

Indian Civilization: Unity in Diversity and Ethnicity

Dr Shekar Naik

Assistant Professor of History, Government First Grade College, Channarayapatana,
Hassan District, Karnataka

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on India's diversity stems from historical influences, including waves of invasions, the emergence of religions, and Western colonialism. It represents the country's national identity; ritual, landscapes, and climate have also shaped distinct cultures, traditions, and languages across regions. India from ancient times has flourished to construct a nationality that is neither governed by universalism nor by exceptionality to its interest groups. It is a land of diversity in race, religion, caste, language, and so on. Major factors are affecting diversity in India, Race; Ethnicity and Linguistic diversity. India has a shared cultural heritage that spans thousands of years.

Keywords: Unity, Diversity, Ethnicity, Religion, Civilization, Institutions, Culture and Organization

INTRODUCTION

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. It is a land of myriad languages, a veritable of tongues and numerous moves of apparel and countless mannerisms and multiplicity of ethnic groups. But there are certain common links and unifying bonds that people have sought to develop in order to achieve the eminently desired goal of unity amidst diversity. India is a country with a diverse culture. India's culture refers to a group of small distinct civilizations.

India does not have one but many great traditions. Although the Hinduistic tradition has always enjoyed a predominant position, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and several tribal traditions have co-existed and enriched the civilization of India, which is an ensemble of these great and little traditions, cultures and ways life. On this Indigenous civilization has been superimposed the influence of western social, economic and political Institutions. But the unity is a fragile one, constantly under attack from social categories like caste, language, religion, region and ethnic diversity manifest in territorial movements for Jharkhand, Gorkhaland, etc. Given our political framework of democratic participation and decision making, it is the principle of reconciliation that must ultimately prevail to preserve the integral structure of the Indian civilization.

The role of ethnicity, territoriality, religion, etc. in the integration of Indian society can be appreciated in the framework of its civilization. A common mistake in formulating the notion of Indian civilization is in identifying it predominantly or entirely in terms of the dominant Hindu tradition. "Unity in diversity is used as an expression of harmony and unity between dissimilar individuals or groups. It is a concept of "unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation" (Lalonde, Roxanne 1994:4)

Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and several tribal traditions have existed and enriched the civilization of India. The inheritance from the West is not less important in many fields. Its mental background and equipment, though largely influenced by the persistence of Indian tradition have been moulded into their present shape by over a hundred years of Western education extending practically too every field of mental activity. Its social ideals are not what the Hindu society had for long cherished, but those assimilated from the West and derived predominantly from the doctrines of French Revolution, and to a lesser, though to an increasing extent from the teachings of Marx and the lessons of the Soviet experiment.

Even the religious beliefs of Hinduism have been transformed substantially during the course of the last 100 years. In fact, it will be no exaggeration to say that the new Indian state represents traditions, ideals and principles which are the results of an effective but imperfect synthesis between the East and West.

This brings us to the problem of diversity in Indian traditions and cultures and its bearing upon the process of unity of the civilization. This unity could be observed at several levels, especially in the periods before the Western encounter. An important source of unity can be noticed in the processes of cultural and technological communication and interaction.

Travelling mendicants, traders, storytellers, craftsmen and artists in traditional India established cultural bridges of unity between regions and cultural traditions. The institutions of pilgrimage, fairs and festivals provided yet another nodal point for communication, for cultural unity in the framework of its diversity. The organization of Indian cultural tradition at the levels of the folk and the elite have had a large measure of mutual give and take through localization of the cosmopolitan or elite traditions and cosmopolitization of the local tradition. This also extended to the levels of social and cultural mobility in the system.

Although never fully exhaustive, the political economy of the imperial system in traditional India did create administrative, educational, technological, and cultural institutions and personnel whose role was cosmopolitan rather than local. These institutions functioned as bridges among local social systems and cultural traditions. This was also reflected in the inter-structural autonomy of traditional Indian social structure. Indeed, the traditional caste panchayats and panchayats of the occupational groups specially the artisans, craftsmen and service communities such as the washer men, barbers and potters, etc. who were linked together under the 'system, enjoyed autonomy in both self-governance and for enforcement of rules of reciprocity with the larger society.

The social categories like caste, language, religion and region, etc. have a pan-ethnic character. The linguistic re-organisation of states in India after Independence was based on similar erroneous assumption that a linguistic community articulated homogeneous social group phenomena. Forty years after Independence we find that a variety of new interest-groups have merged within linguistically re-organised states on the basis of caste, religion and territory. The Indian social structure and civilization cannot be understood on the basis of a single principle of social organization, be it caste, religion, language or community. Each of these manifest vital elements of the Indian social structure and its civilization, but none of them individually encompass in totality. An organic pluralism is inherent in the principles which define the Indian civilization and its social structure.

