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## What Unites India

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Some years ago, I spent a summer in Finland, working at the Helsinki University of Technology. The Finns are a remarkably orderly people – calm, low-key and well-behaved. Lunch at the university cafeteria was invariably a rather sedate affair – people quietly going about their business (which happened, at the moment, to be the ingestion of food) and only speaking when spoken to. This hour of silence every afternoon (broken only by the soft sound of chewing) became so unnerving that I started trying to stir up some excitement. I began soliciting the opinions of my co-workers on the most controversial social topics I could think of – religion, politics, race, abortion, sexuality – to see if I could strike a nerve, stumble onto differences in belief between them strong enough to provoke an argument.

What I found was that for each question, only a single person would stop eating to answer – succinctly stating the prevailing national position, while the rest nodded in agreement. There *were* no differences in opinion – the lunch group (and by extension the rest of the country) was reacting as a single entity, a multi-headed organism which not only responded with a unified voice, but also somehow knew whom to pick next for the role of mouthpiece. I became so obsessed with trying to find something contentious that I started doing my homework – digging up prickly questions like the country's problems with alcoholism, or reservation quotas for the small (5.5%) Swedish-speaking minority. But the response remained the same. My fantasy of Finn vs. Finn never came to fruition – they were much too homogeneous a group. An entire nation of five million bound together with essentially the same beliefs, customs, culture, language – they even *look* the same. What unites Finland? *Everything* does.

India, of course, is the exact antithesis – examining the population, one uncovers only differences. The various divisions in terms of class and culture, religion and language, caste and subcaste, skin tone and physical characteristics, offer a well-stocked boutique of reasons to discriminate against each other. Applying the Finnish model suggests that we should all, like an aggregation of mutually repelling particles, simply fly apart. And yet, we don't. Clearly a different paradigm is at work – a paradigm in which, paradoxically, this very smorgasbord of diversity must play a pivotal role in keeping the country together.

The phrase “Unity in diversity” comes to mind – a concept that Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, asserts is best exemplified by India. According to this philosophy, the danger of fragmentation for a highly diverse society is so acute that it is forced to develop a heightened sense of tolerance of internal differences to survive. In other words, it is the threat of our country breaking apart that keeps us united.

While there is some truth in this idea, it neither captures the full picture, nor explains the mechanism by which such unity might actually be fostered. Consider that aggregation of 1.2 billion individual particles again, many of them rural and illiterate, all of them subject to intense pressure from their own particular needs and prejudices. Surely the most immediate and compelling motivation that drives them (in fact, that drives anyone, Finns included) is self-interest. Try explaining the Wikipedia entry to a poor farmer (or, for that matter a rich businessman) – tell him how a grand social theory predicts he will rise above his own immediate needs to ensure that the flag of unity is always kept aloft. He will laugh in your face.

And yet, a model of independent entrepreneurship does not apply either. Rugged individualism in the American sense is not the order of the day. People belong to well-defined communities – clan, village, sect, *biradari* – and it is membership in these that turns out to be of primary significance. Rather than 1.2 billion separate particles, the Indian model can be thought of as organized into a much smaller number of groups. The sense of belonging within each such group is extremely strong – the individual’s social sustenance (not to mention very identity) is often entirely dependent on it. As a result, self-interest is no longer always the dominant motivator – rather, it might be subsumed into the interests of the group.

What makes these groups so attractive? What endows them with their strong sense of identity, their stability, their cohesive power? The driving force, I believe, is diversity. The groups derive their strength precisely from the inhomogeneity of the larger society from which they are drawn. While there might be several socioeconomic and evolutionary arguments favoring diversity, it is not necessarily something easy to live with. Alien customs can be surprisingly grating. People yearn to hear their own language. The natural defense against an onslaught of difference is to seek those like oneself. This is exactly what the group offers – a refuge from “The Other.” One can seek comfort in a community of individuals with the same customs, the same ideas, the same aspirations, the same background. The reaction to too much diversity, in other words, is that people organize themselves into miniature versions of Finland.

This, then, is one of the surprising effects of diversity – rather than pulling people apart, it induces them to clot together. The phenomenon is observed in various other contexts globally – witness the way so many first generation immigrants in the West retract into the most orthodox religious groups they can find, to distance themselves from the alien culture around. In India, this clotting process repeats itself at higher levels. The groups that people form, regarded now as individual entities, still find themselves awash in a sea of tremendous diversity. The same mechanism as before will now cause these *groups* to clump together in reaction – moreover, this process plays out again at still higher levels, to give a fractal hierarchy. For instance, local communities of leatherworkers might imbed themselves in a larger regional community of the same profession, which in turn might bond with other regional Dalit groups to remain afloat in the surrounding sea of non-Dalit groups.

