

## Multi-Ethnicity, religion and Indian polity

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### Abstract

India has a highly complex and colorful social mosaic. Yet, although characterized by a vast spread of cultural diversity and heterogeneity, this mosaic is not chaotic. It has a clearly discernible pattern, wherein socio-cultural diversity draws its strength and sustenance from India's composite culture and civilizational thrust. This culture has evolved over centuries, through a process of assimilation and amalgamation of the diverse cultural influxes coming with the hordes of invaders - the Aryans, the Sakas, the Huns, the Pathans, the Moghuls, and the Europeans. Thus, the evolved composite culture of India cannot be compared either with the melting-pot of American society or with the multinational state exemplified by the now defunct Soviet Union. India's socio-cultural mosaic is the true picture of "unity in diversity," like a bouquet of flowers or vegetables in a salad bowl, where every component, while retaining its specific identity, is a part of a larger whole.

**Keywords:** Multi-Ethnicity, Pluralism, Marxist, Ethnic Identity, Cultural Values, Dharma, Ancestor-Worship, Universal Brotherhood, Favoutism, Aryan Varna System

### Introduction

1. The current focus on the concepts of 'ethnic identity', 'ethnic groups', 'ethno-culture', 'ethno-political etc. may appear as a bit new and loud, specially at a time when humankind is talking of 'global village', "one planet, one humanity", but the phenomenon of ethnic plurality has been an intrinsic component of the socio-political reality of a number of multi-ethnic states in South Asia. Our own country India has been conspicuous as a country with pluralism in ethnicity, culture, religion, language and such other basic factors and has always been described as a community with unity in diversity. Whether this description is appropriate or not is another question. One of the very basic problems of countries like India is how to build up one 'nation' without ironing out the pluralistic character of the society. This problem is concrete and genuine and may not admit of a mere theoretical solution. But again, without a sound theoretical framework, practical implementation and solution may not even be possible.

In identifying the component elements of ethnicity one has to seriously consider the role of religion in multi-ethnic societies. Do or can religions play a constructive role in binding the multiplicities into a cohesive whole so that the 'nation' is built up or do they disrupt the attempt at unity and work as disintegrative forces? Questions like these are not easy to answer as in the polity, religions do not play a uniform role and it often becomes difficult to determine the political motive behind the play of religions. Anyway, before entering into the thick of the problem some classifications regarding the key-concepts like 'ethnicity', 'religion' etc. seem to be in order.

2. It cannot be denied that there is a good deal of confusion born out of the antiquity regarding the meaning of such terms as 'ethnicity', 'ethnology' and 'religion'. This confusion reflects fidelities and flexibility in the usage of the terms over time

and space. As a result the definitional debates cannot be avoided.

The word 'ethnic' is derived from the Greek word 'ethnikos' and refers to: (a) nations not converted in Christianity — 'heathens', 'pagans' (b) races or large groups of people having common traits and customs, or, (c) groups 'in an exotic primitive culture'. But these linguistic meanings do not and cannot exactly comprehend the expansive significance in which the term 'ethnicity' is used. For the formation of an ethnic identity, writes S.C. Dube " a combination of factors—common descent, a socially relevant cultural or physical characteristic, and a set of attributes and behaviour patterns, is necessary". As a matter of fact, however, many of these features appear to be more subjective than objective. The factor of common descent may be real or putative; even the common racial origin may not be necessary. Often, the bases of 'ethnic identity' are formed by a sort of cultural attitudes like distinctive beliefs, institutions, customs and social practices, religion and language. Physical anthropologists would also point out that some physiological characteristics like pigmentation of the skin or the body-shape, especially of the nose, head and eyes, may provide the foundation of ethnic identity. It is generally believed that the consolidation of an ethnic group takes place through the sharing of ideas, common behavior patterns, feelings and meanings. The ethnic identity of a group is believed to be established through a perceived distinction between ourselves (as 'we') from others (as 'they') and the belief that we/they have a common destiny. We thus find that 'ethnic' or 'ethnicity' eludes a neat definition. It is a conglomeration of so many factors and is quite adaptable or flexible in character and is used differently depending upon situations and perceptions of advantages. Dube nicely put it: "Despite its ambiguities and shifting emphasis, ethnicity makes a heady cocktail, potent in its effect and unsettling to the established order of things. It is part sentiment, part ideology, and part agenda". Ethnicity

