
UNIT 3 NATURE OF INDIAN DIVERSITIES AND NATIONALIST RESPONSES

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

Nehru's catch-phrase 'unity-in-diversity' is perhaps best reflective of modern nationalist responses to the challenges posed by diversities. Travelling through India on the eve of the general elections of 1937, Nehru discovered and enthused about the natural and cultural diversity that he found everywhere—in the physical layout of the land as well as the physical appearances of the people, in their cultural habits and religious differences. But underlying this diversity, he had 'glimpses' of a 'dream of unity'. This unity was not visible in external standardisation of beliefs or customs but was 'something deeper'. It was not just an intellectual unity but an emotional unity to be experienced. Did this unity really exist 'out there' in the world? It is important to note that Nehru wrote of the 'dream' of unity; like any dream, it called for active imagination and effort on our part. Like him, most nationalists saw mind-boggling diversities and dreamt of a unity; but like all dreams, their dream was continuously interrupted, distorted and shaped by the realities of politics.

Let us begin with some clarifications regarding the title. Firstly, on diversity; in ordinary usage, diversity is understood to mean variety and difference. In this sense, diversity may be found everywhere, from the physical landscape to the cultural practices as Nehru discovered. But diversity, in itself, is probably not politically significant until it becomes the basis of a struggle for recognition. Whether we take the question of caste or religion or language or tribe, we discover that nationalist leaders were compelled to respond to diversity in the face of serious challenges posed by some activist reformers and social movements. In other words, Gandhi was forced to investigate the caste question in a political sense when Ambedkar insisted upon in social sense through the separate electorates. Undoubtedly, Gandhi dealt with caste in a moral sense before he met Ambedkar but not so in a political sense. Similarly, when the Muslim League raised the demand for a separate nation, the Congress leaders were forced to consider religious diversity in political terms.

Secondly, there was no single nationalist response to these diversities. Depending on their ideological biases and the immediate political context, nationalists responded differently. These responses may be examined at two levels—the level of ideology and the level of political accommodation. For after all, nationalist response implies not only how some leaders thought

about diversity but also how some compromises had to be made so that diversities and differences were recognised. Historically, caste groups and religious minorities posed serious challenges to the nationalists from the beginning and had to be dealt with regularly. Language and tribe remained somewhat marginal in the consciousness of most nationalists.

3.2 CASTE, UNTOUCHABILITY AND OPPRESSIVE DIVERSITY

Caste identity, either as a fourfold order or as *jati* could not simply be celebrated as an expression of Indian diversity. But it did not become the subject of an explicit national campaign until the early years of the twentieth century. Bhikhu Parekh has noted that as Indian nationalists began to demand social and political equality from colonial government, the fact that such equality was denied to many within the Hindu society had also to be faced. A second political reason was that Hindu leaders began to see that internal divisions and disunity had to be overcome in order to wage an effective struggle against colonialism. Lala Lajpat Rai lamented how untouchability had caused many to convert thereby increasing the numerical strength of the Muslims and Christians. He warned that Hindus might become minorities in their own country unless they set their house in order. Thus untouchability slowly but definitely became a matter of shame, a 'blot' on Hindu conscience to be removed. Despite widespread consensus on the issue, the Congress did not pass a resolution condemning untouchability.

Ideologically, Hindu nationalists drew upon different intellectual sources to attack untouchability. Some resorted to Hindu scriptures to argue that there was no religious basis for the practice. But the Hindu texts could not be said to be opposed to the practice in an unequivocal manner. Others opted to follow European liberal sources and saw the practice as an inhuman and unjust inheritance best left behind. Nehru voices liberal opposition when he argued that caste identity leads to the exclusion and suppression of some groups from the mainstream and discourages the pursuit of merit and excellence in all. A third strategy was to simply launch a political critique of the institution pointing out how the practice harmed the anti-colonial struggle.

