

**World Forum on Democracy
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**Presentation Summary
Panel on 'Federalism, Multi-ethnic Society and Democracy'**

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In these remarks* I wish to question a widespread assumption that limits our thinking about the significance of politics of federalism. The assumption is this: federalism is a specialised remedy for the polities afflicted with a special condition, namely of being multi-ethnic. Perhaps one could fine-tune it to say that federal political arrangements are best-suited or required for those kinds of multiplicity of ethnicities that happen to have a geographical expression. The remedy consists of a constitutionally sanctioned institutional arrangement of power sharing between different levels of governance. The case for federalism has rested on how widespread this condition is, especially in the 'emerging democracies', and on how effective the federal solution is in tackling it.

Let me begin by saying what is not wrong with this assumption. It is indeed borne out by historical experience, of democracies 'emerging' or otherwise, that polities that have instituted federal political arrangements have handled ethnic differences better than those that do not have recourse to such arrangements. It is fairly plausible to hypothesise that the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka would not have reached the state it has reached today if the constitution makers had institutionalised federalism and had provided for the kind of 'devolution' that is being discussed in the island today. Obversely, it is doubtful if India would have survived the fifty years as nation-state were it not for the foresight of the constitution makers in opting for a federal arrangement in a context where they could have done without it. At the same time, where ethnic cleavages do not run along some regional divisions, federal solution has very little to offer. It is doubtful if federalism offers any hope for the ethno-political conflict in Fiji.

My problem with this assumption is that in making it out to be a special case, it understates and in the process misunderstands the connection between democracy, ethnicities and the politics of differences. It might look like a small, friendly dispute, with little practical implications. But I daresay that it has deeper theoretical implications for politics of knowledge. It is connected to one of the fundamental paradoxes of our time: D. L. Sheth has argued that while democracy is expanding all over the globe, our notion of what it means to be a democracy is actually shrinking. Contemporary models of democracy are based on a very narrow experience, narrow both in space and time. As my friend Peter deSouza puts it, the contemporary discourse on democratisation suffers from too little understanding of the paradoxes inherent in the expansion of democracy and just too much triumphalism.

The idea that some societies are multi-ethnic and others are not is based on the assumption that a society's map of ethnicity is given and fixed. That is why the democratic theory has

found it so difficult to reconcile ethnicity to democratic politics. Liberal democracy is founded on the fiction that the majority that rules is a majority not of persons but of ideas. It has made peace with the fact that the majority may be a majority of interests too. But it has found it impossible to make peace with the permanent majority of ethnicities, born out of an accident of birth. If there is a sense of scandal in how democratic theory deals with ethnicity, the reason is not far to seek. Ethnicity represents the dark fears of liberal democracy. If liberal democracy is the child of modernity, ethnicity represents the stranglehold of tradition. If democracy is all about choices, ethnicity stands for absence of choice. If democracy is predicated on reasoned deliberation, ethnicity stands for closure of reason.

Or so we like to believe. I wish to question this belief. In thinking about ethnicity and politics democratic theory is preoccupied with a relatively less interesting question of what ethnicity does to politics. I think we can begin to think afresh if we asked the other question: what does politics do to ethnicities? From a limited understanding largely derived from the Indian experience, I feel that this question is worth asking. The inauguration of modern democracy in general and universal adult franchise in particular unleashes a very powerful mechanism. It set up a permanent competition for manufacturing majority in a local context. It constantly invites the participants to redefine their loyalty by thinking afresh who they are. The resultant affiliation is to categories that bear traditional names, but it is the outcome of a very modern phenomenon. The boundaries appear given and unquestionable to the actors, but a longer historical view shows that the boundaries are anything but stable. A calmer look at the working of the democratic processes would show ethnicity as a realm of choice: ethnic boundaries are politically chosen, redrawn, constantly negotiated and often gerrymandered.

Take the role of caste, supposedly a uniquely Indian institution resistant to any change, in Indian politics. While popular commentary on Indian politics is full of complaints of casteism in politics, the more careful observers like Rajni Kothari pointed out about three decades ago that perhaps a more fundamental process was that of politicisation of caste. In that sense there is nothing unique about the institution of caste, in so far as it affects modern politics. It is yet another traditional cleavage that lends itself to mobilisation of collectivities. The same institution of caste that was considered inimical to the principles of democracy has served as a vehicle of mobility of lower castes and thus made for greater democratisation of the society. The case of the Other Backward Castes illustrates this point very well. Modern politics transforms what ethnicity is by prescribing what ethnicity does.

