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RESEARCH ARTICLE

INDIA: A LAND OF SOCIAL DIVERSITIES AND COMPOSITE CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism is the social hallmark of both developed and developing nations. Countries having a large population, big geographical landscape, diverse flora and fauna such as USA, Canada, Russia, India, and China have also multicultural societies. These countries are not only accommodated their socially diverse groups with great harmony but also integrate them into mainstream national development. Basically plural and multicultural societies are characterized by the existence of multiple ethnic and others socio-cultural groups within the same country or nation-state. As far as social mosaic of India is concerned though it can say that it has evolved over centuries, through a process of assimilation and amalgamation of the diverse cultural influxes coming from central and northwestern Asia as well as European continent. This paper seeks to an attempt about India's socio-cultural diversity and how this diversity draws it strength and sustenance from India's composite culture.

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INTRODUCTION

The social ethos of India presents a complex mosaic and diverse picture. Its geo-political and historical characteristics have few parallels. Its size and population, geographical, linguistic, religious, racial and other diversities give it the character of a subcontinent while many traditions and common elements of culture and religion bind them. The people of India remain heterogeneous in language, racial composition, customs, habits and several other characteristics of everyday life (Narang, 2003). This paper has been divided into two parts, first part discusses about India's social diversities and the second part examines that how India's socio-cultural mosaic is the true picture of "unity in diversity" in the domain of composite culture. Social mosaic of India in terms of major ethnic groups, linguistic groups and religious communities is discussed below.

Diversity in India: An Overview

India is home to a plethora of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups which are discussed under following heads.

- Ethnic Diversity
- Linguistic Diversity
- Religious Diversity

Ethnic Diversity

The systematic study of India's ethnicity was done by one of the most distinguish Indian Anthropologists B.S.Guha. Guha's work is regarded one of the most standard document on Indian racial studies. His work published in the form of document 'People of India' 2011 by the *Anthropological Survey of India*. According to Guha, India's ethnic groups are classified into 6 main races (Guha, 2011) like,

1. The Negritos
2. The Proto-Australoids
3. The Mongoloids
4. The Mediterranean
5. The Western broad headed people of Brachycephals
6. The Nordics

The Negritos

The Negritos race has dark to dark black skin colour. Their head shape is small round, medium or long having woolly hair. Their forehead is bulbous having supraorbital ridges. Their eyes are dark in colour. Their nose is straight, flat and broad. Their physical stature is very short or Pygmy type. Kadars and Pulayans of Cochin and Travancore belong to this group, similarly Irular and Primitive tribes of Wynad also belong to this group.

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The Proto-Australoids

The Proto-Australoids race has dark brown skin. Their head shape is long with less developed and slightly retreating forehead. Their hair form is wavy and curly with dark in colour. Their eyes are dark in colour and nose is broad with depressed at the root. Their physical feature is short and limbs are delicate. Urali of Travancore and Baiga of Rewa belong to this group. The other tribal groups such as Chenchu, Kannikar, Khondh, Bhil, Santhal and Oaron belong to this group.

The Mongoloids

The Mongoloids race is also called 'People of Yellow race' because of their yellow skin. Their facial outlook is flat with prominent cheek bones. Hair style is straight and obliquely set, scanty hair is also found on body and face. Their eyes are epicanthic fold and nose is medium form. Their physical stature is medium height. The people of sub-Himalayan region such as Sema Naga of Assam and Nimbus groups of Nepal belong to this group. Similarly Lepchas of Kalimpong, Hill tribe Chakmas of North-Eastern states and Tibetan of Bhutan and Sikkim belong to this group.

The Mediterranean

The people of Mediterranean have light skin and long and narrow head with bulbous forehead. They have wavy to curly hair form. Their face is narrow with pointed chin and has dark eyes. Their nose is small and broad. They have medium to tall and slender body built. The Tamil Brahmans of Madurai, Nairs and Numbudiri Brahmans of Cochin, Telegu Brahmans of Andhra belongs to this race. Similarly, Brahmins of Allahabad (UP), Bengal, Maharashtra and Malabar region are belonging to this group. Apart from these, Punjabi Chettris and the Pathans as well as the people of Sind and Rajputana are representative of this group.