transcends the known boundaries of state, religions, sect and class, and poses a challenge to the established nationalities and communities by using ethnic indicators involving symbols and their manipulation by the competing elites of the ethnic groups. The importance of the symbolic and cultural aspects of ethnicity notwithstanding, ethnic questions often get politicised because, in the final analysis, most ethnic conflicts are aimed at securing larger share of economic resources and products, and for a greater part or say in the decision-making processes. This might appear simplistic but the various studies made by the sociologists regarding the different movements in recent times, e.g. Gorkhaland Movement, Jharkhand d Movement, Uttarkhand Movement, ULFA Movement, NSCN Movement, Khalistan Movement and such others, mention the common feeling of being marginalised economically, culturally, and politically, accompanied by a 'perceived threat, genuine or otherwise, to the groups' identity to be the main factors behind such movements. These movements might quite often be inspired and assisted by neighboring countries but that does not adequately explain nor erase out the persistent feeling of an ethnic group of being marginalised.

Urmila Phadins mentions<sup>3</sup> about four approaches in understanding the phenomenon of ethnicity. These are: (a) the primordialist approach, (b) the cultural pluralist approach, (c) the approach of the supporters of modernisation and development and (d) the Marxist and Neo-Marxist approach. (a) The primordialist approach to ethnic identities and ethnicity considers: common descent and culture. As the more important factors as they can be easily cultivated. Thus, for this approach, ethnic identities are not chosen but they are givens of the past. However, cultural markers are not that way permanent; they are liable to change even within one's lifetime, as in cases of religious conversion. (b) Cultural pluralist approach, initially formulated by Furnivall, has been refined and modified by Smith and others. Smith's cultural pluralism admits the co-existence of various cultural groups within a society having different institutional systems (e.g. value systems, belief patterns, social structures) which are mutually incompatible. In such a situation, the political order leads to the sub-ordination of one group by the other and this makes it vulnerable to conflict. This situational approach which appears to be subjectivist puts its emphasis upon the perception of the members of a group of being different from others and on its concern for the present status or pre-document of the group and its future prospects. Such an approach cannot explain the inter-ethnic group harmony in a society. (c) The modernisation and developmental approach believes that the ethnic affinities are residual phenomena and they would be dissolved with modernisation and development through the extension of the capitalist market. But this assertion is not of doubtful merit as, not to speak of the Third World countries, even in the USA ethnic conflicts have not disappeared nor have they been dissolved. (d) The Marxist-neo-Marxist approach tries to explain ethnic conflicts as the result of manipulation by the ruling class and vested interests for detracting the class consciousness of the proletarian class by making use of the ethnicity card. From the point of view of the Marxian approach 'ethnic identity' is viewed as a reactionary impulse, opposed to the development of class-consciousness and class-solidarity of the exploited class. 'Ethnic consciousness' is considered as 'false consciousness'.

Though there may be some theoretical justification for such a stand, the practical impact is much too strong and real to be overlooked or denied. The breakdown of the USSR may be due to, among other factors, the ethnic conflict among the different Republics. I myself perceived a strong sense of ethnic superiority among the Lithuanians during my visit to the USSR in 1985 and this struck a discordant note in the conceptual framework of a socialist country. The wind of change was clearly evident at that period. Anyway, in charged political contexts accompanied by major ideological shifts, dormant ethnicities may assume very aggressive postures as evidenced by the trouble between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. What is more important to note is that ethnicity poses a serious challenge to both the major paradigms of development communist and non-communist. According to both these models development should have contained the assertion of ethnic identities but what we find on the contrary is that ethnic identities appear to be confronting both the ideologies of development itself.

