



GLOBAL CENTRE FOR PLURALISM CENTRE MONDIAL DU PLURALISME

Why Did India Choose Pluralism?

LESSONS FROM A POSTCOLONIAL STATE

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Like many postcolonial states, India was confronted with various lines of fracture at independence and faced the challenge of building a sense of shared nationhood. The partition of India in 1947 was driven by the demand for two states on the basis of the theory that Hindus and Muslims constituted separate nations. While the creation of Pakistan was an affirmation of this idea, India remained committed to the recognition of cultural diversity and the possibility of pluralism despite a large Hindu majority. In many postcolonial states, the response has been to suppress difference in the name of unity, however an attempt was made in India to conceive of the nation as pluralist. A number of institutional vehicles were adopted to affirm and promote the inclusion of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities as well as caste groups.

India's pursuit of a pluralist conception of postcolonial nation-building may be instructive even as it is flawed.. Several dimensions of its historic experience are of interest. First, what were the antecedents that made this choice possible? Some

commentators have argued respect for diversity is part of the Hindu tradition, but the Indian National Congress was avowedly secular, suggesting other forces were at play. Second, how did the commitment to pluralism interact with other hierarchies, such as the role of caste? In India, as elsewhere, the commitment to pluralism is partial and selective. Some forms of pluralism are more highly valued and protected than others, and alongside visible affirmations of some forms of difference, other hierarchies remain hidden or disavowed. Finally, what accounts for the durability of India's commitment to pluralism? Although it faces grave challenges—most recently from a strand of Hindu nationalism—a commitment to pluralism remains a living part of Indian national identity.

In commissioning the India case, the Centre seeks to understand why and how a commitment to pluralism—making a virtue of respect for diversity rather than viewing it as a regrettable necessity—was built into India's self-understanding as a postcolonial state. Seventy years on, what lessons can we learn

This paper is part of a new publication series from the **Global Centre for Pluralism** called **Accounting for Change in Diverse Societies**. Focused on six world regions, each "change case" examines a specific moment in time when a country altered its approach to diversity, either expanding or eroding the foundations of inclusive citizenship. The aim of the series – which also features thematic overviews by leading global scholars – is to build global understanding of the sources of inclusion and exclusion in diverse societies and the pathways to pluralism.

about the dynamics of difference—both horizontal and vertical—within the self-identity of the country, and about the limits of such self-identities in the lives of citizens? Does a normative and institutional commitment to pluralism continue to underpin India’s conception of national identity today?

CASE NARRATIVE

As a postcolonial state undergoing a bitter partition of territory along religious lines at the time of independence in 1947, India’s adoption of a pluralistic approach to managing its tremendous diversity was not inevitable. Several factors made this possible. The existence of historical antecedents that supported a pluralistic choice at the time of nation-building was one factor. Long before India existed as a modern state, various forms of state power in the subcontinent, including empires and regional kingdoms, favoured the accommodation of societal diversity. Both indigenous and foreign rulers largely respected the internal rules and practices of social groups.

Indian nationalisms that emerged in the late-nineteenth century in response to British colonialism reflected these antecedents, but also contained opposed ideological strands. Secular nationalism equated nationality with inclusive citizenship. In contrast, Hindu nationalism sought to unify India’s diversities around a core of Hindu religion and culture and the Hindi language. Leaders of the Indian National Congress, such as Gandhi and Nehru, managed these opposing views, emphasizing that cultural diversity was India’s distinguishing civilizational trait, declaring it to be a source of

strength rather than a weakness. Their different visions of pluralism became central to Indian nationalism. Furthermore, the Congress leadership’s accommodation of people and of debates from across the ideological-political spectrum enabled the building of a broad coalition in favour of an Indian nation, as well as a political culture that was substantially tolerant of dissent.

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Reflecting historical legacies of accommodation of social diversity, as well as the nationalist elites’ commitment to an inclusive notion of Indian national identity, the Indian constitution recognized several group-differentiated rights. Two distinct approaches can be identified: an integrationist approach established legislative and employment quotas for ex-Untouchable (lower caste) and tribal groups; and a restricted multicultural approach provided associational and institutional autonomy for religious and linguistic groups, albeit subject to other constitutional rights, including those of equality and non-discrimination.