The Western broad headed people of Brachycephals

This racial group have light skin colour. Their face is round or long with broad head that is rounded occipital shape. Their hair form is wavy with dark brownish to dark colour. Their eye is dark brown or dark in colour and nose shape is prominent. Their stature is medium to tall height and body is thickly set. The Bania of Gujarat, Kathi of Kathiawar, Kayasthas and Brahmans of Bengal, Kanarese Brahmans of Mysore and Orissa belongs to this racial group. Parsis of Bombay also belong to this group.

The Nordics

This racial group have fair complexion. Their face is long and straight with strong jaws. Their head form is long with occipital and arched forehead. Their hair is wavy with brown to dark in colour. Their eyes are mostly bluish tinge and nose shape is fine or narrow. Their physical stature is tall with powerfully built body. People of northern India mainly from Punjab and Rajputana such as Kaffirs and Kathash belong to this group (Guha, 2011).

Linguistic Diversity

After ethnic groups, next major diversity in India is language. It is well known that the people of India display a high degree of diversity in their languages and dialects. It has been acquired through a long process of peopling of the sub-continent by heterogeneous ethnic groups mainly drawn from the neighbouring regions of Asia. A linguistic group is an entity of social significance. There is a broad social integration among all the speakers of a certain language. The language and the dialect thus play a significant role in defining the elements of regional identity. In India, the distribution pattern of major language groups was considered as a satisfactory basis for the formation of states. This has given a new political meaning to the geographical patterns of the linguistic distribution of the country.

According to the 2011 Census of India there are 187 languages spoken by different section of our society. The languages spoken by the people of India belong to the following four language families.

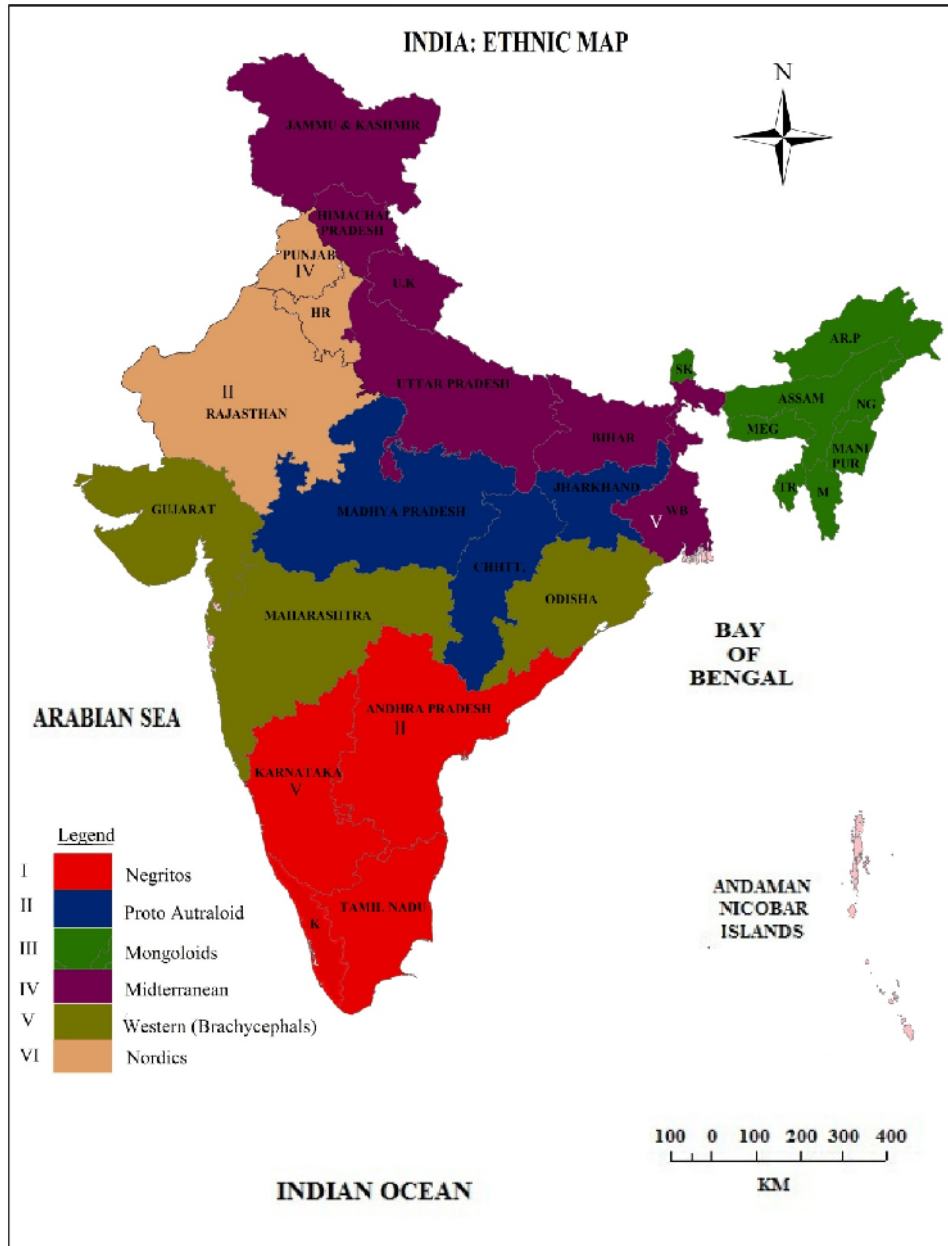
1. The Austro-Asiatic Language Family (Nishada)
2. The Tibeto-Chinese Language Family (Kirata)
3. The Dravidian Language Family (Dravida)
4. The Indo-European Language Family (Aryan)

