

“Disruptive lesser loyalties” in contemporary India

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2014-11-3

Arjun Srinivas challenges arguments that democracy exacerbates divisions in India. He writes that a crucial distinction needs to be made between the expression of cultural identities and secessionist tendencies.



“The homeland is not an abstraction that sends people to be massacred on the war front. Rather, it is a sensibility, a certain taste for life that distinguishes you from the rest.” – A. Camus

Albert Camus, the French-Algerian philosopher was a strong proponent of a Mediterranean identity. According to him, shared sensibility was the basis of nation-hood. All the sundry states along the Mediterranean including North Africa, Iberia and the Levant could therefore, due to their cultural proximity, qualify as constituents of one great nation.

Thinking along these lines, a pertinent question would be: how does India fare in the light of this definition? Not well, some would argue. In *A Million Mutinies Now* [V.S Naipaul](#) has celebrated the birth of the Indian nation during its independence from British colonial rule and its ensuing experiment with democracy. He says “Independence had come to India like a kind of revolution. However, now there were many revolutions within that revolution”. He suggests that competing cultural identities within the subcontinent render India a fractious, untenable entity that would eventually disintegrate into its “disruptive lesser loyalties of region, caste and clan”.

So how significant are these “disruptive lesser loyalties” in contemporary India? Does democracy exacerbate these influences? T.C.A Srinivasa-Raghavan has explored these themes in his article “[Return of the Mansabdar](#)”. Following the euphoria of India’s successful birth struggle, the Central Government consciously tried to accomplish the homogenisation of India. The author argues that the objective was “to create a composite Indian identity to replace the old regional and communal ones”. The success of these policies is debatable. So why pursue it? What are the benefits that accrue from homogenisation?

Raghavan refers to a study by economists Alberto Alesina and Bryony Reich, titled “[Nation Building](#)”, which rigorously examines the costs and benefits of homogenisation. They conclude that for democracies in particular, homogenisation enables better participation in the democratic governance. The convergence of preferences is seen to enhance social capital, and consequently positively influence the productivity of individuals and groups.

Yet both Raghavan and Naipaul are of the opinion that democracy has exacerbated India’s “fissiparous tendencies.” This is manifest in the increasing relevance of regional parties in national politics. The demands for the creation of new states within the union seem to have more political resonance today. There are ramifications on India’s foreign policy as well. India’s relationship with Sri Lanka has been historically influenced by the politics of Tamil Nadu state, which has an ethnic Tamil population of close to 60 million. West Bengal, which shares a border and a heritage with Bangladesh, has continually lobbied for the increased development along the River Teesta, adversely affecting India’s relationship with its eastern neighbour.

Raghavan even quotes instances from popular culture to validate his argument. He observes that that Bollywood films and television increasingly reflect themes and settings that are regional, rather than national in scope. Naipaul argues that regional chauvinistic interests have gained traction due to participatory democracy. Therefore, the narrative is that Indian society is less homogeneous today and is increasingly veering towards several insular entities.

However, there are contemporary trends that contradict this narrative. For this, we need to acknowledge the crucial role of mass media and technology, particularly television and the internet. The generation that grew up in India during the 1990's post-economic liberalisation was the first to have exposure to national television networks. During their inception, most of these networks produced output targeting a national, rather than a regional audience. News networks that were established in the early 1990's persist to date and set the agenda for public discourse. It wouldn't be far-fetched to assume that these influences have led to shared sensibilities and opinions. The proliferation of mobile technology and other modern forms of communication has actually encouraged migration between the states. Consequently, it is easier today than ever before for two individuals from disparate parts of the country to communicate and engage with each other.

Furthermore, we need to consider the imperatives of economic development. The nature of development in India has been highly unequal, with a few regions receiving the major share of the Foreign Direct Investment. Migration is mostly concentrated to the National Capital Region and the southern states of Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. This immigration has led to the emergence of cosmopolitan cities which may not be ideals of multiculturalism but are melting pots of diversity.

A crucial distinction needs to be made between the expression of cultural identities and secessionist tendencies. Homogeneity in terms of preferences needn't necessarily manifest itself as cultural similarity. India's strength as a nation lies in its pluralistic society and liberal ethos. In a vivid and memorable description of India in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Salman Rushdie likens India's cultural tapestry to a 'palimpsest'. A palimpsest represents a painting on a canvas, which is painted over several times. The eventual outcome may not be orderly, but it is nuanced and immensely beautiful.

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