Forms of Multiculturalism and Identity Issues in India

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ABSTRACT

The author attempts to explain India's relative unity in the face of immense linguistic, religious, social and economic diversity. Despite being the world's second most populous country, India has managed to resist disintegration through the practice of multiculturalism. Bhattacharyya examines the ideological and political contributions of Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first Prime Minister, and the effect of federalism on minority interests.

Demographically speaking, India is the world's second largest country, and the most diverse, ethnically speaking. Despite her recent globalization and higher rates of growth, the country has remained poor and underdeveloped with massive unemployment, illiteracy, and regional imbalances in development, and is marked by large-scale social and economic inequalities and deprivations. Ethno-national conflicts, rooted in the above, have visited the country time and again (and still do), often demanding secession. The ugliest manifestations of these have routinely taken the form of communal riots. No wonder generations of scholars, both Indian and foreign, have predicted ever since her independence (1947) from British colonial rule, the country's imminent 'balkanization' and collapse. [Harrison, 1959; Kohli, 1991] Sadly though, 'balkanization' has occurred in the Balkans, and the multi-ethnic Soviet Union has disintegrated. By contrast, India's record of relative unity and integrity achieved within a shorter period of time and against many odds is remarkable indeed, particularly when viewed in relation to the various forms of lingering ethnic conflicts verging often on civil wars in parts of the so-called third world and developing nations. What is, then, the secret of India's relative unity and integrity? Kohli [2001], an authority on Indian politics, asked the question: when many less diverse and plural post-colonial states have failed, what is the secret of India's success? How does India survive as a 'nation'-state when the very national identity of the people is yet to be precisely defined? The basic argument of this article is that various forms of multiculturalism have been at work behind the country's relative success in unity and integrity as a state.

India's Diversity

India's population today is more than a billion, making it the second largest country in the world. India's diversity is proverbial. Although predominantly inhabited by the 'Hindus' (over 82%) who are regionally rooted, plural in beliefs and practices, and divided by castes, and languages, India's population also contains large proportions of Muslims (about 12%), Sikhs (1.94%), Buddhists (0.76%), Christian (2.34%), Jains (0.39%). [Census Report of India, 1991] The terms 'Hindi' and 'Hindus' should be distinguished. The term 'Hindi' refers to a language spoken by the single largest group of Indians (about 40%), while the term 'Hindu' refers to a religious community (or rather communities). Thus, all Hindi speakers are not Hindus, and all Hindus are not Hindi speakers.

Linguistically, India is no less diverse. It is the home of some hundred languages and dialects, and so far, 22 languages have been 'officially' recognized and placed under the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The speakers of these languages are in the millions, and mostly rooted territorially. It must, however, be mentioned that due to the migration of people of one area to another in search of jobs and opportunities, millions of speakers of language reside in areas linguistically different. For instance, about 9 million Bengalis live in areas of India outside of West Bengal, and Tripura (from whence they originate and are in the majority).

Once officially recognized, the constitution provides for the protection of that language as well as the group and its culture and traditions. Although Hindi, spoken by about 40% of the population, is the 'national' language, English is retained as the link language for official communication. Hindi is spoken predominantly in states such as Uttar Pradesh (demographically India's largest state), Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttarachal. There are, however, some anomalies in this official recognition of languages. For example, there are sizeable sections of the population, more particularly the aboriginal people, most notably in the Northeast (containing seven federal units), who are a majority in their locality but whose mother tongue is not yet 'officially' recognized due to the underdevelopment of the scripts. Also, there are states like Manipur in which the officially recognized language (i.e., Manipuri) is not used for official purposes since its script is not adequately developed.

The third aspect of India's ethnic diversity is its aboriginal population (known as tribals) numbering about 100 million, and spread all over the country, but mostly concentrated in the Northeast where five (Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Manipur) out of seven are tribal states, and the tribals constitute significant elements of the population in the remaining two states (Assam and Tripura). India's Northeast contains a large presence of political insurgency and extremism spearheaded by varied groups of tribals.

The last aspect of India's diversity, which, in fact, has added complexity to its diversity, is the significant presence of minorities in each region and state of India. This has been so despite decades of territorial reorganization of the federation aiming at congruity between ethnic identity and the political association/identity (District Council, Regional Council, or statehood within the federation). Each state and region of India is, indeed, a microcosm of India.

