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**Cultural Pluralism in India:**

**protecting a symbol of National Identity**

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*India that is Bharat has been one of the great ancient civilizations. This civilisation originated about 7000 BC and lasted till the end of Ashoka’s rule. Like any civilization it evolved certain unique features of its own which, in their entirety and inter-relatedness, became its dominant feature distinct from other civilizations. Indian civilization is distinguished from other civilizations in respect of its continuity and heterogeneity, its accommodating history and its composite character. Land of India has witnessed multiple waves of migrations over tens of millennia from Central Asia, western Asia, western Eurasia, Tibeto-Burman and others. The advent of the Aryans, the Mongoloid groups, the Kushans, the Sakas, the Greeks, the Huns, the Arabs, the Persians, and the Turks migrated to India at different points of time. Migrating people brought with them their cultures, religions, philosophy, wedding rituals, festivals, cuisine, clothings, music, paintings, sculptures and behaviour patterns etc. The groups that migrated to India were able to maintain their unique cultural identities within a larger society and their values and practices were accepted by the wider culture. India witnessed an extensive process of indigenization of these migrant groups. This process created a composite fabric of Indian culture woven with strands and shades of varying textures and colours making it a mosaic of races and cultures. This amalgamation created a Cultural Pluralism in India.*

**Introduction**

A critical understanding of the unity of India shows that the fabric of Indian society has been built around certain symbolisms evolved out of centuries of merging of these cultures. This includes the Sanatanism and Hinduism built through a network of centres of pilgrimage; a composite cultural tradition born out of the long interaction and exchange between Hindus and Muslims through the length and breadth of the country, such as the Sufi and Bhakti Movements; patriotism of all hues which emerged during the First War of Independence in 1857 and culminated in the freedom struggle and Country’s independence in 1947; secular-liberal-democracy as enshrined in the Constitution of India; and the process of nation building and political developments that ensued after the independence of the Country.

By making India as a Sovereign {Socialist, Secular} Democratic, Republic and secure all its citizens: justice (social, economic and political); liberty (of thought , expression, belief, faith and worship); equality (of status and of opportunity); and promote among the citizens fraternity, the framers of Indian Constitution vowed to protect the unity and integrity of the the Country. Build unity in diversity and protect all the identities. Actuated by the vital considerations of national unity, integrity and political stability, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister

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of India, strove to ensure that apprehensions and misgivings of different identities and sub-identities either of culture, religion or language were resolved. While striving to secure to the minorities such constructional safeguards by protecting their interests, and the right of the minorities to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice, his aim was not to perpetuate the islands of [religio-cultural] minorities but to assuage their feelings of uncertainty and fear of domination or encroachment by the majority of their vital interests touching religion, script, language and culture.

Apart from the Preamble which declares India a Secular State with equal respect to all religions and having no state religion, Article 29 was included to protect the interests of the minorities by making a provision that any citizen/section of citizens having a distinct language, or culture have the right to conserve the same. And that no discrimination would be done on the ground of religion, race, caste, language or region. Articles 30 guarantee certain rights to the minorities by giving them the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. Further that the state was not to shall not to discriminate against any minority educational institution whether based on religion or language, in granting aid to educational institutions.

**Important Components of India’s Pluralism**

India has evolved as a plural society. It is repository of multiplicity of cultures --a synthesis of diverse social and cultural elements. A grand synthesis of cultures, religions and languages of the people converged on this land. National unity and integrity in the country have been maintained even though there are sharp economic and social inequalities. It is this synthesis which has made India a unique mosaic of cultures. India is, in fact, a panorama of its own types without a parallel in other continents. The urge for unity in diversity has firmely ingrained in our ethos and public discourse. We can see very clearly here that people of different religions, creeds, castes, languages, cultures, lifestyle, dressing sense, faith/or not faith in God, rituals of worship, etc live together with harmony on one land of India. It is a vast and most populated country of the world where people of different religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, Christianity and Parsees live together but everyone believes in one theory that they are destined to live together by divinity or historical evolutionary process. People here celebrate Holi, Diwali, Eid, Christmas, Good Friday, peacefully without harming other religious people. India has retained its diversity and given a dignified place in its mainstream to a variety of people with different physical features and cultural patterns. In short, India is “the epitome of the world”. Some of the important components of its pluralism include:

**Race**

The India received a large number of migratory races from the Western and the Eastern directions. Majority of the people of India are descendants of immigrants from across the Himalayas. This has created a variety of ethnic elements in India making it an ethnological museum such as Turko-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Scytho-Dravidian, Aryo-Dravidian, Mongo o- Dravidian, Mongoloid and Dravidian. These seven racial types can be reduced to three basic types- the Indo-Aryan, the Mongolian and the Dravidian. In his opinion the last two types would account for the racial composition of tribal India.

**Language**

As per 1961 census India had as many as 1,652 languages and dialects. On the basis of

these languages there was created the 8′h Schedule of the Constitution of India recognising 22 languages such as Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmir. Konkani. Malayalam. Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali. Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit. Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, and Sindhi, Santhali, Boro, Maithili andDogri. But four of these languages namely Sanskrit, Kashmiri, Nepali and Sindhi are not official languages in any State of the Indian Union. But all these languages are rich in literature

#### Religion:

India has a lot of religious heterogenity even through nearly 80 per cent of the population profess different shades of Hinduism. There are people adhering to various faiths, particularly of Hinduism, (80.5%), Islam (13.04%), Christianity (2.03%), Sikhism (1.9%), Buddhism (0.8), Jainism (0.4%). The religions with lesser following are Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Bahaism etc. While Hindus and Muslims are found in almost all parts of India, the remaining minority religions have their pockets of concentration. Christians have their strongholds in the three Southern States of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Meghalaya. Sikhs are concentrated largely in Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, parts of Rajasthan, Buddhist in Maharashtra and Jains are mainly spread over Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat, and also found in most urban centres in India.

#### Caste:

India is also land of Caste or Jati, the people of endogamous status group practicing a specific traditional occupation. There are more than 3,000 Jatis in India. These are hierarchically graded in different ways in different regions. Practice of caste system is not confined to Hindus alone. We find castes among the Muslims, Christians, Sikhs as well as other communities. There is hierarchy of Shaikh, Saiyed, Mughal, Pathan among the Muslims. Furthermore, there are castes like Teli (oil pressure). Dhobi (washerman), Darzi (tailor) etc. among the Muslims. Similarly, caste consciousness among the Christians in India is not unknown. Since a vast majority of Christians in India were converted from Hindu fold, the converts have carried the caste system into Christianity. Among the Sikhs again we have so many castes including Jat Sikh, Arora, Khatri, Ramgarhia, Saini, Kamboj, Mahton, Chhimba, Mohyal and Majahabi Sikh etc.

**Culture:**

India has an amazing cultural diversity throughout the country. The North, South, East and Northeast, the West have their own distinct cultures and almost every state has carved its own cultural niche. This cultural richness is unparalled in the world.

**Festivals:**

A land of festivals, there are festivals in India for every season, for every legend and myth, every region and every religious place. Some are exclusive to certain communities and religions while others have a national and secular character about them. Festivals are held throughout the year offer a unique way of seeing Indian culture at its best. Major religious Festivals in India include Holi, Raksha Bandhan, Diwali, Krishna Janamastami, Durga-Puja, Dussehra, Maha Shivaratri, Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-zuha, Christmas, Easter, Buddha Purnima, Mahavir Jayanti, etc. Seasonal and Harvesting festivals that are celebrated in India includes Basant Panchami, Pongal, Makar Sankranti, Lohri, Onam, Baisakhi, Bhogali bihu, etc.

**Cuisine:**

The cuisine in India is classified into three major categories. Sattva, Rajas and Tamas.