The Austro-Asiatic Language Family (Nishada)

The Austro-Asiatic language family had their origin in Indo-China and South China from there they spread east into India and south into Malaya and then passed into the islands beyond. But the more recent views is that the Austriacs are a very old off-shoot of the Mediterranean people who came into India from the west, probably even before the Dravidians. Austric speech influenced Dravidian and Aryan. In the plains, Austric has been very largely suppressed by Dravidian and Aryan, but Austric languages survive in the less easily accessible hills and forests of Central and Eastern India. On the Himalayan slopes, Austric languages have deeply modified the Tibeto-Chinese dialects—these took over some Austric features. The known languages of this family are Khasi group of North-East, Nicobarese of the Nicobar Island and Munda group such as Santhali, Kherwari, Mundari, Gabada etc mostly spoke in Chota Nagpur Plateau region of Jharkhand, Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and part of Central India.

The Tibeto-Chinese Language Family (Kirata)

The original Sino-Tibetan speakers appear to have become characterised with their basic language at least 4000 years before Christ in the area to the west of China between the sources of the Yangtze and the Hwang Rivers. There they developed a language which ultimately became the source of Chinese, Tibetan, Burmese and possibly also Thai, though the genetic connection of Thai with the Sino-Tibetan family is now being questioned. The Tibeto-Burman speaking Mongoloids with yellow complexion came to be known among the Vedic Aryans as the Kiratas. The Kirata influence in the amalgam of Aryo-Dravido-Austic culture, which is Indian culture or Hindu culture was not very far-reaching. The role of the Sino-Tibetan languages and their position also are not very significant.



The speakers of Tibeto-Chinese family of Languages are people of Mongoloid origin, who are considered to have entered the Indian frontiers much earlier than the Indo-Aryan speakers. The known languages of this family are Ladakhi, Tibetan, Limbu, Naga, Mizo, Kuki, Lepcha, Tamang, Dhimal, Toto, Newari, Wancho, Sema, Maring etc. These languages mostly spoke in Himalayan and northeast region.

