One or Many: Pluralistic Identities *vis-a-vis* Enforced Uniformity

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Abstract

North East India, though geographically, is at the borders of the Himalayas where one might get the impression that the Himalayan identity seem to be merging into larger cultures and communities, one cannot escape the fact that the region shares so many common features as well as challenges with the rest of the people of the Himalayan region. Across the world, many of the smaller indigenous cultures and their religious and worldviews were under threat from the dominant cultures. And India is no exception. The world, beyond doubt, is a pluralistic place. And to deny the human being the plurality that is so integral to his or her existence is to negate his or her very being itself. A refusal to accept the diversity and difference—whether they are individuals or organised groups—are impoverishing themselves and the rest of the world. Cultures and communities, just as individuals, deserve the freedom to be open and pluralistic. The Himalayas exemplify what India represents—a mosaic of cultures, worldviews, philosophies, languages, ethnic identities and much more. The totalitarian ideologies that overrun Europe from the early part of the 20th century has resulted in catastrophes abound. It should be the collective resolve of all of us including academicians, philosophers, civil society groups, political parties, the media, and all the more the common people to read the writing on the wall, and to strive for a pluralistic and diverse India. There are numerous ways in which a dominant section of people and their ideology challenges and threatens the survival of the smaller communities. The kind of ideology, which advocates religious, cultural, and ethnic domination, rooted in the ideology of one nation, one culture, and one religion could very well lead to serious threats to the minorities and their rights, which in turn poses a serious threat to our nation's survival itself.

Keywords: Pluralism, Identities, Minorities, Hindutva, Totalitarian

Introduction

I carry with me the experience of North East India, where I had lived and worked for more than three decades. Though, geographically, the region is at the borders of the

Himalayas where one might get the impression that the Himalayan identity seem to be melting and fading into larger cultures and communities, one cannot escape the fact that the region shares so many common features as well as challenges with the rest of the people of the Himalayan region. That would give me the legitimacy to speak as 'we' rather than 'you' and 'us' as separate entities.

A poor Exchange, a growing Divide

What, then, is so common about us? We confront many challenges that pose threats to our right Sto be different, plural, in short, ourselves. We are constantly being pressured into following the majority path often at the peril of giving up our individual or collective identity. The barter seems attractive, but the returns are poor and the consequences of the exchange are disastrous. Pope Benedict XVI when he was Cardinal Ratzinger wrote a book titled Introduction to Christianity which contains a parable called 'Honest Jack'. The parable illustrates what I am trying to say: A man carrying a burdensome lump of gold exchanged it successively for a horse, a cow, a goose and a whetstone, which he finally threw into water.

What we are offered in exchange seems to be an enforced uniformity, a serious attempt to impose cultural assimilation and conformity. The tools of the game include cultural assertion on the one hand, and appropriation of diverse smaller, indigenous cultural and religious worldviews, on the other. A divide is being built between the systems and values of the minority and the majority. The former is mockingly called the 'marginal' and the latter undeservingly exalted as the 'mainstream.'

Similar, unacceptable, distinctions are also built around terms like 'language' and 'dialect', 'alternative' etc. Accordingly, the term language is given a superior status and the word dialect is degraded to a lower standing. The word 'alternative' is being offered as a poorer, inferior substitute in the absence of a more deserving entity, be it in the area of medicine, art or media. We have thus 'alternative medicines' or 'alternative media'. Often these are referred to as items that may be at best tolerated in the absence of the real thing! Eventually the wrong is legitimised and made into a norm.

The problem is with the flawed rules of the game: unfortunately in this unequal game of cultural dominance, the player and the referee are the same. There is no level playing field for the minority communities in the match against the so-called majority communities. I use the expression 'so-called', because the game is played on the premise that big is beautiful. Being small, being a minority, speaking a language which is perhaps the primary or even the only medium of communication for a numerically smaller community, belonging to a religious community which has only a few adherents, become a disadvantage. Your voice is not heeded, you are not heard. You march the streets in protest, but you lack visibility.

The World is Plural

At the outset, I refuse to accept the rules of the game. I wish to affirm the right of all individuals and communities—many of them ornament the Himalayas like a necklace—to be different, even when it entails swimming against the current. Cultural and ethnic identities must have the space and opportunity to express and flourish in a free and unhindered manner.