Sattva stands for balance, Rajas for Passion and Tamas for indulgence. Food is consumed according to the lifestyle of a person. India is known for its love for food and for its diverse multi cuisine. The cooking style varies from region to region. Major Indian foods include South Indian, Punjabi, Mughali, Bengali, Kashmiri, Rajasthani and Gujarati.

**Art forms:**

Religions, mythology and classical literature form the basis of most of the performing arts in India which goes back to thousands of years. Some of the world-famous dance forms that originated and evolved in India include Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniattam and Odissi. Indian dance too has diverse folk dance forms such as Bhangra of Punjab, Yakshagana of Karnataka, Bihu of Assam and Chhau of Jharkhand. Music also plays a very important role in the lives of Indians. Indian architecture has evolved through various ages in different regions of the country. Sculpture and architecture in India dates back to the Indus valley civilization.

**Common Political Culture**

Lucian W. Pye, the great political scientist, and comparative politics writes that “political culture is the set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments of that give orders and meaning to a political process and that provide the underlaying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour in the political system. India is a land of diversities with equally powerful strands of unity. Political discourse here has evolved through different routes in different regions/states. There is tremendous and sharp political diversity in the national and state politics. Still all political fora agrees to a single constitutional system, have faith in the common political system and trust in common political structures. The country has one National Flag, National Bird, National Flower, National Tree, National Anthem, National River, National Aquatic Animal, State Emblem, National Calendar, National Animal, National Song, National Fruit, Currency Symbol etc.

It is argued that India’s cultural plurality brings in greater tolerance among different groups, resulting in less prejudice and discrimination toward each other. Cultural pluralism also exposes the public and policymakers to multiple perspectives, which can improve critical thinking on decisions related to leading issues. Cultural pluralism helps preserve the unique traditions, identities and languages of the many cultures within one society. However, a counterargument to that is given that cultural pluralism threatens to divide the country into more isolated units and, if pursued vigorously, could produce a more entrenched “ghetto mentality." Members of certain cultural groups become so sensitized to prejudice that they become self-righteously intolerant of any type of criticism. They contend that cultural pluralism could threaten India’s ancient values and goals and threaten the preservation of its cultural history. Plural Societies bring with them competing claims or entitlements – each of which can be justified and defended. Such societies, by their very nature, are challenging to govern.

Cultural pluralism, however, is a symbol of India’s national identity embedded in the broader context of Indian civilization. This pluralism forms the basic structure of our society, it is a dynamic and creative vision of Indian civilization. An important characteristic of this pluralism is its ever-evolving synthesis which makes India as a nation in the making and not as a closed system or a finished product. As Jawaharlal Nehru said in one of his statements that ‘Indianness is a matter of feeling, a dream, a vision, and an emotion’. Cultural pluralism as part of our national identity is in tandem with the notion of inclusive growth and development.

Threats to India’s cultural pluralism are from the forces who project India as ‘one nation, one people and one culture’ expressed in variety of ways. To suggest that all the Indians irrespective of their historical, geographical and cultural moorings must adopt one culture threatens our sipirit of coexistence and unity in diversity. To become a state the people need to have a common politico-legal system and to become a nation requisite is a shared value system not necessarily by having one language, one culture or even one religion. No society in the world is completely homogenous and there are divisions on different bases which sometimes are opposed to each other resulting in conflicts, protests, riots and violence. Many in plural societies hold such strong beliefs that their desire to convert others to their way of thinking can lead them to commit violent actions such as vandalism or even terrorism. This fanaticism and extremism is a real danger to cultural pluralism of India.

Such sectarian tendencies are a potential threat to the sovereignty, democracy, integrity, and in short the very existence of India. This is a restrictive, and negative response to the process of modern nation building. In a multi-cultural society like India mutually incompatible, and antagonistic viewpoints may be there but those conflicts have to be resolved through political, social, and cultural discourse, through cooperation, accommodation, and conflict resolution. Any group, individual or organization indulging in contrary to this is doing disservice to our exercise of nation-building and is damaging the Idea of India we envision for the rest of the 21st century.