In other words, ethnicity is like any other social cleavage in as much as it is potentially both open and closed ended. A democrat must look beyond this label and ask what it contains in a specific historic context. It is not necessary that all ethnic politics will degenerate into a rule of permanent majority. Politicised ethnicities can serve as an open ended arrangement for power sharing. The challenge is to look for institutional forms and political practices that encourage a healthy politics of diversity.

But in order to appreciate this we need to understand both these key concepts in a broader frame than is usually the case. The currently dominant 'check-list' model of democratisation, that reduces democracy to implanting a standardised check-list of institutions with the help of a global tool kit and some dollars, does not even begin to

understand the real challenge of democratisation all over the globe. Similarly a narrow conception of federalism that focuses on the legal-institutional to the exclusion of the cultural-political cannot give us a good sense of how diversities may be accommodated within a democratic frame. Ashis Nandy thinks that the greatest threat to democratic politics of diversities comes from forces of cultural homogenisation of the globe.

Let me now draw these various strands together. If what I have said above has any merit, the connection between democracy and federalism is deeper and different than it appears. Federalism is not a specialised remedy for some special cases. It merely embodies a general institutional imperative in any democracy, namely that of politics of difference. Accommodation of geographically concentrated ethnic cleavages is in principle no difference from any other form of accommodation of diversities. Multi-ethnicity is not a special condition: it is a potential element inherent in all societies, albeit in different forms. In that sense federalism expresses the essence of democracy. But it does so in different forms in specific historical setting. What makes federalism more relevant than we think it usually is also makes it more likely to take diverse institutional forms. The real challenge for those of us who take the values of democracy and diversity seriously is to come up with institutional innovations that suit the specific requirements of each polity and in the process expand the repertoire of what we know as federalism.

One last point, a response to the question posed by the WFD: Can these values be realised within a state? Or does their realisation require the help of the international community? There is a suggestion implicit in this question. But I am afraid I do not see the point. Of course none of the fundamental human values can be fully realised within the often artificial boundary of a nation-state. Accommodation of diversities is no exception. In fact it is an apt case that calls for going beyond the state-centred view of the globe, for in Asia and Africa the social cleavages often cut across the artificial lines of the modern nation states. Yet, given the power relations of the world that we live in, I do not foresee any better context than a truly democratic nation state for the realisation of these values. For it makes impossible demands on my credulity to even imagine a truly democratic world order in the foreseeable future. I am often astonished at how little attention the issue of democratisation of the world has received in the recent flood of literature on democratisation. I suspect it has something to do with the fact that much of the academic and NGO industry on democratisation is located in the US. Call me conservative and timid, but I feel safer in being governed by my wretched rulers in Delhi than by the charming and no doubt benevolent masters in Washington.

As for the 'international community' I am afraid I do not recognise this animal. When was it born? What are its claims to calling itself international? Or a community, for that matter? I do hope that we are not looking for a politically correct name for what was once called the white man's burden by presumably an equally benevolent and enthusiastic set of persons. Forgive me if I sound shrill. But I do wish to say a big NO-THANK-YOU to the suggestion of the WFD. If democracy is one of the essentially contested concepts of modern social theory, the cognitive enterprise of making sense of democracy, of thinking, writing or doing research on democracy cannot but be inescapably political. I do not see how can we even begin to handle the WFD poser without asking an elementary question: can we democratise the practice of thinking about democracy? This in turn might allow us to ask more basic and disturbing questions: Which democracy? Whose world? I do hope that democrats assembled here do not wish to insure themselves against the cognitive and

political hazards that such questions pose.

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* I would like to dedicate these remarks to the memory of Neelan Thiruchelvam, one of the finest public intellectuals and activists South Asia has produced in recent times, who was killed last year by the LTTE for struggling for precisely those values that we discuss in this panel: recognition of ethnic multiplicities through federal institutional arrangements in a democratic setting.

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