Empirically, caste is a local phenomenon, only its ideology (varna) has an extended, may be all-India. But over a period of time caste both structurally and ideologically has penetrated several other religious and cultural traditions, such as Islam, Christianity and Sikhism, etc. A religious definition of caste ideology, such as through Hinduism, would not explain its role and significance in the Indian society. Similarly, religion and language, though indicative of groups solidarity at a certain level are fractured by differentiation of such groups on the basis of caste, region, occupation and wealth. Within each religious, linguistic, tribal or caste groups there are factors which articulate their internal similarity, but there are also strong elements which outcross each respective bond and unite with those based on dissimilar principles. There is diversity, but it also has a framework of unity. "Besides, in India, the guiding principle of the Sahitya Akademi, as articulated by Dr. S Radhakrishnan, resonates profoundly: "All Indian literature is one, written in different languages. This perspective extends seamlessly to encompass the mosaic of Indian culture. Regionally distinct cultures, adorned in a spectrum of dialects and expressions imbued with local hues, encapsulate the very essence of India's spirit" (Rao, Prahalad 2015:40)

Indian civilization has evolved through many stages providing a network of institutions and ideologies which offer unity in plurality. These institutions and their normative principles do reflect the cultural-religious traditions of Hinduism but these also transcend its confine and emerge as a composite system of values, norms and styles drawn from various cultural traditions. This is what constitutes systems of political organization, of control and administration of revenue, trade and market, military, bureaucratic systems, the intellectual accomplishments in medicine, science, art, architecture, music, drama and dance forms, etc. which represent a synthesis of many forms and styles, and combine the sacred with secular in its structure and function. Inter-structural autonomy existed in the eng framework of unity of civilization.

The process of Western contact through colonialism introduced a qualitatively new orientation. The British followed a mutually contradictory policy in pursuit of their colonial objectives. First, their policies activated the regional, religious and segmentary impulses of people in India. This set into motion fissiparous tendencies in society and enlarged the territorial, religious, communal consciousness among people which separated communities and groups rather than linked them together. The British due to the exploitative character of their rule had to introduce technological, industrial and economic-administrative measures which had macroscopic extensions, such as the railways, factories, workshops, roads and highways, police, army, judiciary and bureaucracy, etc. Slowly, in course of freedom movement the British also introduced political reforms which laid the foundation of civic culture and democracy. Paradoxically, the British policy on the one hand, strengthened the forces of regionalism, casteism and communalism and on the other established institutions for a pan-Indian consolidation of colonial state with imperial dimensions.

It created a social situation in the country in which a dualism between principles of primordiality such as territory, religion, language, caste and tribe, etc. and the principle of civic rights like universal suffrage, democratic freedom of participation

and equality, rational-secular judicial administration and education, etc. had to be recognized. The Constitution of India, which was framed after Independence, reflects and incorporates this dualism. It propounds the foundations of a civic society based on secularism, rationalism, freedom and equality. At the same time it also recognizes the special rights and privileges of those sections of Indian society which were exploited for centuries or which feel insecure due to their minority status in the society. The reorganization of states soon after Independence on linguistic lines also reflects the sensitivity of Indian leaders to reconcile the aspirations of regional and segmentary entities with that of the aspiration to build a modern, secular, democratic, socialist nation-state.

Ethnicity in the form of an encapsulated consciousness of culture, customs and ways of life becomes more articulate through encounter with civilization which represents processes of modernization, economic, political technological and scientific. Most issues which lead to the rise of ethnic mobilization seek recognition of their distinctive status and represent demands in social, cultural, economic and political fields. "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. There is little in common, to outward seeming, between the Pathan of the North-West and the Tamil in the far South. Their racial stocks are not the same, though there may be common strands running through them... Yet, with all these differences, there is no mistaking the impress of India on the Pathan, as this is obvious on the Tamil. The Pathan and the Tamil are two extreme examples; the others lie somewhere in between. All of them have their distinctive features; all of them have still more the distinguishing mark of India" (Nehru, Jawaharlal 1989)

A large part of these demand related ethnic movements can be resolved following a strategy of constructive reconciliation. The policies of the Indian state have been responsive to such demands in large measure and have yielded good results in the past. The examples are the separatist movement in Tamilnadu during the 1950's, and the recent Assam and Mizo accords. The strategy of reconciliation through accords goes together with the processes of planning, economic growth and policies of distributive justice in society. It is the process of upward social mobility and rise of a middle class among the ethnic groups and minorities which gives fillip to demands of territorial, parochial and separatist nature. The policy of reconciliation should, therefore, help in abolition of the deprivations of such groups both at the existential and cultural levels. The Constitution of India is in a way designed to promote reconciliation policy in a constructive fashion. It also sets a limit to this process. The means must remain nonviolent, and democratic goals must not transgress sovereignty of the state.