Multiculturalism: Ideological and Political

One major form that multiculturalism has taken in India and that has informed public policies of accommodation of diversity as ideological and political. The most recent federal debate in India, particularly since the late 1980s, has emphasized the multicultural underpinnings of political institutional arrangements. [Bhattacharyya: 2001] Historically speaking, India's anti-colonial nationalist leaders, by and large, swore by the country's multicultural reality, but it was Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first Prime Minister, whose thought on the issue proved decisive in giving it constitutional legitimacy, and most determined the policy framework in post-independence governance. Nehru was respectful of the traditional values and institutions of Indian society and of its contemporary diversity. He simultaneously recognized India's diversity, and emphasized 'unity in diversity'. In his own words:

> *'The diversity of India'… is tremendous; it is obvious. It lies on the surface and anybody can see it. It concerns itself with physical appearances as well as with certain mental habits and traits… Yet, with all these differences, there is no mistaking the impress of India.* [Nehru: 1946: 61-62]

Nehru's profound concern for the cultural plurality and the specificity of the situation, and his respect for the values involved in them were also reflected in his practical approach to governance. Commenting on the problems of integration in his state- and nation-building efforts with regard to various territorial units of the country, most notably in the Northeast, he advised the Chief Ministers in his *Letters to Chief Ministers* in the early 1950s not "to treat them by some single formula because they differ greatly among themselves. It seems obviously undesirable to deny them some kind of self-government or autonomy." [Nehru: 1986: 364] He simultaneously cautioned against any attempt at homogenization of different culturally specific people.

Nehru was not, however, opposed to assimilation because without it a nation could never be built, particularly in a society like India. But his idea of assimilation was not a forced or externally imposed one. He said that such an assimilation process would be developed by itself through education and contacts without any special efforts. In such a process, he emphasized, every care should be taken to retain the individuality of cultures, much of which was, for him, retainable. Clarifying further his ideas on the issue, he said that the people living in these areas should feel that they have perfect freedom to live their own lives according to their wishes and genius, and that India should signify to them as a protecting as well as a liberating force. He pointed out that the policy of the state was not to interfere with the affairs of the tribals but to offer them the largest measure of autonomy. [Nehru: 1985: 151-52]

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Nehru's approach to the problem of the management of ethnic conflicts, and to the issue of nation and state building was thus at once democratic and multicultural. It showed an acute sense of realism, accommodation and adjustment in state approaches to communities, and was an instance of 'modernity relativized' [Bhattacharyya: 2001] in a non-western context.

Multiculturalism: Federal

Since independence, federalism, and an ongoing federalizing process – the one which politically accommodates ethnic identity – has remained perhaps the most effective method of managing and resolving conflicts. Married to this method is democracy, which stipulates that the political association or institution (whether statehood, sub-statehood, or Tribal or Regional Councils) that ethnic groups may demand as the fulfilment of their identity needs (the constitution provides for such institutional measures) must be democratically based, and formed by the consent of the 'ethnic' electorate, and not to be something 'naturally' given. The story of statehood within the Indian federation since 1950 is the story of acquiescing to ethnic identity demands for political recognition, for autonomous powers within the federation, and for a more secure environment for the protection and maintenance of identity. It is no wonder that some scholars have tended to see Indian federalism and Indian multiculturalism as corollaries to each other. [Pant: 1998: 17] Carl Friedrich was one of the first scholars who recognized the growing strength of Indian federalism, and its capacity to increasingly differentiate itself:

> *India is clearly undergoing a federalizing process in the course of which federal diversity is increasing. It is… a recurrent feature of this process that in the course of democratizing of a society, regional and linguistic-cultural communities become more*

articulate and demand recognition in the form of a set of political institutions, including safeguards for the identity of the particular community. [Friedrich: 1968: 135-36]

Since the ethno-linguistic communities are, by and large, mostly territorially rooted, the territorial solutions in the form of different degrees of statehood have worked. Statehood and such other demands are predicated on collective or group rights of ethnic communities.

