INDIAN EXPERIENCE OF PLURALISM

ABSTRACT

This article explores the reasons for India's numerous ethnic, religious, and cultural groups living together peacefully. Jaishankar Narayanan traces it back to the vision of Vedas thousands of years ago, which permeates the culture and way of life of most Indians. Narayanan also argues that India's constitution supports pluralism.

JAISHANKAR NARAYANAN

Jaishankar Narayanan, a Sishya (Student) of Swami Dayananda Saraswathi, has undergone a three year residential course on Vedanta and Sanskrit at Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Anaikatti, India. He is married to Vidya, and lives in Chennai, India. He is working as the Joint Secretary of AIM for Seva, an NGO working in the field of Education, Health Care, Women's empowerment, Environment and Disaster Relief. He teaches Vedanta and Sanskrit to interested people in Chennai.

Pluralism is defined, as a condition in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious, or cultural groups are present and tolerated within a society and the belief that such a condition is desirable or socially beneficial. This pluralism has been manifest in India for many thousands of years. India is one of the most diverse nations in the world geographically, linguistically and ethnically. How did Indians of the past and the present live together with peace and respect for each other? The answer for this question lies in the vision of the Vedas, which permeates the culture and way of life of the majority of the Indians.

The Vedas proclaim that all that is here is a manifestation of the one reality, which we can call God. This God, who is manifest as this entire world of names and forms, can be called by different names and worshipped in different forms. Like a person can be called by different names by different people and he responds to all of them, similarly God accepts all forms of worship and prayer and responds. So all forms of worship are acceptable and valid. This vision of accepting and validating all forms of worship has been the main reason for Indians to be pluralistic. Thus India is the only country where the Jews were never persecuted and were allowed to live peacefully. It also has one of the largest populations of Parsee Zoroastrians who fled Iran hundreds of years ago.

Rajiv Malhotra while comparing India and Pakistan in his article in Sulekha.com says that India is a garland maker. I quote the following from that article.

"Be like a garland maker, O king; not like a charcoal burner."

—Mahabharata, XII.72.20

This famous statement from the Mahabharata contrasts two worldviews. It asks the king to preserve and protect diversity, in a coherent way. The metaphor used is that of a garland, in which flowers of many colors and forms are strung together for a pleasing effect. The contrast is given against charcoal, which is the result of burning all kinds of wood and reducing diversity to homogeneous dead matter. The charcoal burner is reductionist and destroys diversity, whereas the garland maker celebrates diversity.

Garland making and charcoal burning represent two divergent worldviews in terms of socio-political ideology. The former leads to pluralism and diversity of thought, whereas the latter strives for a homogenized and fossilized society in which dogma runs supreme.

India represents a long and continuous history of experimentation with garland making. A central tenet of dharma is that one's social duty is individualistic and dependent upon the *context*:

- To illustrate the context-sensitive nature of *dharma*, a text by Baudhayana lists practices that would be normal in one region of India but not appropriate in another, and advises that learned men of the traditions should follow the customs of their respective districts.
- Furthermore, the ethical views applicable also depend upon one's stage in life (*asramadharma*).
- One's particular position in society determines one's personal dharma (*svadharma*).
- The dharma has to be based upon one's personal inner nature (*svabhava*).
- There is even special dharma that is appropriate in times of distress or emergency (*apaddharma*).

Hence, anything resembling a universal or absolute social law (*sadharana*) is characterized as a last resort and not as a first resort - a fallback if no context can be found applicable.

Combine this with the fact that social theories (called *Smritis*) were *not* divine revelations as was the case in the Abrahamic religions, but were constructed by human lawmakers who were analogous to today's public officials. Hence, *all Smritis are amendable*, and indeed are inten-ded to be modified for each era and by each society. This is a very progressive social mandate, and to freeze Indian social norms is, in fact, a travesty based on ignorance.

This pluralistic social theory is deeply rooted in indigenous religions. In the Bhagavadagita (IX. 23-25), Krishna proclaims that the devotees who worship other deities are in fact worshipping Him; and that those who offer worship to various other deities or natural powers also reach the goals they desire.

Dr. P. V. Kane has researched ancient India's pluralism, and concluded emphatically that there was no state sponsored religious exclusivism. In particular, Kashmir's history of garland making spans several millennia. Its identity was not based on any religion. Kashmiris of all religions lived in harmony, and Kashmir was the incubator of Kashmir Shaivism, much of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, and Sufism. Kashmir's survival *as a garland making culture* is a crucial challenge to the future of pluralism in the world."

The Indian Constitution also recognizes pluralism as is evident from the Preamble to its Constitution:

> "WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens: JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation;"

The other characteristic of Indian society, which makes it diverse and plural, is the much-maligned Jati system. Jatis are endogamous groups, which are often characterized by the occupation of the members of the group such as barber or potter. There are thousands of Jatis in India and each Jati has its own customs, traditions, cuisine, arts, apparel etc. When people of different races invaded or migrated to India they were just assimilated as a different Jati. So there was no genocide in India, as in the case of the encounter of Europeans with Native Americans.

So India has always been a beacon of pluralism and it will remain so even in the future in spite of the recent prophesies of a clash of civilizations.