a lack of performance? After all, by now India was listed 130th in the Global Human Development Index and as the 12th most inequitable economy in the world. He also accused sections of the Indian media of scaling new heights of impropriety. “The mainstream media’s vulgarity has destroyed the norms of Indian democracy that once prevailed in the public domain.”

This is the same Ansari who, in 2015, told an audience in New Delhi that the Indian experience of a large Muslim minority living in a secular polity, however imperfect, could even be a model for others to emulate. Ansari perhaps was hopeful even as shadows of intolerance were becoming darker. He praised the Indian system even in 2018. But he warned – among other things – that the tendency to project

the Muslims as 'the new Other' - arising out of and resulting in intolerance - needed to be resisted and reversed. "Sanity demands that all of us pull back from the precipice and anchor thought and action on civic virtues national and global."

Ansari's frankness led to his vilification by those allied with the government. But his voice carries a lot of weight, both within and outside India.

M.R. Narayan Swamy is a veteran journalist.