The separatist movement in Kashmir is a glaring example. It sets its goals beyond the limits of the Constitution. Reconciliation with such demands poses organic threat to the very edifice of the Indian nation-state. Short of the demand for a theocratic political set-up, many channels for reconciliation of other demands of the movement could be accommodated through democratic processes. "Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India and leader of the Indian National Congress, vigorously promoted unity in diversity as an ideal essential to national consolidation and progress" (Marangoly George, Rosemary 2013)

The other example is the territorial movement for Gorkhaland in eastern India. This movement demands separate state within the Union for their self- governance. The irony is that most such demands continue to emerge from states which were earlier reorganised on linguistic lines. As the processes of development particularly growth of education, politicalization, aspiration for social mobility and social justice gain momentum, it is presumable that more and more sub-regionalisation and sub-ethnification of identities would take place. Hence, a reconciliation strategy anchored in creation of smaller and smaller states may not succeed in accommodating or defusing such demands. It may even prove to be counterproductive. Yet, given our political framework of democratic participation and decision-making the principle of reconciliation cannot be forsaken.

Most demands by sections and groups are based on issues which have a political-economic character and can be met within the framework of the Constitution. But, this can be a success only if reinforced by suitable social and economic policies. These policies would have to be evolved in an inter-related fashion as they are organically inter-linked. Some of the policy measures may be outlined as follows:

The cultural and social institutions of the minorities, ethnic groups and communities must be jealously protected, and wherever possible opportunities may be given for their constructive reinforcement so that cultural, emotional and social deprivations may not lead to frustration and alienation. "Unity in diversity is also a slogan utilized by the disciples of Swami Sivananda. They came to America to spread the true meaning of Unity in Diversity; that we are All in One & One in All in an all loving ahimsa God"(Swami Vevekanada)

This policy maybe backed with measures of economic development of the groups with suitable mix of the policies of macro and micro planning supported by voluntary institutional efforts. The focus should increasingly be on decentralisation and self-help, so that specific nature of the economic deprivations could be looked after and removed. "The idea and related phrase is very old and dates back to ancient times in both Western and Eastern Old World cultures. It has applications in many fields, including ecology, cosmology, philosophy, religion and politics" (Kalin, Ibrahim 2004: 430)

The policies with regard to education, information and communication may be suitably formulated to take into consideration two factors: first, the need to create man power and skill among the deprived groups, tribes and communities rendering their social mobility possible; secondly, providing a basis for their participation in the macro-social institutions of culture and development in the country. The media policy should also orient itself to the need for a balance between the projection of the local, regional and national levels of social, cultural, economic and political profiles of people. In educational institutions too much regionalization due to linguistic demarcation of states has led to negative outcome such as decline of standards and loss of national perspective. It may be necessary to introduce a mix of both regional and national perspectives by amendments in admission, curriculum and employment policies. This could be done in stages through democratic avenues.

There is need for consciously developing linkages between the regional and national institutions of planning, development and social reforms taking into view two major elements: participation and interdependence. The regional or local level groups, sections and communities be given a sense of participation in the national level nations and must be made conscious of their reciprocal responsibilities. So far, most local and regional interest-groups look at the national institutions only from the perspective of demand without having a corresponding awareness of their own obligations. This must be redressed through suitable administrative, social and political initiatives. It is true that process of industrialization and modernization do strengthen macro-linkages in the nation- state, but these are also sometimes perceived as threat to local institutions and aspirations. Dis-information plays a role in such processes and a conscious initiative is, therefore, necessary.

CONCLUSION

Finally, it may be recognized that a modern nation-state must have an efficient and strong support from reinforcement agencies of state policy such as the police, paramilitary forces and the army. It is upto the younger generation to uphold cultural unity for the rest of the world to see, follow and emulate. There is a need to integrate regional and local aspirations within the framework of a united and secular India. All these strategies must, however, be subordinated to the totality of the national ideology of political, economic and social development governed by secular, democratic, socialist and non-violent principles. India's strength in nation- building lies in its legacy of the non-violent tradition raised to the level of a political craft by Gandhiji. This sets the foundation of strategy for reconciliation. It could well be sustained.

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