The Dravidian Language Family (Dravida)

The Dravidians are said to have come from Asia Minor and the Eastern Mediterranean. They were a Mediterranean people of the same stock as the peoples of Asia Minor and Crete and the Pre-Hellenic people of Greece (The Aegean). The Dravidians of India were thus originally a branch of the same people as the Pre-Hellenic people of Greece and Asia Minor.

The exact affiliation of Dravidian with the language of the Eastern Mediterranean has not yet been settled. But some common lexical elements are noticeable. Certain religious notions and ideas as well as cults and practices among the Dravidian people of India have strong West Asian and Mediterranean affinities. The city civilisation of Sind and Punjab and other parts of India appears to be Dravidian, and therefore connected with West Asia. The Dravidian languages are now found in solid blocks in the Deccan and in South India, where they have their separate existence in spite of strong inroads upon them by the Aryan speech. They are an Austric element in the Dravidian languages, just as there is a strong Dravidian-cum-Austric substratum in the Aryan speeches of India. The known languages of this family are Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu, Gondi, Khond, Malto, Kolami,

Religious Diversity

Another important aspect of India's population is the multiplicity of religious faiths. In India, several religions have flourished since time immemorial. India is the original home of Hinduism, which constitutes the system of beliefs and rituals of the majority of its people. The religious groups of India include Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains, although other religious faiths such as Judaism and Zoroastrianism are also represented.

Hindus

Hinduism has developed gradually out of the synthesis of sacrificial cults brought into India by the Aryan invaders around 1500 B.C. with religion of various indigenous people. The most characteristic feature of Hinduism however, is the doctrine of an eternal soul and its rebirth. Even in its classical period (600 B.C. to 450 B.C.) Hinduism was characterised by an astonishing variety of doctrines and cultures. It was regarded however, as a retrograde step when these varieties of culture, ritual and mythology became hardened into social strata and castes. The distribution of Hinduism is widespread throughout the length and the breadth of the country. Almost the entire country with the exception of the extreme North in North Western corner and the North Eastern corner shows that Hindus form over 80 percent of the total population. In many parts of the country such as Orissa large adjoining tract of Madhya Pradesh and adjoining area of Andhra Pradesh where the population is almost entirely (about 90 per cent or more) made up of Hindus. There is another distinct area of Himalayan region (Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal) and sub-Himalayan district of Uttar Pradesh the proportion of Hindu population is high above 95 per cent. Hindus are less numerous in Punjab, Kashmir Valley and the predominantly tribal areas of North-East India.

Muslims

The origin of Islam began in Peninsular Arabia at the "Land of Hejaz" in the beginning of the 7th century. The founder of this religion was Prophet Muhammad^(SAW) who was born in 570 A.D. in a distinguished family of Mecca. After the death of Prophet Muhammad^(SAW) on the 8th June, 632 A.D. the leadership passed to Prophet's "Right guided Caliph" or *Khalifas* who were both religious and political heads. The basic characteristic features of Islam however, is belief in monotheism that is *Allah* and its ethical doctrines based on Holy Text Book *Quran* and *Sunnah* [saying and actions of Prophet Muhammad^(SAW)], (Lewis, 1951). Arabs spread Islam from the Atlantic to Sind within eighty years of Prophet's death. In India Islam spread with the help of Great Sufi Saint Khawja Moinuddin Chisti^(r'alaib), who came from Arabia and established his seat at Ajmer in Rajasthan. Though Islam proclaimed the idea of equality, but in India it has been characterised by caste which is influenced by Hindu caste system. In India Muslims are divided into five large families—Saiyed, Shaikh, Pathan, Moghul and Ansari. Though they are referred as caste, but they are neither castes nor tribes but are merely names given to groups of tribes supposed to be of similar blood (Blunt, 1931). Muslims are divided into two

