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## Towards Genuine Pluralism

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A motorcycle team from India's Border Security Force displays the message of "Unity in Diversity" during the 66th Republic Day Parade at Rajpath in New Delhi on January 26, 2015. File photo: S. Subramaniam. [The Hindu](#)

*Independent India was conceived as a celebration of indigenous diversity. Making the case for progressing from diversity to pluralism, M.A. Kalam, anthropologist and Professor of Applied Social Sciences, C.K. Prahalad Centre for Emerging India, Loyola Institute of Business Administration, Chennai, calls attention to the need to reverse the current majoritarian and unitary tendencies. Rewording the Preambular phrase to 'We the Peoples...' he writes, would recognise India's rich heritage of multiple thoughts and faiths coexisting in society, and reflect the nation as the 'salad bowl' that it is.*

## Introduction

**W**hen Pluralism is deliberated the other obvious concepts/notions that get invoked are Diversity and Multiculturalism. But can the latter two be synonyms for Pluralism? At first thought they may appear to be so. But a deeper insight shows that they indeed denote different thoughts and connotations, and do differ from Pluralism<sup>1</sup>.

While Diversity signifies the presence of different religious, linguistic, regional and other ethnic markers, as also different sexual orientations, and Multiculturalism too stands for almost a similar manifestation of cultural differences; pluralism goes beyond these. Before this analysis is taken any further, an examination of how plural India is has to be attempted. The reason for such an examination of pluralism in the Indian context, to start with, is because there is hardly any other country in the world that shows the kind of diversity that is obtained in India. Even if the international boundaries between the different countries in the African continent are broken down (most of these are straight-line borders between countries, drawn by the colonials who ruled in different parts there), and Africa is conceived of as a single country, still the diversity that is obtained there will fall short of what is come across in India in terms of religion, caste, regionalism, language, and so forth.

Political India as it is known today dates back, in a different earlier *avatar*, to 1956. Till India's Independence in 1947 (and until 1956), India was administered mainly through the three Presidencies, namely, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, with the capital in Delhi. Besides, these there were also 565 Princely States of various sizes, configurations, and dominions. To do away with the erstwhile Presidencies and restructure and form a new India the State Reorganisation Commission was set up, and on its recommendations emerged a varied Indian Union in 1956.

Though this 1956 carving out of States of the Indian Union on the recommendations of the State Reorganisation Commission is generally referred to as the linguistic division of the country; different criteria, in fact, were employed in the case of different regions and states, besides the linguistic criterion. For instance, for the Hindi-speaking States of central and north India various differentiating markers were thought of. And some of the other States, particularly in the northeast, were differentiated because of their numerous and unique tribal cultures and multitude ethnicities. Of course, quite a lot of time has elapsed from that 1956 exercise of the State Reorganisation Commission, and many larger States, particularly those that harboured multiple ethnic groups which felt they needed to have a separate State were allowed do so, for different reasons; in many a case after several movements and bitter struggles. For

instance, in the latest of such occurrences, the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh saw the emergence of Telangana State from within itself, though the language spoken predominantly in both the blocs is Telugu.

## **Pluralism**

A basic definition for Pluralism is that

[It] refers to a society, system of government, or organization that has different groups that keep their identities while existing with other groups or a more dominant group. Rather than just one group, subgroup, or culture dictating how things go, pluralism recognizes a larger number of competing interest groups that share the power. Pluralism serves as a model of democracy, where different groups can voice their opinions and ideas<sup>2</sup>.

Pluralism also signifies “a condition in which minority groups participate fully in the dominant society, yet maintain their cultural differences”, and “a doctrine that a society benefits from such a condition. Also, “cultural pluralism seeks to overcome racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination”<sup>3</sup>.

Encyclopaedia Britannica explains Pluralism as

[T]he view that in liberal democracies power is (or should be) dispersed among a variety of economic and ideological pressure groups and is not (or should not be) held by a single elite or group of elites. Pluralism assumes that diversity is beneficial to society and that autonomy should be enjoyed by disparate functional or cultural groups within a society, including religious groups, trade unions, professional organizations, and ethnic minorities<sup>4</sup>.

During the early twentieth century in England, Frederic Maitland, Samuel Hobson, Harold Laski, Richard Tawney, and George Douglas Howard Cole

[R]eacted against what they alleged to be the alienation of the individual under conditions of unrestrained capitalism.... Pluralists argued that some of the negative aspects of modern industrial society might be overcome by economic and administrative decentralization<sup>5</sup>.