The world, beyond doubt, is a pluralistic place. And to deny the human being the plurality that is so integral to his or her existence is to negate his or her very being itself. A refusal to accept the diversity and difference—whether they are individuals or organised groups—are impoverishing themselves and the rest of the world.

Our identity of oneness consists of many layers. This is so evident in nature. The human person is also a microcosm of many entities. Nonetheless, this 'many-ness' merges into a one. To define life in a one-dimensional way devoid of plurality is to deny it all the space and freedom granted by the giver of life himself. It is true that as part of our growing up, as individuals and groups, we acquire new identities. However, this should not be the result of a constrained, truncated, forced existence that stifles freedom. It should not be like a bonsai, which has been artificially controlled, truncated, forced to grow according to the size of the pot, and thus prevented it from growing into its full potential. The same imagery could be applied to cultures and ethnic communities that are forced to limit their growth under constrains of various kinds.

Cultures and communities, just as individuals, deserve the freedom to be open and pluralistic. Humans have multiple identities and we can find meaning and synthesis without having to sacrifice our individuality and uniqueness. Barack Hussein Obama, the American President, brings forth multiple identities in a complex yet simple way: an African-American, born of a Kenyan father and a white American mother, educated in Indonesia and US, Christian with Islamic roots and a Muslim middle name. He has emerged as a symbol of unity within a multiplicity of identities. It has become easy for the world to connect to him and vice-versa.

People with Multiple Identities

In the political world, we have numerous examples of people with multiple and sometimes conflicting identities: Manmohan Singh, India's Prime Minister, and L. K. Advani, the BJP leader, were born in Pakistan. Pervez Musharaff, the former President of Pakistan, was born in India. Mother Teresa, born in Albania, educated in Britain, lived in Kolkata and came to be known as Mother Teresa of Kolkata, became a citizen of the world. Dalai Lama who was born in Tibet has lived in India for five decades. He has transcended the boundaries of narrow nationalism or the confines of religion to become a world leader, a winner of Nobel Prize for peace.

Late Pope John Paul II was born in Poland, grew up under the oppressive communist regime and was a labourer, ran a secret drama group, became a priest, bishop and the Pope. He moved from his hamlet in Wadowice to the quarries of Poland to the city of Rome and to the centre stage of the world. One can go on citing numerous other examples of people who had transcended their narrow identities like ethnicity, caste, colour, religion, national or geographic boundaries, political ideologies etc.

One can also cite examples to the contrary. We have good number of examples where attempts to straightjacket and streamline the masses have utterly failed. Aurangzeb's narrow religious fanaticism, Hitler's Nazism, Mussolini's Fascism, Mao's false patriotism have all failed. Surely, in a country as diverse as India, any attempt to define us in narrow terms, to confine us to some straightjackets, to reduce us to bonsai plants are bound to fail as they go against our true identity.

We all carry within ourselves seeds of infinite hopes and aspirations, possibilities of being defined and moulded in many ways. Trying to forego that possibility would be trying to trim us and shape us according to someone else's perception of us. It is futile to fuse and merge, to restrict the infinite possibilities we all have in terms of defining our identities, or assuming new roles and identities.

A Multi-Coloured World

In the age of new media, where convergence is the buzz word, where we have text, context, image, sound, symbol, real and virtual—communication has become multi-directional. Our life, similarly, is not painted with just one hue, but a variety of colours, making us a multi-coloured being. There is no contradiction in being an Indian, Muslim, Bengali, vegetarian, speaking English, playing cricket, eating at home or in a fast food joint, drinking whisky or vodka or simple rice beer or lime juice. One may pray in a temple, mosque, church, gurudwara, or choose not to pray at all.

The 'other' is not an enemy, but a complimentary part of me. We should aspire to live in an inclusive society and not in an isolated world of economic sanctions, political controls, social untouchability, cultural superiority, a walled world of ideological apartheids.

It is beyond doubt that fragmented thinking, absolutisation of being, rigid dogma and exclusivist ideologies can stereotype cultures, lead to conflicts and violence, and possibly harm our existence. And such a situation would destroy the richness and beauty of a variegated, pluralistic and rich cultural tradition. If that happens life would be robbed of its charm and beauty, its varied hues and colours and fragrance.