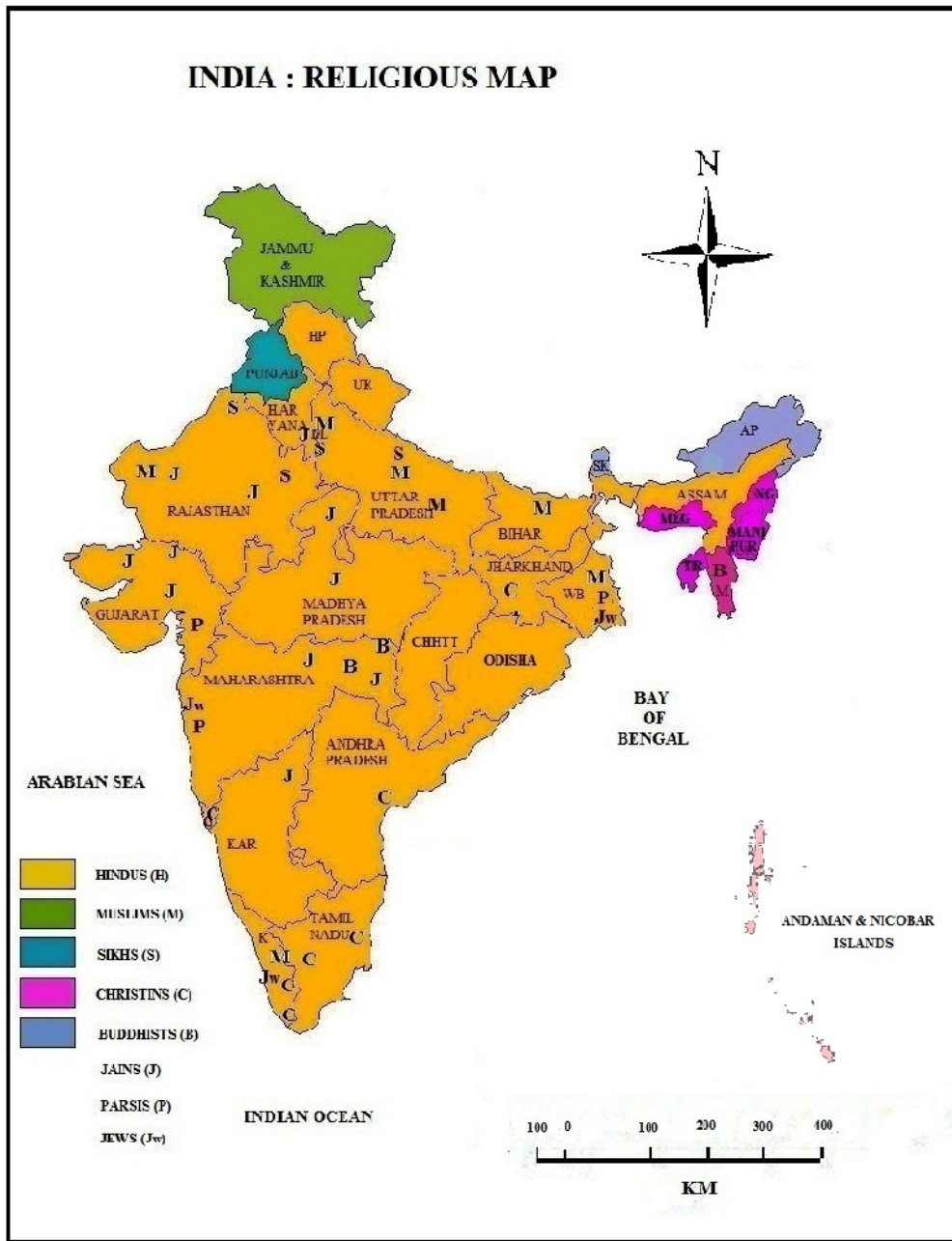
major religious sect—*Shia* and *Sunni* and there are several offshoots and minor groups like *Ismailia*, *Bohra*, *Khoja*, *Maimon*, *Momins*, *Domon*, *Moplahic* etc (Blunt, 1931). In addition there are interior and exterior castes among Muslims (a) *Ashraf* or *Sharif* – meaning noble or person of high extraction. It includes all undoubted descendants of foreigners and converts from higher Hindu castes. (b) *Ajlaf* or *Alrop* – meaning "wretches" embraces all other Mohammedans, including the functional groups and low ranking converts (Blunt, 1931). In India Muslims are a predominantly rural community with marked concentration in the Kashmir valley and adjacent Kargil Tehsil, Mewat, Rohilkhand and upper Doab, Ganga Delta, Malasar and the Lakshadweep Island.