## **Plural Societies: Nationality and Citizenship Issues**

Here, it is pertinent to draw on instances of plural societies from different contexts and examine how nations and nationalities are conceived of, as well as dealt with, in different contexts. In the erstwhile Soviet Union 15 Republics came together in 1922 and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was born. It survived for almost 70 years until its dissolution in 1991 consequent to the dissipation of the communist regime in the USSR. Peoples belonging to these fifteen Republics were nationals respectively of Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Belorussia, Uzbekistan, Armenia, and so on, but were all citizens of the USSR.

A contemporary example of something constructed on similar lines is the European Union which comprises of 28 member states. It is a politico-economic union, has a European Council, and a European Parliament. Peoples in the Union are European Union Citizens but are also, simultaneously, the nationals of their own respective countries such as France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and so on.

Different from the examples alluded to above, are instances of people belonging to a single nation being citizens of different countries. A classic example of this relates to the Bedouin who regard themselves as a single nation but are scattered over different North African Countries like Syria, Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Israel, and so on. Before the modern notions of countries and citizenship emerged the entire wide expanse of north Africa (as also many other parts of the world) did not have any international boundaries and till quite recently the Bedouin moved around and traversed the area without any restrictions; the international boundaries had little relevance to them. From the Bedouin point of view the emergence of international borders, and being forced to choose a citizenship where they should belong, is a strange and artificial way of confinement, and they subscribe to these notions with reservations and grudges.

An interesting example of how a nation could be conceived of is that of the Nation of Islam. During October 1995 Louis Farrakhan organised the Million Man March in Washington D.C., U.S. He pitched himself as a leader of the Nation of Islam. Though predominantly an African-American congregation, it included Muslims of other ethnic backgrounds and drew Muslims from various countries too. Also, many non-Muslim whites and coloureds participated in the rally.

In Pakistan the four main ethnic groups, namely, *Punjabis*, *Pakhtoons* (Pathans), *Baluchis*, and *Sindhis* regard themselves as different *qaum* (Urdu equivalent for nation, people, race,

tribe). *Muhajirs* (immigrants), principally Urdu-speaking migrants from India, particularly at the time of the partition of the country in 1947 and for a few subsequent years too, have for long demanded recognition as a fifth nation in Pakistan. At times, Pakistanis also refer to the different ethnic groups in Pakistan as *zaat* (nearest English equivalents being caste, race, kind, breed).

In South Asia, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh alone shows very little diversity linguistically as also religiously; more than 98 per cent speak Bangla, about 87 per cent are Muslims; the rest are Hindus and a sprinkling of tribes. On the other hand, India and Pakistan are so different and so complex.

Canada, in a cross-country comparison, is, unarguably, recognised as the country that has handled its pluralism in the best possible way politically, economically and culturally. Canada still allows immigration to the extent of about one per cent of its population, annually. The remarkable thing about Canada's multiculturalism is that 20 per cent of its population is foreign-born, with continuing streams of immigrants from different parts of the world. Yet, given the tremendous diversity it has succeeded to a high degree in integrating the various peoples, drawn from myriad religious, linguistic and ethnic contexts, with a low degree of conflicts, frictions and inter-cultural misunderstandings. One probable explanation is that unlike in many other country contexts, a sort of strong central religious and/or value culture is not deeply embedded in Canadian ethos though the core of early immigrants were of European extract.

### **Melting Pot and Salad Bowl**

No doubt the U.S. situation, as also that of the U.K., are often invoked to talk about the successes of these countries as regards their multicultural policies, and the allegories and metaphors of melting pot and salad bowl are advocated *ad nauseam*. Nevertheless, racism in both these countries raises its ugly head quite frequently. The melting pot metaphor was employed for long in the U.S. context and that was a clear indication towards the phenomenon of assimilation. But the intended, or hinted at, assimilation never happened and, as the joke goes, what melted was just the pot, not its components! Hence a revision of sorts occurred and the melting pot symbol gave way to the idea of a salad bowl. The salad bowl, to be sure, points towards an amalgamation, but the emphasis is not on assimilation but a degree of integration where the different constituents do not lose their identity in spite of coexisting with the others. The salad bowl analogy is relatively more acceptable than the erstwhile melting pot one, particularly so in academics, and among sociologists and social/cultural

anthropologists. Also, analytically, it is a good tool to have not just academically but also in the political realm.