For the present, we may sum up the discussion made so far by identifying an ethnic group after Frederik Barth. <sup>4</sup> He mentions four characteristics for such identification: (1) an ethnic group designates a population which is self-perpetuating. (2) This population shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms. (3) This population makes up a field of communication and interaction of its own. (4) This population is composed of the members that identify themselves as a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order. We may note that Barth has put more emphasis on the so-called 'objective elements' rather than the subjective ones though the subjective factors have not been, and as a matter of fact, can never be, ignored. I shall have something more to say in this regard in the concluding section.

The other key-concept 'religion' has to be briefly explained now. In this context it may be mentioned that the Indian term 'dharma' which is often taken as the synonym for religion is simply not the equivalent of religion as understood in the western context. Whereas the term religion is always theoretic 'dharma' is not so. One may be 'dharmika' even without believing in God. As for religion, half in jest and half in earnest, it is said that there are ten thousand definitions of religions and it is not easy to choose between them. We may, however, try to identify the important common features of religions - be it monotheism, ditheism or polytheism or even the much earlier forms of primitive religions e.g. totemism, fetishism and ancestor-worship. Religion implies man's belief in one/more than one transcendent supernormal powers whereby man gains stability of life and escapes from the feeling of helplessness and to which he/she surrenders himself/ herself through worship, service and performance of certain prescribed practices. Religion thus is composed of all the human faculties of mind - cognitive (in the form of belief), emotive (in the form gaining stability and security against the feeling of helplessness) and conative (in the form of worship, service and other religious activities). We may avoid in this context the debate regarding the true nature of religion - either as opium to mankind or as a form of human alienation whereby man alienates all the positive virtues and creates the image of God/Gods or the epitome of all powers and positive virtues. Historically speaking, some form of religion or other has been noticed as a social institution

throughout the different phases / stages of human history. Religion has generally been supposed to be an important component of ethnic identity though there are reasons to doubt this view. The values and beliefs, the institutions and practices that have been mentioned as factors of ethnicity explicitly or implicitly lean towards religion. Religion appears to be a necessary component of ethnic identity. But the conflict between two groups of people professing the same religion e.g. the current conflict between the Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan, or, the multi-cornered contest for domination in the Islamic Afghanistan, go to show that ethnic identity depends, if at all, only marginally on religion and the challenge from the ethnic groups cannot be solved only through the religious approach. Of course, religion always remains a potent factor in ethnic conflicts and the religious/ethnic card is/may be played if/when it suits the leadership to play the card.

**3.** Does or can religion play a constructive role in a multi-ethnic society like that of India which is now witnessing divergent ethnic challenges to the polity ? The answer is not easy in a complex network of events and elements. No religion in its kernel preaches hatred to anybody nor does it teach its positive aspect, every religion worth the name tries to propagate an attitude of sympathy and love to all. 'Universal brotherhood' as it is called in Christianity, is usually accepted as the aim of all religions. But the difficulty arises in the actual practices of the enthusiastic votaries of a particular religion especially when it is a proselytising religion. The monopolistic claim to truth and access to God by any one religion to the exclusion of others is the breeding ground of contempt, distrust and ill-feeling to the practitioners of other religions. This is a starting-point of what is now fashionably called 'fundamentalism'. It is not uncommon when fundamentalist motives have been dressed up as ethnic demands and a polity like that of our country has been put on a spot in taking the correct measure to combat it. The forty second amendment of our Constitution brought in the term 'Secularism' into the expression before " Sovereign socialist democratic Republic' to put emphasis on the fact that India, unlike the other countries in the sub-continent e.g. Pakistan and Bangladesh which are theocratic, has no special preference for any particular religion though the majority of the population is Hindu by religion. No one religion is the 'State religion". Every individual is free to follow his or her religion without, of course, encroaching upon others' right to do so. The word "Secularism" has some amount of ambiguity around it; that is why a clear understanding about its import is needed. If it is taken to mean indifference or opposition to all religions / religious values, crass materialism will be the result of secularism. The wisdom and lofty ideals of India's traditional culture which is perennially described as "unity in diversity" is appropriately preserved in the constitution through its "Fundamental Rights' and the 'Directive Principles'. The addition of the term 'Secularism' is perhaps intended to highlight the nature of the traditional Indian culture which has been basically humanistic and has attempted to achieve harmony (Samanvaya) in man's life — individually and socially. In speaking of the Indian cultural tradition it may not be in appropriate to go back to the problem of multi-ethnicity in our country. Whatever the arguments in favour of identifying