Let me make a few points about the above model. At each stage, the primary role diversity plays is not necessarily to give birth to new conglomerations, but to provide the pressure that keeps them stable, no matter how they originated. An advantage of the model is that it helps explain why such an elaborate hierarchical structure of subcastes and castes continues to endure in India. It should be noted that significant overlap can exist between various groups and conglomerations – for instance, while an individual’s primary identification might be with a professional, familial, or caste-based group, he might also feel a sense of allegiance to larger conglomerations structured around factors like language or religion.

While individuals or their immediate low-level groups have very limited power, rising through the hierarchy, we eventually reach conglomerations large enough to have political clout (for example, the group of all Dalits, of all Muslims, of Gujaratis, of Punjabis, etc.). How does “Unity in Diversity” apply at this level? Is the Wikipedia explanation finally sufficient? Does the size of these groups make them more sensitive, more responsible, ready to stifle their own needs and desires for the greater good of the country?

The answer is that groups, like individuals, also tend to act in their own self-interest, rather than out of nobility or altruism. If the membership of these large groups was economically stultified, and there were clear advantages to secession, then we would see vigorous campaigns for it played out all over the nation. But the fact is that people’s lives in India *have* been improving – slowly, it is true, but steadily – as most indicators (poverty, rate of literacy, the UN’s human development index) from the past three decades show. In addition, the boom of the last several years has infused sections of the population with a new optimism about the future, even if it might not yet be in their grasp. There does not seem to be a glaring economic imperative, either now or in the recent past, for a group to give up on India and strike out on its own.

When such secessionist ideas *do* arise, however, diversity plays an important role in damping them out. Recall how the top-level conglomerations arose in our model – through the combination of “building block” groups at lower levels. As we ascend this hierarchy of groups from the smallest to the largest, we can expect an increasing amount of variation in background, class, culture, religion. The fact that most individuals end up belonging to several different conglomerations contributes to this variation. The groups at the top, the ones large enough to effect political change, are the least homogeneous – consequently, they will generally have constituents with divergent aims and interests. Uniting all these constituents behind any action, particularly one geared towards radical change, is very difficult. A good example is the secession drive for Khalistan – the fact that the population of Punjab was so divided in terms of religion, class and economic well-being was an important factor in gutting the movement.

There is another way in which diversity promotes unity at this top level – by providing a tangible, flesh and blood “Other.” Each group depends on this “Other” to define itself, to reinforce its own identity. Muslims distinguish themselves from the idol-worshipping Hindus, Hindus from the beef-eating Muslims. Higher castes need the lower ones to set

themselves apart from, through claims of being purer, more religious, more spiritually evolved, and so on. Punjabis wake up every morning and thank their stars they are not born Gujarati or Marathi or Sindhi or (fill in the blank). Within the nervous system circuitry of each group is the realization that to remain relevant, to perpetuate its very existence, the compressive force from this “Other” is essential. Break off to strike out on your own, and there is no longer the pressure to bind the building block constituents together, there is no longer a *raison d’être*. It is therefore in each group’s self-interest to maintain an equilibrium of two opposing actions. First, to draw their populations *away* from other groups by emphasizing the differences, thus engendering internal solidarity. Simultaneously, to lean *towards* the same groups as a corrective measure, so that the mutually beneficial union (marked with no matter how much internecine hostility) is not completely destroyed.

One vital element not mentioned yet in this picture is democracy. This is the crucial release valve which stabilizes the entire model. Disgruntled groups who feel they have been shortchanged know they have the opportunity to express their ire at the polls – they do not have to break away. It could be argued, therefore, that democracy is what really keeps the country intact – by enfranchising all individuals and groups, and providing them with a time-tested method of effecting change.

But suppose we delve a little deeper and ask *why* this form of government has worked so well in India. What gives Indian democracy its robustness, its longevity? As Edward Luce argues in his recent book, *In Spite of the Gods*, it is once again the diversity of the population that works behind the scenes to ensure democracy endures. The country, quite simply, is much too diverse for other forms of government to take root. “Far from endangering democracy, India’s pluralism makes democracy essential,” Luce writes. So even if we accept that democracy is one of the most important factors in fostering unity, we can still trace its continuing survival back to our old friend, diversity.

Sixty years ago, on the eve of Indian independence, Nehru made his famous “Tryst with Destiny” speech. “A new star arises, the star of freedom in the East,” he declared, but it was actually millions of tiny stars that arose that evening; that, at the stroke of midnight, were launched into the sky and set free. The usual Newtonian rules of gravitation did not apply to these stars – instead, what kept them from flying apart on their own independent trajectories was a much more complex force field. A field which drew them together by pulling them apart, a field which depended on their very diversity to ensure unity.

In the first decade of this new millenium, it is important to remind ourselves of what continues to keeps India aloft – the millions of attractions and repulsions taking place between its multiplying stars, between the clusters and constellations they form, between its galaxies both massive and small. The Finnish model will never apply – the romanticized ideal of all these components united in rosy, frictionless harmony. Rather, what’s critical is to safeguard the rights, enfranchisement and continuing inclusion of each component, for the purely selfish reason of continued stability. Only then will India be assured of moving as one as it continues its cosmic voyage towards new trysts with destiny.

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