### **The Pluralism Project**

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University was initiated in 1991. Diana Eck, who is associated with the well-thought out and significant initiative<sup>6</sup>, makes some erudite observations pertaining to this enterprise:

Over the past five decades, immigration has dramatically changed the religious landscape of the United States. Today, the encounter of people of different religious traditions takes place in our own cities and neighborhoods. [T]he Pluralism Project at Harvard University began a pioneering study of America's changing religious landscape. Through an expanding network of affiliates, we document the contours of our multi-religious society, explore new forms of interfaith engagement, study the impact of religious diversity in civic life, and contextualize these findings within a global framework<sup>7</sup>.

### **Eck elucidates further**

The plurality of religious traditions and cultures has come to characterise every part of the world today. But what is pluralism? Here are four points to begin our thinking:

- First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but *the energetic engagement with diversity*. Diversity can and has meant the creation of religious ghettos with little traffic between or among them. Today, religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not a given; it is an achievement. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies.
- Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.

- Third, pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another.
- Fourth, pluralism is *based on dialogue*. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. Dialogue does not mean everyone at the “table” will agree with one another. Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table -- with one’s commitments.

In her 2013 Lecture “From Diversity to Pluralism” Eck enlightens us further when she illustrates her thought by taking an example from the USA:

All of America’s diversity, old and new, does not add up to pluralism. “Pluralism” and “diversity” are sometimes used as if they were synonymous, but diversity—splendid, colorful, and perhaps threatening—is not pluralism. Pluralism is the engagement that creates a common society from all that diversity. For example, on the same street in Silver Spring, Maryland, are a Vietnamese Catholic church, a Cambodian Buddhist temple, a Ukrainian Orthodox church, a Muslim Community Center, a Hispanic First Church of God, and a Hindu temple. This is certainly diversity, but without any engagement or relationship among the different groups it may not be an instance of pluralism<sup>8</sup>.

### **Global Centre for Pluralism**

Besides the Harvard University initiative, we have another instance of an interesting enterprise geared towards emphasising what role pluralism should play in the contemporary cosmopolitan societies of the world. And this exercise was begun in Canada in 2011.

The Global Centre for Pluralism, Ottawa, believes, Pluralism

[E]mphasizes individual choices as well as collective compromise and mutual obligation as routes to peace, stability and human development. As such, the concept of pluralism speaks to the experiences of countries around the world regardless of the origins of their respective diversities<sup>9</sup>.

When Canada's population, and thereby its pluralism, is compared with that of India, some significant features are revealed: as pointed out above, nearly one-fifth of Canada's population, or 20 per cent of its citizens are born elsewhere, that is in countries other than Canada. About 50 per cent of Toronto's (Canada's largest city) population is foreign born. Hardly any other country or city in the world shows such extraordinary diversity. Whether we consider the whole of India or any of its larger cities, foreign-born population is negligible. But India's diversity, though made up entirely of its indigenous population is no doubt mind-boggling. Even if all the straight-line country boundaries, drawn by the various colonial rulers, between the different nations in the African continent are broken down, as already stated above, the diversity obtained there would not be as complex as what is found in India! But at the same time, it is to be recognised that this diversity is not due to India's foreign-born population in the sense that is obtained in Canada. This diversity, to a remarkably high degree can, and indeed has to be, seen as home-grown or indigenous.

Various religious, caste, ethnic and linguistic groups, with tremendous multicultural facets and features have lived together in India as neighbours and co-existed historically; such parallels are rare to non-existent in other parts of the world. Most other ancient civilisations with almost continuous habitations have not shown the kind of diversity India has harboured. Given that, a lot of people in India indulge in platitudes of the Unity in Diversity kind. Nevertheless, communal tensions do occur. Instead of working towards pluralism, India's politicians/leaders attempt to explain away communal disturbances in myriad ways, including the oft-repeated cliché for every action there is a reaction, and the like.

### **India and its nations**

In his convocation address <sup>10</sup> at the National Law School of India University, Bangalore, on August 6, 2017, Hamid Ansari, the then Vice President of India, made very perceptible observations as regards India's diversity and pluralism. He pointed out that India has over 4,635 communities, 78 per cent of whom are not just linguistic and cultural but social categories, and that India's religious minorities constitute 19.4 per cent of the total. Indianness, he said, "came to be defined not as a singular or exhaustive identity but as embodying the idea of layered Indianness, an accretion of identities". Ansari further clarified his ideas when he observed:

For many decades after independence, a pluralist view of nationalism and Indianness reflective of the widest possible circle of inclusiveness and a 'salad bowl' approach,



characterised our thinking. More recently an alternate viewpoint of 'purifying exclusivism' has tended to intrude into and take over the political and cultural landscape. One manifestation of it is 'an increasingly fragile national ego' that threatens to rule out any dissent however innocent. Hyper-nationalism and the closing of the mind is also 'a manifestation of insecurity about one's place in the world.'

