Indian Exceptionalism or Indian Model: Negotiating Cultural Diversity and Minority Rights in a Democratic Nation-State

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Can democratic nation-states accommodate cultural diversity while sustaining a sense of collective identity? Does public recognition of cultural community differences pose a threat to the unity and integrity of the nation-state? Should liberal democracies be concerned about the fate of cultural minorities living within their boundaries? Will the application of majority–minority framework deepen democracy and nurture peace? Can cultural diversity be protected and nourished without compromising national well-being and the commitment to equality? These are questions that confront democracies all over the world today. Even though the western world is becoming increasingly sensitive to the presence of cultural majoritarianism in liberal polities, there is still little agreement on how should minorities, and the cultural diversity that they represent, be accommodated within a democracy. This chapter seeks to intervene in this debate by drawing upon and reflecting on the experience of India. India is, in some respects, quite unique, with enormous diversities of religion, language, and culture. Yet, as we think about a framework of democracy that is sensitive to the concerns of cultural minorities and respectful of differences, the experience of India may well provide some valuable input both for understanding the importance of a multicultural structure and for refining existing theories of multicultural accommodation.

1. Mandating a New Path

India was among the first few democracies to embark on the multicultural path. At a time when Western liberalism advocated neutrality and difference-blind approach, India acknowledged the rights of minorities and valued cultural diversity. This was an innovative and bold initiative that defied the dominant thinking of its time. After all independence of the country in 1947 had come with partition of her territory. The creation of Pakistan, as a separate homeland for the Muslim population, had resulted in mass migrations and unprecedented communal violence that left more than a million people dead. In this situation of charged communal passions there was a strong case for constructing an ethnonationalist state: one where the national identity was anchored in the culture of the Hindu majority. Indeed several prominent individuals argued that now we have Pakistan as a Muslim state, India could legitimately be a Hindu state. However, this proposal met with little support even from those leaders of the Indian National Congress (INC) who were known to be attentive to the sentiments of the Hindu community. Sardar Patel, to take one example, responded to these suggestions firmly with the statement: ‘I do not think it is possible to consider Hindustan as a Hindu state....We must not forget that there are other minorities whose protection is our primary responsibility. The state must exist for all irrespective
of caste and creed (Patel to B. M. Birla 10 June 1947, quoted in Mahajan 2001: 5; emphasis added).

Creating a state that is rooted in the culture of the majority was one clear option. The second was to follow the classical liberal model and efface all reference to socially ascribed identities. There were strong voices in favor of this alternative too. They advocated that individuals be treated merely as citizens of the country and that rights be granted to them only in their capacity as citizens. Effectively this meant that no consideration be given to caste and community affiliations and all persons as citizens be treated alike by law. This option too was discussed but eventually it was agreed that while all persons as citizens would enjoy a set of core political and civil rights, minority populations have special concerns, particularly about the fate of their culture and possible pressures to assimilate into the majority. The path that India adopted self-consciously therefore was one that acknowledged persons as citizens of the state as well as members of specific cultural communities. While political rights of participation were extended to all, nevertheless on other matters due consideration was given to community affiliations and membership.

The language of majority and minority was not new to the Indian setting. During the British Raj community affiliations were factored into the political process, and as was the case in many other colonies, here too the electorate was differentiated along community lines. However, the multicultural path that India embarked on after independence was neither an extension of the colonial policy nor merely a pragmatic response to the political circumstances of the time. The latter certainly figured and weighed in the deliberations, but it was the emphasis on sustaining cultural diversity within a unified and integrated polity that gave the policy a new edge.

In the eighteenth century, the East India Company operated with ‘European understandings of world history’ (Rudolph and Rudolph 2001: 39). They believed that Hindus and Muslims represent two ancient and distinct civilizations, comparable to the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome. Consequently, they treated the two communities as diverse cultural wholes and applied the customary laws of the relevant religious community while dealing with its members. However, by the nineteenth century, the British orientation had changed in two significant ways. First, the liberal individualist tradition came to dominate the colonial policy and this brought in a different assessment of India and her people. The colonized subjects were now uniformly represented as ‘people without a history’, ‘barbaric’, incapable of self-governance, and, above all, possessing little that was worthy of respect as knowledge. Second, the Revolt of 1857 revealed resistance to the British presence in India. Confronted with the issue of maintaining their control over the colony, the British began to differentiate between the Hindus and the Muslims—the two major communities in India (Desai 1976: 312–4). This was initially prompted by the desire to penalize and alienate those who were associated with the revolt, but subsequently it became an effective way of keeping the two communities apart. To quote General Rose (1801–1885):

We maintain our power by playing off one section of Indians against another and we shall continue to do so. The inborn antagonism between the Indian races is a factor contributing to our strength. The divisive spirit must be kept alive and intact. For, if the whole of India were to
stand up against us, then how could we continue to assert ourselves? (in von Pochhammer 1981: 387).