Nature is a harmonious blend of elemental forces and beauty. Poets, artists and saints across time and space have shown us that harmony within and around our existence. Unfortunately, despots and tyrants for their own narrow interests have failed to see it or have turned a blind eye towards that aspect of life.

The Himalayas – A Symbol of Unity in Diversity

The Himalayas, to me, exemplify what India represents—a mosaic of cultures, worldviews, philosophies, languages, ethnic identities and much more. One of the most powerful symbols of what India is may be found in the great rivers that take its birth on the slopes of the Himalayas. The water merges with thousands of other streams and tributaries, making them into the mighty Brahmaputra and the Ganges. Nature, the Himalayas, in particular, never ceases to teach us how to be different and yet related and to be connected, maintains harmony, and how to be assimilated without losing one's identity, selfhood, and freedom.

The Himalayan people have much to offer to a world that tends to be segregated, walled and at the same time globalised into a uniform village, disenchanted without diversity. It is an identity that is truly one and many, a unity in diversity that is talked about again and again. It is not a unity that is imposed from outside or above, but emerging from within, on its own and spontaneously. It is a unity that flows through the concourse of our national bloodstream. To dissect it is to bleed ourselves to death.

India: One and Many

Historically, it is well acknowledged that cultures and civilisations do not exist in isolation, and have influenced and impacted each other. The process of assimilation and osmosis of worldviews, ideas and beliefs, have been an ongoing process. One cannot filter and differentiate or measure the nature and extent of these influences. The Indian civilisation stands out among most other civilizations as a symbol of this diversity and fusion.

Since the middle of the second millennium BCE, Indian civilisation had witnessed streams of groups and communities from different parts of the world migrating into this geographical space. The advent of the Aryans, the Tibeto-Burman speaking Mongoloid groups, the Kushans, the Sakas, the Greeks, the Huns, the Arabs, the Persians, and the Turks have all migrated to India at different periods of history. Each of these migrating communities in turn brought along with them their respective traditions, customs, beliefs and worldviews. Thus, the Indian civilisation became a melting pot of races and cultures.

The Harappan civilisation had extensive trade and cultural contacts with Mesopotamia, Persia, Afghanistan and the Mediterranean world. The process of acculturation which was set in motion as far back as the third millennium BCE continued during the successive periods of Indian history and led to the intermingling of a variety of cultural traits and features. Among other things, the Indian astronomical tradition was influenced by the Babylonian arithmetical system as well as the Greek geometrical system.[1]

1 R.A. Jairazbhoy, *Foreign Influence in Ancient India,* Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1963, Joshi P. M. (ed.), *Studies in the Foreign Relations of India,* Hyderabad, State Archives, Government of Andhra Pradesh, 1975.

According to A.R. Momin, "Vedic society was internally differentiated and pluralistic, rather than monolithic and homogeneous.[2] It was an amalgam or synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan, including the tribal elements. Romila Thapar, an authority on Indian history, has argued that since its very inception Hinduism appears to be a "mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas."[3] Thus, Indian civilisation, since ancient times, has had a pluralistic and composite character. This pluralistic and composite ethos which began during the Vedic period, was supplemented by the rise of Buddhism and Jainism, and was further reinforced during the beginning of the medieval period which witnessed the early flowering of the Bhakti Movement. This composite tradition attained efflorescence during the late medieval period.[4] Pluralism has been one of the quintessential features of Hinduism both at the metaphysical as well as socio-cultural level. At the metaphysical level, truth was considered pluralistic.[5] For example, it is believed that if two Sruti traditions are in conflict, both of them are to be held as law. The inherently pluralistic ethos of Hinduism is reflected, on the one hand, in the wide and divergent range of beliefs and ideas and, on the other, in stratification, customs, traditions and behavioural patterns. Syncretism is conspicuously evident in the survival of non-Aryan deities, rituals and ceremonies in villages which have been the heartland of Aryan expansion.[6] Further, the epic traditions, in both textual as well as folk forms, bear the imprint of pluralism. For instance, the Ramayana has several variants or versions.[7]Hinduism itself is not strictly dogmatised or systematised. It is expressed in a variety of ways in different places and cultures. Many of the popular festivals too, like Diwali for instance, have numerous regional variations.