But untouchability slowly forced the nationalists to interrogate the larger question of caste itself. Most nationalists felt that the caste system was originally rational and good. The underlying principle, they speculated, must have been division of labour or occupational specialisation. Gandhi, for example, felt that it provided for hereditary callings that prevented competition, transmitted religious and moral norms and practices, ensured local order and peace and provided an emotional and economic support system. Thus although sound in principle, human greed and selfishness had vitiated this institution and it had degenerated. What was to be done now? Liberals hoped that caste would slowly die out and be forgotten. The traditionalists, who wished to justify a non-hierarchical caste system, one where vocational training would be based on diverse natural aptitudes, faced an uphill task.

Ambedkar launched the most devastating critique of this position claiming that caste was an integral part of Hinduism, that there was nothing rational or ethical or efficient about classifying people as superior or inferior at birth, that untouchability was an integral part of the caste system and that none of these could be simply reformed away without a major overhaul of the religion itself. He reminded that even enlightened saints and seers like Samkara or Ramanuja never attacked social inequality, only inequality before God. Ambedkar's wrestling with this question and his final exit from Hinduism are telling in this regard.

Gandhi himself repeatedly tried to distinguish between caste and hierarchy, caste and untouchability and eventually conceded that 'caste had to go'. But then it is questionable whether Gandhi fully triumphed over upper caste biases in his own activity. As Dilip Menon has noted, Gandhi's speeches on his Trivandrum tour are replete with appeals to lower castes to observe cleanliness and eschew vices like alcohol. In north India, *shuddhi sabhas* had been in operation for long. On the one hand, this emphasis on cleanliness draws upon the brahminical obsession with purity and pollution. Undoubtedly, Gandhi was more progressive than the orthoprax Namboodri pundits of Trivandrum who did not wish the untouchables to be using the same roads. But Gandhi primarily saw untouchability as a 'sin' of the caste Hindus who had to repent. That is why he involved the caste Hindus rather than the untouchability in his Harijan upliftment programme. Bhikhu Parekh has noted that Gandhi never took the caste question beyond a moral and religious dimension to a political level. This was crystal clear in his opposition to separate electorates in the Poona fast of 1932.

Casteist attitudes persisted also at other levels in the nationalist movement. Ranajit Guha has alerted us to the fact that those who did not participate in *Swadeshi* or *Non-cooperation* campaigns faced social boycott from the nationalist neighbours in many villages. Even when nationalists were disowning caste at a theoretical level, they relied on caste sanctions in practice. If someone used Liverpool salt, social boycott was resorted to. Or if someone did not join the swadeshi cause, he would be denied services of a barber or washerman; and without the services of these professionals, a Hindu could be rendered impure. In other words, while caste is being denied at one level, it was being reinforced at another level.

The paternalistic tone within nationalist discourse has obscured the fact that during the national movement, so-called lower castes were asserting themselves at various levels. In the south, E. V. Ramasami Naicker, later famous as Periyar or the 'Big One' pushed the non-brahminical movement in radical and leftist directions. In this movement, large numbers were rejecting temple-entry, priests officiating at weddings and so on. Time and again, movements from below attempted to divert the nationalist movement and deepen it.

Despite these shortcomings, the Constitutional settlement aspires to empower the SC's and OBC's through special provisions designed to increase political representation and enhance their economic and employment opportunities. Article 17 abolished untouchability while articles 15 and 19 are explicit in providing for special provisions for some caste groups. There is to be a National Commission for overseeing the working of the safeguards and report to Parliament.

3.3 RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY VERSUS COMMUNALISM

The Indian nationalists had to contend with diversity and differences within religions as well as between religions within the Indian context. Most nationalists, whether they were Hindu revivalists like Tilak or liberals like Nehru explicitly rejected the idea of a majoritarian rule based on one religion or language. On the surface, they eschewed thinking of the nation in terms of a single religious identity.

At a general level, religious diversity, in itself, was not a problem; in fact, it was cherished as a unique manifestation of Indian, more specifically Hindu, toleration. But communalism, that is, a 'narrow group mentality basing itself on a religious community but in reality concerned with political power and patronage of the interested group' was a problem fuelled by the divide and rule policy of the British.