Consequently, even though the British initiated several group-differentiated policies, including separate electorate for the Muslims, these were often conceived and viewed as measures intended to draw a wedge between the two major communities; or at the very least, to win the support of a community (Chandra et al. 1989: 142, 290–1, 418–9). But even more significantly, these initiatives were not prompted by a respect for difference. The colonial policies were, by the nineteenth century, homogenizing in intent. Representing their task as a ‘civilizing mission’ the British hoped to ‘form a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, morals, and in intellect’ (Macaulay in Rudolph and Rudolph 2001: 41–2). Quite obviously, the diversity that the various communities represented was not here regarded to be either valuable or worthy of protection. It was at best a way of making the task of governing a foreign nation easier.

In sharp contrast to this, the democratic framework of independent India was shaped by a positive evaluation of the different religions and cultures that existed here. Further, the structures and institutions were devised with the understanding that the diverse communities must be treated as equals in the public arena. Equal treatment for different communities meant that all should be at liberty to live in accordance with their culture, without being compelled to assimilate into the culture of the majority. To give some substance to this commitment, minority communities received special representation in the Constituent Assembly that undertook the task of framing the Constitution of independent India. In particular, members of minority communities were inducted into the Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights for the explicit purpose of discussing and incorporating their claims and concerns.²

There was thus an effort to include members of different communities, particularly, religious and cultural minorities separately, so that they could have institutional recognition and their voice could be counted in the Indian polity. This was a radical departure from accepted liberal practices of that time and it was intended to give minorities a sense of belonging as equal partners in the polity. At a time when the tragedy of partition and community-based violence yielded considerable unease with internal differences, this initial effort of involving members of various communities in the deliberative process provided a cementing factor, that gave legitimacy to the Constitution which was subsequently framed and endorsed.

Besides providing legitimacy, the participation of different communities bestowed recognition upon the many communities that composed the Indian nation-state. It openly accepted that India was a culturally diverse country, and that the diversity represented by the different ways of life would be expressed and protected in the public arena. This was the first gesture that aimed to assure the minorities that the culture of the majority would not be thrust upon them; and, they would have access to their culture. The Constitution of India eventually formalized these assurances and provided, on the one hand, safeguards to curb cultural assimilation, and, on the other, rights that enabled minority communities to protect and promote their distinct way of life. Cultural diversity was thus acknowledged: indeed, it was seen as an essential and indispensable characteristic of the Indian polity—one that was desirable and worthy of being preserved and cherished.
2. From a Plural Society to a Multicultural Polity

In contemporary theories of multiculturalism and liberal pluralism, minorities receive special consideration for a variety of different reasons. In some cases, special treatment is justified on grounds of self-respect and the need for recognition (Taylor 1992; Carens and Williams 1996); while in other cases, it is the concern for justice for oppressed groups that provides the rationale for special rights (Spinner 2001). In India, it was an acceptance of the existing cultural plurality along with a positive evaluation of diversity that provided the rationale for the multicultural framework. The fact that cultural diversity was valued, affirmed, and even protected here, while most other countries in the region pursued more aggressive and assimilationist policies of nation-building, has prompted many scholars to explain the distinctiveness of the Indian path in terms of the religious traditions of the country. The tolerance and respect for differences that informed the Constitution of independent India is here considered to be an expression of the plural and accommodative nature of Hinduism—the religion of the dominant majority comprising more than 80 percent of the population.

There is no doubt that within the geographical space that comprises contemporary India, Hinduism has coexisted with ‘Judaism...for nearly two thousand years, Christianity from the time before it went to Europe, and Zoroastrianism for over twelve hundred years’ (Nandy 1998: 336). Also, that Hinduism is a nonproselytizing religion; it has no institutionalized hierarchy of the kind that structures Roman Catholicism; and, it is polytheistic in nature and does not impose upon its members any specific creed or sacred text. Hence, as a religion Hinduism is extremely plural and allows space for other religious communities to exist without imposing its own truths upon them. Yet it is not the Hindu way of life or religious tradition that propelled the pursuit of the multicultural path. Nor was the multicultural framework that India endorsed at the time of independence a natural corollary of Hindu tolerance. Indeed, the period immediately before independence saw the growth of a more aggressive and exclusionary Hinduism, one that found its most articulate expression in the writings and speeches of Vir Savarkar and Hedgewar. The framers of the Indian Constitution eventually rejected this expression of Hinduism and chose to emphasize the desirability of living with differences. As was mentioned earlier, India was a land of many religions, languages, and sects. The rulers who conquered the land and settled here often enriched the existing plurality by endorsing existing customs and practices. But there were also moments of conflict. Since the seventeenth century particularly, we have the emergence of a distinct Hindu consciousness that posits itself in opposition to the prevailing Muslim rule. These sporadic, but steadily increasing, articulations of difference over the next two centuries helped to build and consolidate a Hindu identity that is more cohesive and less accommodative of otherness. When India gained independence it is these assertions of Hindu religion and community identity that come to the negotiating table, and the path of diversity and accommodation is eventually endorsed by setting aside these voices of Hindu community that express an attitude of cultural majoritarianism.