The unity of India, as pointed out by Momin, is often assumed and taken for granted; it is seldom subjected to a critical examination in a diachronic framework. This is so because the sense of unity, which pervades the fabric of Indian society, is rather elusive, nebulous and enigmatic. Nevertheless, at the pan-Indian level, five interrelated sources of integration and unity can be delineated:

(a) Sanskritic Hinduism at the ideational and institutional levels practised and propagated through a network of centres of pilgrimage,[8]

2 A. R. Momin, "*Cultural Pluralism, National Identity and Development:* The Indian Case", in Baidyanath Sarawati (ed.), Cultural Pluralism, National Identity and Development, New Delhi, IGNCA and D. K. Print World Pvt. Ltd., 2006.

3 Romila Thapar, *Interpreting Early India,* Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, p. 68; Romila Thapar. "The Study of Society in Ancient India", in *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations,* New Delhi, Orient Blackswan, 1978.

4 A. R. Momin, *op.cit.*

5 Irawati Karve, *Hindu Society: An Interpretation,* Poona, Deccan College, 1961

6 McKim Marriott and Alan R. Beals, *Village India: Studies in the Little Community,* Issue 83, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1955.

7 Romila Thapar, "The Ramayana: Theme and Variations", in S.N. Mukherjee (ed.), *Indian History and Thought,* Calcutta, Subarnarekha, 1982, pp. 221-53; V. Raghavan (ed.), *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1980; Paula Richman (ed.), *Many Ramayanas, The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia,* New Delhi, OUP, 1992.

8 M.N. Srinivas, *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritization and Other Essays,* New Delhi, Penguin, 1989; S.M. Bhardwaj,

(b) a composite cultural tradition born out of the protracted interaction and exchange between Hindus and Muslims through the length and breadth of the country, which is best exemplified in the Sufi and Bhakti movements,[9]

(c) Patriotism and nascent nationalism, which emerged during the first War of Independence of 1857 and culminated in the freedom struggle,[10]

(d) the secular-democratic ethos of modern India which is enshrined in the Constitution of the country, and

(e) the country-wide process of modernisation which was set into motion during the British period and which got accelerated in the post-Independence period. The above mentioned themes or currents have wide geographical and cultural reach and are manifested both at the macro as well as micro levels. Even today, these five factors continue to impact the Indian society in different ways.

Since the late medieval period witnessed a creative synthesis of Hindu and Islamic civilizations and thus represents the zenith of India's composite tradition, it merits some elaboration. The protracted interaction between Hindus and Muslims gave rise to what may be termed as the Indo-Islamic tradition. There are two interrelated dimensions of the Indo-Islamic tradition. On the one hand, it manifested itself in syncretistic traditions of music, art, literature and architecture.[11] On the other, it found expression in folklore, dress patterns, food habits, names and surnames.[12]

The Sufis played a crucial role in the development of this syncretistic tradition. The divine and human values practised by the Sufis, their message of love and brotherhood and their identification with the poor and the dispossessed attracted thousands of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs to their fold. Even now their shrines, which are located through the length and breadth of the country, are thronged by millions of people and thereby serve as focal points of integration.[13] The Bhakti Movement, which had a far-reaching impact on Indian society during the medieval period, was significantly influenced by the ideals and precepts of Sufism.

Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India: A Study in Cultural Geography, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1973; B.N. Saraswati, *The Spectrum of the Sacred*, New Delhi, Concept Publications, 1984.

9 Tara Chand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture,* Allahabad, Indian Press, 1936; H.K. Sherwani, *Cultural Trends in Medieval India,* Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1968.

10 A. R. Momin, *op.cit.*

11 A. R. Momin, op.cit. notes that the Ramayana of Tulsidas contains scores of Arabic and Persian words. There are over thirty translations of the epic in Urdu and over a dozen in Persian. In some villages, the Ramayana is ritually recited before the Hindu devotees by a Muslim sage.

12 G. S. Ghurye, Indian Sadhus, Bombay, Popular Books, 1953, p. 157, quoted in   A. R. Momin, *op.cit.*

13 S.P. Jain, *The Social Structure of Hindu-Muslim Community,* Delhi, National Publishing House, 1975; Christian W. Troll (ed.), *Muslims Shrines in India: Their Character, History and Significance,* New Delhi, OUP, 1989; P. M. Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Muin Al-Din Chishti of Ajmer,* New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1989.