In practice, religious differences were less well accommodated than ethnic diversity by the Congress-led nationalist movement. Claiming to represent all sections of society, the Congress rejected Muslim

League demands for separate representation of minorities and for power-sharing mechanisms that it equated with colonial divide-and-rule strategies. Despite the relative success of accommodationist policies for linguistic diversity since Independence, a vision of multicultural minority rights has eluded India's policymakers, who remain imprisoned by India's 1947 partition on religious lines. In turn, this normative deficit has created fertile ideological ground for the growth of Hindu nationalism that is fueled by a sense of victimhood, the sense that secular nationalists and the state have denied due recognition and resources to the majority religion in India.

Multiple exclusions continue to plague Indian society. Quotas have expanded to include electorally powerful intermediate "backward" castes, but remain under-filled at higher levels of employment and education in the case of Dalit and tribal groups. Quotas foster resentment and backlash among non-beneficiaries, strengthening support for the Hindu right. Police brutality in areas populated by tribal groups that contain valuable resources is common and condoned by governments pursuing economic growth and security.

Muslims suffer multiple forms of exclusion—under-representation in legislatures, government jobs and educational institutions; high levels of poverty, illiteracy, poor access to health amenities, segregated housing; and increasing levels of violence since the rise of Hindu nationalism in the 1990s. The few attempts to improve their status have not succeeded, due in part to the tacit opposition of substantial sections of government bureaucracies to implement inclusionary policies. The refusal to collect or make

available data according to religious and caste identities prevents the tracking of measures designed to help disadvantaged groups.

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Since the election of a Hindu nationalist government in 2014, incidents of violence and intimidation against religious and political minorities, including secular and Left critics have increased. The Indian constitution does place several institutional restraints on majority governments—among them judicial review, an independent election commission, and a federal division of powers. The constitution's substantive protections for individual rights and group autonomy and formal commitment to institutional heterogeneity provide additional avenues for challenging majoritarian policies. Whether these checks are strong enough to resist and reverse the tide of Hindu nationalism remains to be seen.

THROUGH A PLURALISM LENS

Sources of Inclusion and Exclusion

The Global Centre for Pluralism asked each author in the Change Case series to reflect on the sources of inclusion and exclusion through a pluralism lens—that is, using the Centre’s “drivers of pluralism” framework. Some highlights from the full India case are included here.

Livelihoods and Wellbeing

- Marginalized castes and classes, tribes, Muslims remain under-represented in all sectors of employment.
- Correcting historic exclusions through affirmative action policies or quotas takes time, and requires mechanisms for monitoring progress. This includes the collection and availability of data disaggregated by social groups, often with-held by governments as sensitive.

Law, Politics and Recognition

- To create an inclusive polity, a constitutional framework that recognizes group membership, as well as standard liberal individual rights are important.
- The Indian constitution recognizes multiple sources of group identity - eg. religion, language, caste, tribe – offering multiple routes to group claims.
- A constitution-making process characterized by extended public debate, and a willingness to compromise in order to reach consensus, has underpinned the successes of the Indian constitution.

- Federalism, including power-sharing, has enabled the accommodation of linguistic and regional diversity. At the same time, it has also often diminished protection for minorities.
- Institutional heterogeneity in India’s political system (eg. parliamentary sovereignty as well as judicial review) sustains pluralism in India.
- Political leadership can make a crucial difference to the inclusion of minorities.

Citizens, Civil Society and Identity

- Non-governmental organizations, a free press, and a critical intelligentsia have served as sources of inclusion, highlighting the abuses of state power. These are challenged by forces of Hindu nationalism today.
- Hierarchical and segmented patterns of diversity pose a challenge to inclusionary policies. These include growing residential and occupational segregation of Muslims in many cities.

CONCLUSION

Unlike many other post-colonial societies, India chose a pluralistic constitution at independence despite strong countervailing pressures in the aftermath of a bloody religious partition in 1947. Several historic antecedents and circumstances, including the presence of political leaders who were committed to minority rights, made this possible. India’s constitution continues to endure as a standard in public life and enjoy legitimacy among India’s diverse groups. A normative deficit nonetheless remained with regard to the recognition and respect for religious minorities, 70 years on,

Indian pluralism pays a heavy price for the omission. The rise of Hindu nationalism and its exclusionary effect on Muslims among others, challenges inclusive notions of national identity. The elaboration of a multi-religious national identity that emphasizes the value and contribution of minority religions to the Indian nation is still awaited.

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The Global Centre for Pluralism is an applied knowledge organization that facilitates dialogue, analysis and exchange about the building blocks of inclusive societies in which human differences are respected. Based in Ottawa, the Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and citizens can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for shared citizenship. Please visit us at pluralism.ca