subjectivistic component in the clamour for distinct ethnic identity some genuine, 'objective' factors, at least in the case of India, cannot be overlooked. And these factors did vitally influence the structure of the society and the ancient polity as we find in contemporary history. It seems that in the development of ancient India there was a confrontation of at least three distinct groups<sup>5</sup>: (a) the aborigines or tribal peoples of India who are said to be of the same racial stock as the Australian aborigines and whose culture was of the same level; (b) The Dravidians. Nobody knows for certain whom they were, although some scholars believe that they were some sort of Mediterranean people who had entered India at an early date. Whoever they were they were different from the aborigines, and they belonged to a highly developed urban civilization, that of the Indus Valley, although it may well be the case that some mixture between the Dravidians and the aborigines had already taken place before the Aryan entry. (c) The Aryans, who had a highly developed language, great mobility (peculiar to nomads) and probably, use of metals which gave them material advantage over the Dravidians, although their civilization at the time of entry into India (believed to be between 2000 and 1500 B. C.) was not comparable to Dravidians in other respects, in the matter of building planned cities, for instance. (The debate regarding the original inhabitation in India by Aryans or their migration into India from Asia Minor is more or less settled. As against the views of S. R. Rao, Ganganath Jha, Khagen Dasgupta and Srikanta Shastri who oppose the theory of Aryan immigration, G. D. Childe's view of Aryan migration into India is generally accepted). Anyway, the more important question is how did the ancient Indian Society face up to the problem of the existence of three distinct groups with diversity of ideas, views and cultures? There could be four possible alternatives: (1) Virtual extermination of one race by others, as happened in North America, and to a great extent in Australia, (2) Imposition of the culture of the dominant group over the rest, as happened in South America ; (3) Absolute equality of all races and cultures in all matters, which the world is yet to see ; (4) the caste system, which instead of destroying the principles of social groupings, customs, and organisation of the constituent elements tried to bring them under an overall order, which yet made room for the differences and kept the elements separate as far as possible. There might already have been in India, before the arrival of the Aryans, the custom of hereditary groupings of people performing different functions and following different customs of marriage, food etc. derived from a tribal past, and the aborigines may already have been recruited to do dirty jobs, the tribal organisation of the society ensuring that they were kept as a group distinct from all others. Most likely on this was superimposed the Aryan Varna System, dividing the functions of the society into four categories as (i) studying, teaching, wli-rshping and sacrificing (Brahmans) (ii) political and military activities, (Kslitriyas) (iii) economic and commercial activities (Vaisyas) (iv) the odd and menial jobs including agriculture ( Sudras ). The whole social structure could thus be brought under the idea of fourfold division of labour. In the Purusasukta of the Rigveda this form of division of labour might have been sanctified. In the Gita Srikrishna has mentioned about the four varnas on the basis of gunas and Karma and this implies interchangeability between varnas on the basis of the merit of a person. This was a lofty

ideal which gradually deteriorated into the hereditary caste system. But some sound scholars in sociology, e.g. S.C. Deve, object to the identification of varna with jati with solid reasons. However, we may avoid this debate in the present context.