In the last decades of the 20th century, with India embarking on economic liberalisation, and integrating its economy with the global economy, there emerge yet other sub-cultures that are more syncretistic and cosmopolitan than the traditional ones. The rise of youth power in politics, especially as expressed in the lowering of the age for voting, increasing demands for younger people to be fielded for elections, the increasing purchasing power of the youth, their ability to network and find new virtual meeting points on the cyberspace are all contributing to the emergence of the said sub-cultures. On the other hand, people with an obscurantist and bigoted mindset, trying to define their culture and religion in narrower ways have launched a process of moral policing that stand against the process of modernisation and change expressed in new forms of social behaviour, clothing, food habits, speech etc. Nonetheless, the youth are revolting in different ways against those who impose moral code of conduct and try to stifle their freedom. It is important not to alienate the youth, who constitute a considerable percentage of our population, from playing their role in shaping the destiny of the nation with their distinctive contribution.

Hindutva — a threat to Pluralism

A pan Indian civilisation, as envisioned and propagated by certain fundamentalist forces, is not possible without being violent to the pluralistic nature of our country. Imposing a uniform culture or religion would only lead to the destruction of India's rich pluralism rooted in diversity of religions, cultures, languages and so on. Those who try to promote a Hindu Rashtra at the exclusion of other identities, as is being openly advocated by the Sangh Parivar and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are cutting the very roots on which India's richness rests. It goes without saying that their attempts are destructive and suicidal.

It should be the collective resolve of all of us including academicians, philosophers, civil society groups, political parties, the media, and all the more the common people to read the writing on the wall, and to strive for a pluralistic and diverse India.

Communalism and fundamentalism, without doubt, are among the major threats that the country is facing today. These two are not new to the country, but what is disturbing is the legitimacy they are receiving by the day. With a highly polarised party politics that is growing by the day, caste politics, religious fundamentalism and religion and caste based polarisation are gaining strength. Political parties are using them strategically and systematically as instruments to gain power.

It should be noted that there is a major difference between Hinduism and Hindutva. The former represents the religion of the vast majority of people in India. Hindutva instead represents a narrow, nationalistic ideology. It is a pseudo-religion without the concept of true transcendence, and it advocates communalism, sectarianism, militancy, violence, intolerance and even endorses the principle the 'end justifies the

means.[14] Today, Hindutva has permeated much of the fabric of Indian society, polity and culture. The dangerous, or at times catastrophic, ramifications are there before our eyes or are unfolding.

The totalitarian ideologies that overrun Europe from the early part of the 20th century has resulted in catastrophes abound. Nationalism, when defined in a narrow and militant way, has a tendency to feed sectarian and separatist forces. Hindutva has drawn inspiration from such aggressive forms of nationalism as Hitler's Nazism, Mazzini's Italian liberal nationalism etc. Asit Krishna Mukherjee, who has a comprehensive knowledge of Nazi philosophy and doctrine, articulated with enthusiasm their application to Indian society with the upper caste as the progeny of the 'Aryan race'.[15] M.S. Golwalkar, the onetime head and chief ideologue of the RSS, was an ardent admirer and emulator of Hitler and his ideas of racial purity.

If the protagonists of Hindutva ideology gains absolute political power, it is likely that India will move in the direction of political dictatorship and a totalitarian regime. The Ayodhya issue since the 1980s, and the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, the Bombay riots of 1992-1993, the Orissa incident of burning alive the Staines in 1999, the Gujarat pogrom, the Orissa carnage in 2007 and 2008, and a host of other similar communal incidents in the country are forebodings of what is yet to come. To make matters worse, the fundamentalist and communal ideology is permeating our national politics, culture, educational system, media, military and the administrative machinery. The end result would be serious threat to the very concept of minority and minority rights, religious freedom, human rights, secularism and cultural and religious pluralism.

There are also attempts to appropriate the identities of the minority communities in Northeast India and the Himalayas by calling them Hindus, or at other times denigrating or ridiculing their religious identities and beliefs by calling them animists or nature worshippers. Such attempts are undertaken with an ulterior motive to make them feel inferior and eventually give up their belief systems. Even when communities opt to change their religious identity, it should be done by their own free will and it should be ensured that their cultural values and richness are not lost in the process. Education and social awareness can be facilitated so that the communities can be guided to make informed choices that contribute to their collective and individual well being.