Ansari held that "citizenship does imply national obligations. It necessitates adherence to and affection for the nation in all its rich diversity".

Madhavan Palat, former professor of History at the Jawharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, argues that India comprises nations <sup>11</sup>. What he is trying to convey is that India, as a Nation, is composed of multiple nations. He says

[T]he one nation is a composite nation of many nations, several types of nations, of regions that may or may not be nations, and of many possible nations; and all of them, both the one and the many, harbour two concepts of nation, the civic and the ethnic, or the secular and the communal. The civic or the secular implies that all inhabitants of the territory of the nation belong to the nation and vice versa; and the ethnic or the communal suggests that the nation is constituted by only one community. While the Indian nation is accepted, the regional nations seem to be only grudgingly acknowledged if at all (p 5).

Palat regards the different peoples of India as nations. In order to avoid confusion, it should be clarified here that one is not dealing here with citizenship but with nationality.

Palat, explicates his argument further when he says

Nearly every State of the Indian Union is a nation and is nationalist within itself to a surprising degree, and their nationalisms date from the late nineteenth century, coeval with the pan-Indian nationalisms, civic and ethnic. Each one is possessed of a territory that is clearly demarcated; an origin myth; a history peopled with heroes who furthered the cause of this nation and villains who endangered it; a language in most cases but with important exceptions; deriving from that history and language, a culture that is claimed to be unique; the political and cultural institutions of state and nation; a political and cultural leadership firmly in the saddle; and a dissemination of a national culture around these coordinates from the late nineteenth century followed by a political mobilization from the 1920s (p 7).

The thrust of Palat's argument is that while the country (India) is conceived of as a Nation the various constituents and regions have been designated as states of the union and not as nations.

## **Peoples of India**

The Preamble to the Constitution of India begins with "WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA ...." If it is acceded that India has nations, then we need to adopt the plural for the word People. The Preamble should instead declare "We, the Peoples of India...." The Constitution of India deals only with the issue of citizens and citizenship and does not delve into the realm of nations/nationality. Though over a 100 amendments have been made to the Constitution the aspect concerning plurality of the Indian people constituting nations, and conceiving them as nations, has hardly been debated either in Parliament or among academics or civil society. While it would be more prudent to recognise the plural nature of its peoples and comprehend India as comprising different nations, as things stand all citizens of India are perceived as a single nation.

But it does not mean that recognition of India as a combination of nations instead of just States necessarily make India plural.

## **Conclusion**

Given the atmosphere and the overt attempts that currently prevail, of mainstreaming Indian society, and the project of unitary religious/cultural representation driven by a Hindu nationalist fervour, of perceiving the peoples of the country as belonging to a single faith and as products of a single stock, it is imperative that such endeavours are nipped in the bud by advancing the processes of pluralism, and the provision of adequate space for diverse cultural streams that manifestly exist in our historical past and contemporary contexts. Given that globalisation is on and cosmopolitanism, as a process, is geared towards an increase in almost all cities and metropolises, there is no way in which diversity can ever decrease in India, or be made to decline. Hence diversity should be all embracing and is to be celebrated rather than decried or belittled.

Also, inclusiveness does not amount to dilution or doing away with ethnicity, identity, or cultural practices of the various diverse groups that all contribute towards making the dense mosaic – the Indian Union. Being embedded in the Union does not mean assimilation. It does in no way

resemble or is akin to a melting pot and should never be thought of on those lines. It may, at best, amount to a sort of integration. Nothing more than that. That is, a salad bowl sort of existence. Inclusiveness does not support or stand as a synonym for mainstreaming. Besides, enough space has to be provided for healthy coexistence and sustenance for the different ethnic, religious and other practices that are the hallmark of complex societies embracing cultural elements of varying degrees and shades. These should be allowed to develop at their own pace, absorbing or rejecting cultural traits from/of other societies/communities as they deem fit. Acculturation that occurs as a consequence of inter-cultural mixing and borrowing should not be of any forced kind.

Unity in Diversity sounds like a good aphorism. This platitude has been bandied about by all, including politicians, civil society members and organisations, as well as by academics, as a catch-all phrase for far too long. When we mouth Unity in Diversity we seem to assume that it exists, it happens, and is thought of as a given. However, that is a supposition of sorts, though it does point towards a multicultural situation. But if it can indeed be demonstrated that there undeniably is unity despite diversity, then that would be the path to achieving pluralism. A visible, discernible, lively and successful engagement with diversity is pluralism indeed.

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