

Accommodation of cultures in tune with India's spirit of liberal democracy

India's extreme diversity makes pluralism imperative

BY AKHTAR MAJEED

AS THE INDIAN CONSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE SHOWS, it is possible to respect cultural diversity without damaging the nation-state. In multicultural, multi-ethnic and plural societies, such as India and many others, social justice, economic progress and political democracy can be achieved only through accommodation of diverse interests and identities. The system of law and justice derives its legitimacy from not allowing the need of any one group to overshadow or eliminate the needs of others. Thus, in India, pluralism melds cultures with the spirit of liberal democracy.

A country the size of a continent, with an area of 3.28 million square km and a population of over one billion, India is the world's most plural society: 22 national languages and some 2000 dialects; a dozen ethnic and seven religious groups fragmented into a large number of sects, castes and sub-castes; and some 60 socio-cultural sub-regions spread over seven natural geographic regions. A viable and successful system of government must recognize these identities and respect and accommodate them. The Constitution of India has done just that and has become the best guarantee for a viable and vibrant nation.

Ultimately, it is not just a question of majority/minority in a plural society; it is a question of social and distributive justice in a liberal democracy. If democracy is not receptive to various identities in a plural society, then it remains only a majoritarian democracy that underprivileges minorities. Since majoritarian

procedures and institutions could disadvantage minorities, the Indian Constitution has ensured special provisions for the protection of minority rights as well as balancing group rights with individual rights.

Territory and ethnicity

The framers of the Constitution were deeply conscious that India is a plural society, but they were also concerned about the need for unity and consolidation. In the aftermath of the 1947 partition of India, creating Pakistan and India, such concerns were natural. It was in that context that a particular type of federal governance was visualized, which evolved over time into multi-layered federalism as the way to fulfill aspirations of the many cultural groups. The socio-economic diversity of the country made bargaining within Indian federalism important. Once the decision-making processes were decentralized, the result was consensual democracy.

The framers of India's Constitution had intended the very size and heterogeneity of the original large states to discourage the emergence of parochial identities. However, they left the door open to a reorganization of states along linguistic lines, which, over time, has produced 28 states and six union territories. Many countries have had difficulty in maintaining national identity in the face of demands for autonomy, even secession. Heterogeneous India's success in remaining intact is surely rooted in reorganization: the adjustment of state boundaries and creation of new states – both of which are the prerogative of the central government. In the last decades, as India has become less centralized, the politics of states' reorganization have changed as well. States no longer feel they are overshadowed by the central government, nor is there a feeling of systemic discrimination against the states.



REUTERS/VINAY MATHUR

An "untouchable" becomes Chief Minister of the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Mayawati Kumari, leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party, a party of Dalits or "untouchables," took power in the state after her party's victory in May.

SPECIAL SECTION

Unity in Diversity

INDIA 2007



Prof. Akhtar Majeed is director of the Centre for Federal Studies at Hamdard University in New Delhi, India.

This has led to a situation where demands for states' reorganization are no longer treated as a political bargaining lever against New Delhi, but as an administrative convenience.

The formation or reorganization of states in India has been based on considerations such as geographical proximity, a common language, similar usages and customs, comparable socio-economic and political stages of development, common historical traditions and experiences, a common way of living, administrative expediency and, more than anything else, a widely prevalent sentiment of togetherness; that is, a sense of identity.

Setting the borders of states

The reorganization of states has served good governance by advancing four criteria:

- administrative convenience
- economic viability
- similarity in the developmental needs of a sub-region
- cultural-linguistic affinity

If an ethnic group is not concentrated territorially, it can then envisage economic and political gains if it obtains greater regional autonomy, for example the earlier demands for a separate Telengana state in Andhra Pradesh. Where regional autonomy in the form of a separate state is not a viable strategy, or is perceived as not immediately possible, demands have been made for preferential treatment, such as those in the state of Maharashtra for exclusive benefits for the local residents. Many demands for constituting new states have been based on allegedly unfair distribution of development benefits in multi-lingual states, for example in Assam in the 1970s and 1980s.


Just as federal India is a composite, plural entity, so have many states become cohesive with a plural basis rather than a single identity. The states are often cohesive political and administrative units, even though they are based not on one identity, but on a synthesis of different identities. There are some states that do claim a distinctive cultural identity; these states are ecologically distinctive, like Uttarakhand, where environmental activists in Himalayan communities acted 30 years ago to prevent further degradation of forests. There are also states that claim to be ethnically distinctive, like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka or Kerala. In another group, regional identities have been subsumed under the dominant language, like Maharashtra, Gujarat or West Bengal. All of these states are

what may be called single-identity states. On the other hand, the large composite states such as Uttar Pradesh reflect a set of variables: language/dialect, social composition of communities, ethnic regions, demographic features, area contiguity, cultural pattern, economy and economic life, historical antecedents, political background and psychological make-up and felt consciousness of group identity. It is in such regions that most demands have been made for new states, as in the north-east of the country.

A voice in local governments

In addition to ethnic groups seeking autonomy, there are also those within the same ethnic group who are sometimes left out of the political process or the local economy. For example, past community development programs often could not succeed due to planning done by bureaucrats and politicians in state capitals with little or no input from the local communities for whom the programs were planned. This encouraged dependence on government resources and undermined self-help. By a constitutional amendment, a new system of rural local bodies called "*panchayats*" and local municipalities was introduced in 1993. The system provides for a three-tier structure at the village, intermediate and district levels. Through the

village council, the primary source of power is now the village. One-third of the elected representatives in these bodies have to be women, who occupy nearly one million seats on the councils. Powers and responsibilities have been given to the elected local bodies to plan and execute economic development plans. There are district planning committees that prepare the development plan for the district as a whole, integrating plans prepared by the rural *panchayats* and urban municipalities. In this way, the institutions under this system seek to realize the goals of decentralized administration consistent with decision-making by people at the grass root level.

The importance of territory has been useful in building upon diversity within nation-states and ensuring that cultural and ethnic differences do not become the basis for group inequality. Further, the different groups do not perceive one another as either inferior or superior. Indian nationhood rests on developing a societal ethos that facilitates the coexistence of diverse groups within one country by power-sharing arrangements. Endorsing pluralism as a value has made possible the nurturing of both equity and identity in a single political system. 



Women line up with their voter identity cards in the eastern Indian city of Patna. One million women were guaranteed seats on village councils or *panchayats* thanks to an amendment to the Indian Constitution.