But then few nationalists managed to transcend communal thinking and preserve diversity within and between religions. Hindu revivalists such as Tilak considered diversity within Hinduism as inhibiting Hindu unity to some extent. Sectarian prejudices were seen as weakening the Hindu community. He saw history largely as a struggle between different religious communities. In the past, he claimed, Buddhists attacked Hinduism; in the future, he foresaw Christianity challenging Hinduism. Against this threat, Hindu community had to fortify itself. The way in which Tilak looked at the past was to some extent conditioned by his hopes for the future. He did not ask whether battle lines were drawn in the past in the same manner as they were in the present, that is, in terms of religious identities and communal loyalties.

Further, Tilak's vision of the future where he saw the Hindus united into a strong community also had to be examined. To what extent is such a vision friendly to the diversity within Hinduism? Most nationalists, be it Tilak or Radhakrishnan approached Hinduism through selective metaphysical ideas of *advaita* and neglected the rich layered diversity of practice. To some extent, they resorted to some key texts like the *Gita* and *Upanishads* and attempted to streamline the diversity of Hinduism along the lines of semitic religions, i.e., one text, one god and perhaps one organisation or church? In turn, this leads to a denial of conflicting theologies within Hinduism that contributed to its strength at different historical junctures. Further, the attempt to introduce Ganesh and Shivaji festivals to mobilise the Hindus into a community opened up the dangerous possibility of the political use of religion for majoritarian ends. His opposition to the Age of Consent Bill which sought to raise the marriageable age for girls from 10 to 12 also lent weight to orthodox Hindus. Although Tilak himself was not personally against the Muslims and commanded many admirers among them, he inaugurated a style of politics that contained the seeds of an aggressive Hindu nationalism. Even during his time, *Swadeshi* often got mixed up with Hindu religiosity although there were dissenters. Rabindranath Tagore's entry and exit from *Swadeshi* was probably the most eloquent expression of both the attractiveness and anxiety induced by such a heady combination of radical politics and religiosity.

In contrast, Gandhi forged a nationalist response that was relatively more inclusive and less aggressive vis-à-vis other religions. Besides the *Gita*, he appealed to other sources such as Sermon on the Mount, Jain ideal of *ahimsa* and Vaishnavist *bhakti*. Gandhi continued to conceive of the Indian nation based on Hindu ideals such as *swaraj* or *Ram Rajya*. But through the ideal of non-violent action, he hoped to temper the assertive impulse from turning into aggressive Hindu nationalism. His vision of Hindu community did not require new temples on disputed sites. Also, he would have reminded Hindus that mythic sites are not to be confused with specific locales; *bhakti* theology claims that ultimately these spaces are to be found in the heart. Gandhi was probably only one devotee to have said that the *Gita* and *Koran* are his two eyes. As Ashis Nandy puts it, Gandhi forged a religious tolerance which was perhaps more suited to the Indian psyche. He was open to others in and through his active religious practices. This openness was not acceptable to fanatical Hindus.

A third ideological response to religious diversity came from liberal secular persons such as Nehru. For Nehru, Muslims were not a community opposed to the Hindu community. He saw them as equally divided by class, language and ideologies. Similarly, he did not see the Hindus as a homogeneous community. As noted above, he was more concerned about this kind of thinking leading to conflict. Nehru grasped that people could believe in different gods and books but he was apprehensive of the political passions generated by faith. But then Gandhi realised

that in modern times, politics is everywhere and so religion gets politicised. The problem is not to shield any realm from politics but how to train people so that they respect democratic norms and are forced to respect rule of law while using religious ideologies and symbols for their own interests.

Now these ideological responses were shaped by different political circumstances and movements on the ground. Were Hindus and Muslims really divided into clear-cut communities as Tilak encourages us to think? Or were they really living in perfect amity until the British came to divide and rule? As Sumit Sarkar points out, the development of communal and national consciousness are both modern phenomena in that they were facilitated by modern economic linkages and communications. Before that, Hindus and Muslims in different locales may have discovered their differences but they may not have thought of themselves as homogeneous communities. Secondly, though Hindus and Muslims may not have lived in perfect amity, communal riots were not regular or frequent events. There were quarrels but there were also Shia-Sunni quarrels and caste conflicts.