The constitution also provides for non-territorial protection of identity. It ensures the conservation and cultivation of such rights as fundamental rights of every citizen of India. Article 29 (1) says that any section of the citizens of India having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the fundamental right to conserve the same. This means that if a cultural minority wants to preserve its own language and culture, the state can not by law impose on it any other culture belonging to the majority of the locality. Both the religious and linguistic minorities are protected by this provision. The constitution also defines a positive, directional role for the state in this regard. It directs every state (federal units) to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education of children belonging to linguistic minority groups, and empowers the President to issue proper direction to any state (Art. 350 A). [Basu: 1997: 380]

The constitution not only provides for the protection of minority interests, but seeks to ensure that individuals belonging to minorities do not suffer from discrimination. Article 29(2) forbids any discrimination against any citizen on the basis of religion, race, caste or language in the matter of admission into educational institutions maintained or aided by the state. D.D. Basu, one of the leading constitutional experts in India, believed that this was a very wide provision in so far as the protection not only of religious but also of local or linguistic minorities was concerned. [Basu: 1997: 380] As far as the institutional means of protection and cultivation of minority culture is concerned, Arts 29(1) and 30(1) stipulate that minorities can establish and administer educational institutions of their own choice, and the state cannot compel them to attend educational institutions not to their liking. The Supreme Court, in a series of judgements over the years, has expanded the ambit of those provisions. [Basu: 1997: 381] When the aggrieved but territorially-rooted minorities have found the existing provisions of the constitution ineffective in protecting their identity within the existing state, they have taken recourse to statehood demands. The three recent cases of the creation of the states of Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttaranchal in 2000 have provided further proofs of the flexibility and adaptability of the state in accommodating newer forms of diversity. The flexible constitutional provisions for statehood (Articles 3-4) apart, the issue at stake was the political accommodation of the ethno-regional (including ecology) identity of the people rather than the linguistic one, which was the prevalent practice in state creation, in particular.

Indian Debate on Multiculturalism

Paradoxical though it may seem, the Indian debate on multiculturalism came rather late, taking shape not until the late 1990s, and the intellectual output is still meagre. [Bhargava, Bagchi and Sudarshan: 1999; Seminar: No. 484: 2002; Bhattacharyya, 2001; 2004] The most usual themes in multicultural debate, globally speaking, have also been recognized in the Indian debate: the need to have a stable identity, importance of cultural belonging, recognition and maintenance of difference [Bhargava, 1999: 1, 18]; the complex and thorny relation between the state and the community, especially the Muslim women [Bilgami, 1999: 164-211] (questioning the efficacy of liberalism when it concedes to the demands of various illiberal practices of Muslim personal law); powerlessness of the Indian secular state to cope with Muslim personal law reform [Chatterjee, 1994]; a radical critique of the Indian nation-state project of 'homogenization' and 'national integration' based on elite vision [Chandhoke, 2000: 26]; and forms of multiculturalism as state policy, and their role in nation and state building in the federal mode [Bhattacharyya, 2001; 2004], and so on. The various problems and limits of multiculturalism have also been highlighted by scholars: exclusion of 'others' from an 'essentialized identity'; over-emphasis on cultural particularity and the deepening divisions undermining the 'common foundation of a viable society'; aggressive community power over individual freedom and so on.

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Though largely sociological and normative in nature, the Indian debate on multiculturalism has raised questions about the place of minorities in the nation-state, and the vexed issue of community identities, as well as the structural limitations of the nation-state project in India and its implicit 'ethnic bias', what Singh calls the 'ethnic' content of democracy [Singh: 2000]. Even though the exact nature of India's 'national' identity may be suspect, the boundaries of the political community blurred, and – often empirically contestable – what is beyond dispute is that India has been relatively successful in resisting disintegration. The Indian debate has, largely, neglected this issue. This is largely a political question calling for, ultimately, a political recognition of identity.

Conclusion

India's social and cultural landscape is dotted with various movements for statehood rooted in political identity searches for communities. There are such movements as Harit Pradesh in western Uttar Pradesh, Vindhyachal in Madhya Pradesh, Telengana in Andhra Pradesh, Vidarbha in Maharashtra, Kodagu in Karnataka, Gorkhaland and Kamtapuri in West Bengal, and Bodoland in Assam. The political history of India since her decolonization has shown flexibility in politically accommodating the political needs of diversity. The outcome of the above is a complex political structure. Even as a federation, India has evolved complex multi-tiered federal institutions to respond to diversity. Parekh has rightly argued that "[e]very multicultural society needs to devise its own appropriate political structure to suit its history, cultural traditions, and range and depth of diversity." [Parekh: 2000: 193] The Indian multicultural debate needs to gain awareness of the political argument and rationality behind several institutional resolutions of identity issues in India since the early 1950s if it is to truly reflect on various forms of multiculturalism at work in India.

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