The ups and downs of India's history is common knowledge. From about 1000 A.D. with the advent of the Muslim rule in India there was a fundamental change in the cultural atmosphere and many of the flexible practices of the existing society with its misuse towards unity in diversity became rigid and almost fossilized. But since the Muslims also made their own contribution to the existing culture, though they were initially very hostile to it, there gradually arose what in a modern jargon is called 'composite culture'. Even the Britishers who tried to keep them as aliens ( with an imaginary sense of superiority ) in all the senses during their domination over India for about a couple of centuries did make some significant contribution to the present culture of India. Indian pioneers of thought as also of action like Raja Rammohun Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Rabin dran ath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Desban dh u D as and Neta ji Bose, to name only a few tried in various ways to develop the composite culture of India.

Rashieeduddin Khans nicely puts about composite culture : "The new culture patterns and value frameworks at the country/ state/region levels would have to be plural without being dichotomous, varied without being conflicting, endogenous, yet opening out of selective, adaptive and recreative exogenous influences. These culture patterns would interface and interact with each other peacefully and voluntarily, in a quest for generating reciprocal and mutually beneficial processes of learning, sharing, borrowing, adapting and thereby establishing the fundamental of a 'global federal culture'.

Of our pioneers Gandhi ji perhaps was the closest to the tradition. He wanted to develop new India situating its nerve center in the villages. His strong emphasis on self-sufficiency through self-sufficient villages with cottage industries playing a dominant role, reviving the humanistic elements, of which there are many, of the traditional culture and discarding the perverted cruel practices like untouchability, and situating the social polity on the fundamental values of fairness, justice, truth, non-violence and harmony signalled a different model of development. But this was rejected by Independent India. The first Prime Minister of India strongly pleaded for a totally scientific orientation, developing scientific temper going vigorously for rapid industrialization with emphasis on heavy industries and acceptance of a mixed economy. The development of unplanned industrial sites and rapid urbanization blew the death-knell of self-sufficient villages and all the mores and culture rooted therein. Neta ji Bose wanted a mixture of both these models but pavodoxically perhaps, despite his oppositions to Gandhian politics, he was closer to Gandhi ji so far as development model was concerned. What has happened in independent India is every body's knowledge and we cannot enter into that story in the present context.

We may try to conclude by noting some of the characteristic features of our country and the needs of to-day.

Historically, India has been one of the greatest confluences of cultural strands, a laboratory, so to say, of racial intermingling, of cross-fertilization of religious ideas and

secular thoughts, of co-existence of languages and dialects. India has been a veritable microcosm of the globe. India's traditional cultural past has perhaps played the most significant role in developing such a mental makeup.

Philosophically, composite culture means rejection of uni-cultural regimentation and mono-cultural domination and reaffirmation of the value of pluralism and syncretism as the valid, stable and the most desirable bases for cultural efflorescence in a mixed and plural polity like India. Gandhi and Tagore are the typical products of such a cultural background as also its vocal advocates.

Politically and economically, strategies of development have to be found which take the greatest care to eradicate regional/group rivalries as manifested through economic discrimination/favoritism, allow reasonable participation of all ethnic groups in the decision-making process of the country and generate and foster a sense of fellow-feeling and love for fellow countryman. Imaginative schemes of reverse discrimination have to be devised and implemented to improve the lot of the poor and the deprived. These steps, taken actually and seriously with –bold and strong political will can, one hopes, bind people of our country together and consolidate the fragile bonds of nationhood. But the solution of many of the problems like food, security, the preservation of ecological balances and avoidance of environmental hazards, the search for energy substitutes, provision for proper health care and education for all, above all the achievement of world peace, needs global effort and global collaboration. India, though now at the receiving end from the technological and economic point of view, can rightly claim its honorable place in this collaborative march, enriched as it is by its tradition of composite culture and an education in harmonious balancing of the basic human values.

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