Linguistic Diversity

Language is probably the most easily identifiable and accurate instrument of articulating the richness and wisdom of an ethnic group. It is the chief vehicle to

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14 J. Kuruvachira, *Politicisation of Hindu Religion in Postmodern India,* Jaipur, Rawat Publications, 2008.

15 Elst. Koenraad, *The Saffron Swastika,* vol.1, the chapter entitled "Was Guru Golwalkar a Nazi? pp. 117-174 quoted in J. Kuruvachira, op.cit.

connect oneself with others as well as with the whole community and with other cultural groups.[16] According to David Crystal, one of the foremost authorities on language, language is the primary outward sign of a group's identity.[17] Language is an indicator of a community's cultural ethos. Language expresses the identity, culture and the worldview of a community, it becomes the most effective tool to express and transmit cultural and ethnic identity. Hence, when a community loses its language it loses the chief repository of expressing its worldview, their knowledge system.

Most of the languages have certain standardised written modes. But the primary function of a language is oral communication. Hence, the speech variations in the same language should not be considered as inferior or incorrect only because they vary from the written, standardised versions. Linguistic bias is often expressed in the way we consider people as rustic, inferior, uncultured, uneducated or smarter or superior, according to the way they speak. We often judge people on the basis of their accent, the kind of vocabulary they use and other specifications of their speech.

The dominant cultures and communities tend to use language as a tool to exhibit or establish their superiority. This attempt to create a hierarchy between the dominant and the 'other' language has to be opposed. Every community and individual has a degree of attachment to one's language. But as Dorian has shown people give up their language due to political suppression, social discrimination, wars, ethnic conflicts, displacement, and epidemics or due to migration necessitated by economic or social factors.[18]

Today, many of the minority languages are facing serious threat to their identity and survival. About fifty percent of the world's languages are spoken in Asia and the Pacific. India alone is home to about 380 languages, of which about 240 are in Northeast India. If we count the languages of the entire Himalayan communities, they will constitute the major portion of the languages of the country, giving it the richest linguistic diversity in India. Thus the linguistic identities of the Himalayan communities cannot be swept under one big carpet of cultural nationalism.

It is argued that linguistic diversity is also linked to biodiversity. When languages die, the treasure trove of traditional knowledge about indigenous medical systems, flora and fauna, folklore and rich oral traditions are lost. This leads to a serious rupture with the past. The UNESCO and other international bodies have recognised the need for adopting mother tongue as the medium of instruction at least till the primary level of education. Approximately 1.38 billion people speak languages that are not used

16 G. Plathottam, "Language Plurality, Biodiversity and Ethnicity: Identity and Change in Northeast India" in T.B. Subha et.al (eds.), *Christianity and Change in Northeast India,* New Delhi, Concept Publishing House, 2009.

17 David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Languages,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

18 N. Dorian, "Linguistic and Ethnographic Fieldwork", in J. Fishman (ed.), *Handbook of Languages and Ethnic Identity,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

for formal education either because they are not written or because they have been deemed unsuitable for education. Children from these communities are instructed in languages other than their mother tongue. It is fair to assume that this affects their learning process and accentuates dropout rates.

Conclusion

There are numerous ways in which a dominant section of people and their ideology challenges and threatens the survival of the smaller communities. The kind of ideology, which advocates religious, cultural, and ethnic domination, rooted in the ideology of one nation, one culture, and one religion could very well lead to serious threats to the minorities and their rights, which in turn poses a serious threat to our nation's survival itself. This ideology, if allowed to succeed, will result in the extinction of the variegated, rich cultural mosaic that constitutes our country. The Himalayas are not only a physical fortress that protects the country, it represents in a microcosm what India is; she is the depository of the sub-continent's cultural, linguistic and religious richness and diversity. We can re-discover the richness and beauty of our country not by using the expression 'unity in diversity' merely as a platitude, but by affirming its worth in a thousand little ways. When we affirm the myriad identities of all the peoples who inhabit India we are affirming our true identity and unity.