The reform movements among Hindus and Muslims helped them acquire a sense of communal identity. Hindu communalism was made possible thanks to reform movements. In the early part this century, Dayanand Saraswati's Arya Samaj succeeded in combining the earlier social reform issues (opposition to child marriage, idolatry, polytheism, widowhood taboos, brahminical dominance etc.) with a pan-Hindu consciousness. Along with *shuddhi* campaigns, they gained deep roots among a variety of caste groups. By the 1890s the Arya Samaj was beginning to criticise the Congress for not being Hindu enough and held conferences at Kumbh Melas and Sanatan Dharma Sabhas. Elsewhere, Ramakrishna Mission in Bengal, Prarthana Samaj in Pune region and Theosophical society in Madras also promoted a sense of Hindu community through their revivalist practices.

What about Muslim communalism? Among them too, reformist as well as revivalist trends arose. In U.P for instance, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's hopes for reforms among the Muslims found a ready audience in traditional Muslim landowners and service families (Aligarh elites) which found their influence declining. Initially, the British supported the reformists in order to counter the spread of strongly anti-imperial, pro-*caliphate* Islam from the Deoband seminary. Subsequently, the British encouraged separatism by arguing that Bengal partition would mean more jobs for Muslims. Though *Swadeshi* did attract some Muslims, British propaganda succeeded in driving the upper classes from the movement.

At a political level, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan had opposed council entry and competitive exams for civil service on the general ground that they would only empower the Hindus who had an edge in English education. The Indian National Congress had not managed to attract many Muslims. The formation of the Muslim league in 1906 and the concession of separate electorates ensured that separatist agendas were represented and argued out. In other words, separatism may be fostered by elite groups who mobilise people for their own interests.

However, people are not always victims; they also act as agents. If they are being influenced by revivalist and separatist politics, there must be some objective reasons. In the U.P and Punjab, communal riots became frequent from 1880s. Sumit Sarkar points out that socio-economic tensions may have played a part in triggering these riots. Hindu peasants faced Muslim *taluqdars* and landlords in large parts of Avadh and Aligarh, Muslim artisans, shopkeepers and petty traders faced big merchants and bankers in towns of U.P while Muslim peasants faced Hindu money-lenders in the Punjab. In Bengal, riots increasingly occurred in 1906-1907 in different

areas. The targets were Hindu *zamindars* and money lenders and the Muslim rioters were seen by nationalists as hired agents of the British. And then in 1917, crowds of upto 50,000 Hindus attack Muslims in 124 villages in Shahabad and Patna. Cow protection propaganda and Sanatan Dharma Sabhas played a part in provoking such riots but they were not sole causes; considerable rumour mongering and gossip about collapse of British rule as well as simmering peasant discontent may have found an outlet in such riots.

But the people were not always only expressing economic discontent in a communal/religious garb? And not always were Muslims drawn to pro-imperialist and separatist politics. In the Khilafat movement, Muslim leaders like Mohammad Ali issued first a call for Non-cooperation in November 1919. Muslim leaders, conscious of the need for Hindu support to make non-cooperation a success, passed a Muslim League resolution calling stopping *Bakr-Id* slaughter of cows. Gandhi and the Congress, after the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh joined hands with the Khilafat activists. Post-Khilafat time saw the revival of separatist identity thanks to separate electorates and rising unemployment. Hindu communalism was also becoming restive and hostile. From 1924, the Muslim League would raise the demand for a federation with full provincial autonomy until the demand for Pakistan in 1940.

The response of the Congress to the Hindu Mahasabha was always ambiguous. Despite his opposition to Non-cooperation, Madan Mohan Malaviya was courted by the Congress leaders. From the mid-twenties, it had been active along with the RSS in spreading Hindi, *Shuddhi* and Hinduism. In some places like Banaras, the Swaraj Party and Hindu Mahasabha were the same organisation. Moulana Abul Kalam Azad complained in 1937 that Congress members could not join the League but they were not barred from being active in the Hindu Mahasabha. It was only in 1938 that Congress declared the Hindu Mahasabha membership being disqualification to remain in Congress. Through the mid-thirties, the growth of both Hindu and Muslim communalism continued, and Nehru would admit to Prasad in 1939 that they had been unable to check anti-congress feeling among the Muslims. The Muslim Mass Contact Campaign launched by Nehru was subverted by local Congress committees dominated by Mahasabha members anyway.