Christian

Christianity is originated in "Promised Land" Palestine by its founder Jesus. Followers of Christianity believe that, as the son of God, he brought teachings that were validated by his resurrection from the dead. It is believed that Christianity in India was introduced in South India in the first century A.D. by St. Thomas, who according to the Catholic Church of Edessa came twice on missions to India. Cosmos of Alexandria, who travelled in South India (A.D. 522), found two Nestorian Churches – one in Quilon and other in Ceylon. A copper plate grant of A.D. 744 attests to the fact that many Indians have become converts to the Christianity. The immigrants from Baghdad, Nineveh, Jerusalem and other places added to the Christian community. Marco Polo (A.D. 1293) mentions the presence of a Christian community at St. Thomas Mount and narrates a story of the martyrdom of St. Thomas on the mount. Indian Christians are divided into Catholics as well as Protestants. The sects restrictions are rigidly observed among Christian community, a high Catholic sect will marry a Catholic only and similarly Protestants will marry among themselves. Christians constitute the third major religious community in the country. They are mostly found in the Southern, Western and North-eastern regions of the country. In Southern states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu they are in a large number. On the Western side of the country Goa is the only state where their concentration is very high. And in North-eastern region Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram Christian are predominantly community in the population.

Sikhs

The word Sikh derived from the Punjabi form of the Sanskrit word '*Shishya*' which means disciple. Sikhs are the followers of Guru Nanak Dev and nine other Gurus of whom the last was Shri Guru Govind Singh. The basic features of Sikhism was based on the teachings of Unity of God; rejection of caste and ritualism and brotherhood of man. Though based on the idiom of equality, Sikhism is as caste ridden as Hinduism. Sikhs are broadly divided into two castes—(1) *Sardars* and (2) *Majhabis*. The former consisting of high castes and later lower castes. Apart from castes there are some religious sects among the Sikhs like *Nihangs*, *Namdharis* and *Ramgarhias*. In India major concentration of Sikhs community are in all districts of Punjab and part of Haryana. Minor pockets of Sikh concentration are found in the *Tarai* region of Uttar Pradesh,



Ganganagar, Alwar and Bharatpur districts of Rajasthan. They are also in a numerous position in the Union Territory of Delhi.

Buddhists

Buddhism was evolved as a revolt against *Vedic* religion or *Brahmanism*. In the sixth century B.C., number of new sects sprang up and Buddhism was one of them. Buddhism was founded by *Kshatriya* Prince Siddartha and was based on the principles of non-violence and simple living instead of ritualism. Later on Prince Siddartha became famous by the name of Gautam Buddha. Buddhism is further divided into two sects: (1) Hinayan and (2) Mahayanas. *Hinayan*(The Small Vehicle)—Old followers of the old religion who believed in Buddha as a Guru or the Great Master, and the *Mahayanas*(The Great Vehicle)—They raised Buddha to the position of a savior god. Taking the country as a whole the largest number of Budd

hists is found in Maharashtra. But Buddhist also constitutes a sizeable proportion in the North-Eastern region of the country such as Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. In the state of Sikkim Buddhist also acquired a numerous position.

Jains

Jainism like Buddhism also evolved against *Brahmanism*, founded by another *Kshatriya* Prince Vardhaman which later became popular by the name of Mahavira. The basic features of Jainism are, stress on right actions and goods deeds instead of sacrifices and prayers. Jains are further divided into two sects—(1) Svetambara and (2) Digambara. *Svetambara* which clothed in white and *Digambara* which remain unclothed , because their Munis wear no clothes. In India the Jains are essentially urban dwellers. This is the only religious community which is more numerous in urban areas than in rural areas. They are spread largely in States of Rajasthan,

Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Union Territory of Delhi.

Jews

Jews are the followers of Judaism religion founded by Abraham. This religion was originated in Ur situated in southern Mesopotamia (presently southeastern Iraq). According to Bible, God told Abraham (who lived sometime between 1800 and 1500 BC) to leave Mesopotamia and settle in Canaan; also known as "Promised Land" (presently Palestine). Jews are basically "Diaspora Community"; because of their historical connection. They are found in every part of the world but their major concentration is in United States of America and Israel. In India they are minority community. Indian Jewry are divided into three main types—1. Beni-Israel Jews, 2. Cochin Jews and 3. Baghdadi Jews. *Beni-Israel Jews* are mostly found in Bombay and they are further divided into two *Gora* (White) and *Kala* (Black), the former being considered higher in rank and later being considered lower in rank. The *Cochin Jews*, mostly found in Cochin (Kerala) are they are further divided into three categories—*Gora*, *Kala* and *Meshuririm* (descendants of Cochin Jews and their slave concubines). The *Baghdadi Jews* are found in Bombay and Calcutta.

Parsis

Parsis are the endogamous group migrated from Iran and came to India [as their name suggests from Fars (Persia)] about 8th century A.D. They were Zoroastrian fire worshipper. They are mostly found in Western India mainly in Bombay and some parts of Gujarat. Some are settled in Calcutta also.

The Indian Social Mosaic: A Composite Culture or a Hallmark of Unity in Diversity

The mosaic, revealed through the social structure of the Indian polity as discussed above, shows a unique feature of the social geography of India, is not the extent of its plurality but the fact that social diversity has been based on and sustained by an underlying unity which has grown with time. India presents an example of remarkable cultural synthesis where the people belonging to different ethnic groups, linguistic groups and religious groups have been united together by a common cultural which places a stamp of their regional identity. The unity of the social ethos in India may now be examined.

First, the ethnic characteristic of the population as a factor or regional differentiation in the social sphere is of particular relevance in the case of the tribal people. The Negritos communities have been by and large assimilated into other racial groups and the remnants are restricted now to parts of the Andaman Islands and the Nilgiri hills. The Proto-Australoid communities have been squeezed into the agriculturally negative areas of the Aravali-Vindhya Chhotanagpur belt and are generally living at a low level of development. The Palaeo and the Tibeto-Mongoloid communities have lived in the small worlds within worlds of the mountain range of the North and the North-East in relative isolation over centuries using low levels of technology in tropical forest areas. These regional identities are being integrated in the democratic polity of India

though inducing impulses of growth into them. Regional strains and stresses, that still persist, are the consequence of the differing levels of development as between the tribal and the adjacent non-tribal communities and the strains can be eliminated only by minimising such disparities (Deniker, 2004). Second, the most potent institution which in spite of its extremely negative role continues to exert tremendous influence on social life in India is the caste system. While originally a distinctive trait of Hinduism, other religious groups like the Muslims, Sikhs and Christians have been greatly influenced by it. It is said that as a result of conversion one may lose one's religion in India but not the caste. While the caste phenomenon is all pervasive, it has its distinct regional forms. The caste system is a common feature in all parts of India, but it thrives on regional hosts. The caste structure in India divides into a series of regional caste structure, all threaded loosely together within the all embracing hierarchy of the Hindu society (Taylor, 2006). Third, language is the most important manifestation of the social cohesion of a group. Linguistic diversity in India therefore, reflects regional differentiation on the one hand and is an important factor in region formation on the other.