Further the nationalist voices among Muslims such as Abul Kalam Azad battled against partition for long and their voices did not get recognised. He argued with both Nehru and Patel that partition would not solve the communal problem but make it more permanent. But somehow the mood of the dominant nationalists such as Patel was to accept partition and be done with it. We must also note that there were also other voices such as that of the *Jam'iyat-i 'Ulama-I-Hind* which were averse to the idea of Pakistan and felt that partition would endanger the Muslims in India. But they were not an influential voice among the Muslims.

Thus by hindsight one can see that the nationalist movement failed time and again to check communal developments within itself. Theoretically, this was because many nationalists often thought of Hindus and Muslims as monolithic communities or as raw materials for such communities. Historically, different historical factors somehow aided the development of a communal consciousness and it may not be fruitful to figure out whether it all could have been avoided. What must be clear that is that religious identity and difference, once politicised can take both benign and malevolent forms. A minimum agreement on liberal constitutional principles may be the best way of ensuring that such politicisation of religion does not subvert rule of law or ensue in militant suppression of others. Such a minimal framework is provided by the Constitution which provides for freedom of religion as a fundamental right alongside cultural and educational rights.

3.4 LANGUAGE: HOMOGENEITY OR PLURALITY?

The question of linguistic diversity emerged in the form of debates over national/official language and the feasibility/desirability of linguistic provinces. At an ideological level, it appeared obvious to many that there had to be a 'national' or 'official' language though there was no need for a national or official religion. What about continuing English as the official language? Even Nehru claimed that it was a foreign language and was not known to large masses of our people. But he took a moderate position on the replacement of English.

In general, many nationalists like Tilak found the diversity of languages an obstacle to national unity and urged the need for a common language. He suggested that the *Devanagari* script may be used for all northern languages. Subsequently, the north-centred composition of the Congress and the influence of Hindu Mahasabha contributed to Hindi in the *Nagari* script being elevated into a possible national language for Free India. Gandhi too was keen on promoting Hindi especially in the South. But the southern experience was ahead in this regard. In 1938, Rajagopalachari, the then premier of Madras had introduced Hindi whether in *Nagari* or Urdu script as an optional subject or as he put it 'chutney on a leaf—take it or leave it'. And failure in the subject was not to detain promotion to higher grade. But his experiment nicely contributed to E.V.Ramasami Naicker's popular struggle against Aryan impositions on Dravidian culture. This experience made Rajaji oppose Hindi imposition in post-independent India.

Granville Austin has documented the extent to which Hindi-supporters were to insist upon adoption of Hindi as official language. The 'Hindi extremists' produced a Hindi constitution which even Hindi speakers from North India found hard to understand given the sanskritisation of the same. Austin writes, "a Sanskritized translation would not only be unintelligible except to a tiny group of the initiate, but it was doubtful if a Sanskritized Constitution could be superimposed on the base of parliamentary government and the British common-law tradition to which the nation was accustomed and which Assembly members wanted to retain." Finally consensus emerged over the continued use of English for at least fifteen years until the 1960's agitations over the issue again.

A second issue to emerge was that of linguistic provinces. Given that the British created multi-lingual states to forestall unity, the Congress had agreed in principle to creation of linguistic states. But Nehru was to move slowly on this issue after independence and it only assumed salience in the 1950s.

3.5 TRIBAL REVOLTS: CIVILISE AND PRESERVE?

Writing history from below, Sumit Sarkar notes how tribal communities have always revolted often and violently in India. Instead of being primitive savages confined to the forest (that kind of tribal survives only in romantic imagination and tourist brochures), tribals are integrated into Indian society as the lowest stratum as agricultural labourers, coolies and so on. Commercialisation of forests, land grabbing and increasing immiseration saw many revolts such as Santal rebellion (1855), Munda rebellion (1895-1900) and the Alluri Sitarama Raju movement in Godavari region in 1922-24 to mention a few. Far from being sporadic or spontaneous, these movements revealed clear identification of targets (often landlords and moneylenders), novel modes of political communication, and consciousness of the interlinkages between local exploiters and alien rule. Writing about the market lootings in Midnapur when the prices of essentials soared in 1914-18, Swapan Das Gupta observes that the adivasis selectively attacked cloth merchant-

cum-moneylenders rather than grain merchants for the former were more exploitative during hard times.

The nationalists approached tribals primarily as illiterate masses to be ‘civilized’ and enlisted into the mainstream. As with other lower caste groups, nationalists did not think of them as autonomous agents creating their own history or as groups which might have had agendas different from the Congress. This meant that at a practical level they were mobilised and demobilised as per the needs of the Congress. This was evident in the case of Midnapur adivasi rebellion between 1921-1923. The Congress began enlisting adivasis in this region only around 1921 and successfully organised a strike against very low wages (they were paid 4 pice for carting wood up for 14 miles and 8 pice for 35 miles!). After intense struggle, a compromise was reached which allowed a Congress activist to monitor worker conditions in the jungles. The Congress undoubtedly channelised existing discontent among the adivasis and extended it against paddy exports and foreign cloth. But subsequently the struggle assumed its own dynamism during Non-cooperation and the adivasis took to looting select stores. The withdrawal of Non-cooperation meant that their struggle was denied external links; so when the adivasis rebelled again in 1922 for traditional jungle rights, they were acting autonomously and Congress only backed them indirectly.

The upshot of the above is that Congress’ response to adivasis or tribals paralleled its response to caste differences. The tribals were not seen as preservers of distinctive world – view and values of their own; they had to be ‘civilized’ and enlisted into the mainstream. As such, when they acted as agents on their own initiative for issues and rights which were important for them, they appeared isolated.

This paternalism flowed into the Constitutional settlement where there were several protectionist measures so as to preserve and protect the interests of the Scheduled Tribes. Article 15 which bans discrimination on grounds of race, caste, etc., explicitly allows for some provisions to advance SCs and STs. Article 19(5) dealing with freedom of residence allows special restrictions to promote the interests of STs in some restricted areas. Similarly there are provisions for a special officer, national commission and special grants-in-aid.

3.6 SUMMARY

There was no single nationalist response to the multiple levels of diversity in India. Further all of these diversities did not become politically significant at the same time; they were slowly shaped and constructed as the basis of special or separatist demands over a period of time. On the caste and tribe question, the nationalists conceived their task primarily as one of civilising the downtrodden. As such the response remained moral and social but not political in the sense of empowering them for their own agendas.

In the case of religious diversity, nationalists were quite ambivalent in practice toward both secularism and communalism. Hindu revivalists urged that they were not against any other religion or community but implicitly conceived the Indian nation on the basis of Hindu ideals and symbols. Gandhi’s religious tolerance was one response to religious diversity and perhaps a powerful response, given the living sense of the sacred in India. However, Gandhi’s response was shaped by true faith and humility which cannot be assumed to be mass virtues. Finally Nehruvian response, stemming from an intellectual skepticism and fear of religious passions was also inadequate from the standpoint of lived faith.

It is necessary to appreciate that these responses were forged according to the imperatives of the national liberation movement. The nationalists often had to act according to their grasp of what was practically feasible. Despite the periodic drive for homogeneity, they measured up to the challenges posed by diversity. The Constitutional provisions for the protection of interests of SCs, STs, OBCs and minorities owe a lot to the nationalist response to the diversities.

3.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the ways in which nationalists responded to caste and untouchability. Were these responses shaped by the upper-caste biases of the nationalists as Ambedkar or Periyar would claim?
- 2) How did the nationalists respond to religious diversity and communalism?
- 3) Critically analyse the main arguments of this unit regarding the adequacy of nationalist responses to different kinds of diversity?