The magnitude of linguistic diversity in the country has sometimes been over stated. It may be noted that 97 per cent of the population of India communicates in 23 out of a total of 187 languages. As we move above the dialect to the higher levels of the linguistic hierarchy, we once again meet the fourfold regional division: (i) the Dravidian region of the South, (ii) the Indo-Aryan region of the North and the North-West, (iii) the Mon-Khmer and the Tibeto-Burmese region of the North-East, and (iv) the Austric region of the Aravali-Vindhya-Chotanagpur region. Due to the assimilation of one and another group the languages has come into close contact and out of this contacts has arisen a vocabulary which shows a Pan-Indian characteristic (Baxter *et al.*, 1998). And lastly, the religious composition of the population constitutes an important web in the social fabric of the country. India is the original home of Hinduism, which constitutes the system of beliefs and rituals for the great majority of its people. Apart from Hindus, Muslims constitutes another largest majority but fall under the categories of minority community in the country followed by Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Christians, Parsis and Jews. The tribal people have a strong affinity with animistic and totemistic beliefs. It is undoubtedly true that religious beliefs constitute an important element in the spiritual life of the people, but the role of religious diversity in the Indian polity has quite often been overstated.

Religious communities are intertwined with each other within the regional cultures. They do not constitute separate national streams, confronting and interacting with each at the level of the nation (Baxter *et al.*, 1998). The Kashmiri Muslim and the Kashmiri Hindus have far more in common than either the Kashmiri Muslim and the Assamese Muslim or the Kashmiri Hindu and the Tamil Hindu. The Sikhs, the Hindu and the Muslim peasants of the Punjab beat with the rhythm of the same *Bhangara* and the soft melody of the *Heer*. All the more remarkable in this process of cultural synthesis is the traditional role of fairs and festivals all over the land. Thus the social ethos of India, over the centuries, has promoted a kind of

healthy, mutually sustaining, relationship between diverse elements within the country. In the context of the preceding discussion, India can perhaps be best described as a unity in diversity. The historical process of give and take between the culturally diverse regions has resulted in the evolution of an all India ethos, incorporating them beyond recognition. The arrivals of the Aryans during Ancient period, Pathans, Iranians and Central Asians during the medieval period accelerated the interplay between the centripetal and centrifugal trends and the unity in diversity of India emerged at a higher level of equilibrium. The Aryans were the first Hindus in India. The development of Hinduism took centuries; the religion is evolutionary in nature and reflects a great deal of local and regional variation. They developed a complex social structure based on the caste system. The Hindus, who had made rich contributions to the development of civilisation in India, largely failed to display a constructive ability to build stable political institutions (Baxter *et al.*, 1998). With the arrivals of Turko-Afghan rulers from Central Asia the advent of Islam in India was possible and the interaction between Muslims and Hindus in India was glorified. The founding of Delhi Sultanate in the twelfth century and the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century represented a pattern of interactions. Mughals were more accommodative as well as secular than their predecessors. The Mughals were not only the new rulers; they were also newest settlers in India. In the process they actively integrated the Hindus into both the civil and military administrations. In addition, they tried to reach across the religious divide to create a more coherent society by making matrimonial alliances with the Hindu princely houses of Rajasthan (Baxter *et al.*, 1998).

Some progress was made during this period in uniting Hindus and Muslims in a composite culture. A powerful part of the *Bhakti* movement (devotional) criticised the orthodoxies of both Hindu Brahmins and Muslim Ulema (religious scholars). Nanak, Kabir, and many other saint poets emphasise the teachings of Islam and Hinduism. Among the Muslims, similar efforts were made by the Sufis, who were influenced by Hindu mysticism. Apart from this the Persian speaking Mughal rulers patronised Urdu, which is written in Persian script. As a language it is rich in literary traditions, and it was spoken by peasantry population in and around Delhi, the principal seat of the Mughal Empire.

The Mughal administrative system such as *Suba*, *Sarkar* and the *Pargana* for example, were, by and large, based on the hierarchy of regional identities as such a regional organisation had evolved within the environmental framework of India through time (Baxter *et al.*, 1998). Thus, in the context of unity in diversity an emphasis on consensus, conciliation, compromise, and accommodation is a tradition that Indians have inherited from their past. Unity and diversity of India are not opposite categories which can grow at each other's cost. They are symbolically linked together, support and sustain each other.

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