The compulsions that pushed the political leadership in the direction of a multicultural polity were many. Negotiating with several politically assertive and mobilized communities, and witnessing the costs of mass population transfers across boundaries underlined the urgency of
holding the country together by taking cognizance of the voices that came from diverse communities. Beyond these pressures of the immediate context, there were considerations that had propelled the struggle for national independence to recognize and affirm diversity. In the course of the anticolonial struggle, the political leadership had to take note of the internal plurality of India and to make an effort to represent it. In fact, the INC continuously presented itself as the voice of the Indian people as a whole, and to give credence to their claim that the British should negotiate with them, they made an effort to bring into its fold people of different religions, castes, and class. One may question whether the INC was able to successfully do this, but there is little doubt that the organization, which played a critical role in leading the fight for independence and subsequently framing the Constitution of independent India, acknowledged the cultural diversity of India. Even more importantly, its leadership maintained that a strong and unified India could be built while retaining its cultural diversity.

The idea that diversity could coexist with political unity along with the normative commitment to realizing this ideal, did not however translate into support for group differentiated policies, particularly, in the political arena. Often, political mobilizations on the basis of caste and religion, as well as policies of separate electorate were resisted on the ground that they encouraged separatism. Yet, even as the concern for an integrated and unified India was preeminent in their thinking, there was a firm belief that political unity could subsist with the commitment to protect cultural diversity. Unity and diversity, in other words, were not viewed as antithetical and conflicting values. They could dwell together, and this meant that India could be a multicultural or even a multinational democratic polity. It was on the basis of this understanding that the Indian National Congress, before independence, challenged the two-nation theory that was voiced to demand a separate state for Muslims, and after independence, deliberated upon the Constitution of the country.

The political leadership did play an important role in imagining a culturally diverse India, where pluralism at the social plane would survive with political unity. But this imagination was spurred as much by the experience of colonialism as by the practices of the colonizers. In the shared context of colonial subjugation it was possible to argue that the colonized people shared a historical predicament. They could, despite their differences, come together and imagine themselves as one nation with common political aspiration for independence and self-governance. Collective historical experience and a perceived common fate and future suggested that an independent India could be united and one, without asserting cultural identity and sameness.

At another level, this assertion was an expression of liberalism that had been mediated by an encounter with the Indian reality and the practices of the British colonizers. The colonial rule had hardened community identities and made them more assertive in the political arena; as a consequence, the individual could not be seen merely as a citizen or an ‘unencumbered’ self. The existing reality compelled recognition of the fact that cultural communities defined, in part at least, the individual, and that the individual brings these collective identities and interests into the public arena. Hence, in the conception of independent India these collective identities could not be effaced; if anything they had to be factored in but in a way that did not fragment the polity. This was the challenge before the framers of the Constitution, and they met this by
making an analytical distinction between heterogeneity and fragmentation, cultural situatedness and cultural nationalism.

While the notion of cultural situatedness located the individual citizen as a member of a community, affirming cultural diversity meant treating members of different communities as equals. But giving substantive form to this understanding of equality and diversity posed several problems. Recognizing and asserting the value of diversity entailed respecting all forms of differences, whatever the nature of the group and the cultural practices that it endorses. When it is a question of rectifying past injustices, or giving autonomy to groups that had previously been discriminated against by the state, or creating a sense of belonging among marginalized groups, it is possible to distinguish between different communities and the claims that they represent. However, when diversity is cherished for itself, then such distinctions become meaningless, for the difference embodied by various cultural groups appears to be equally valuable. There is little ground for saying that the way of life articulated in some cultural forms is more worthy of our respect and protection that others. Consequently, affirming cultural diversity often raises anxieties about the fate of vulnerable groups within a community. Concerns of this kind surfaced even in India, particularly with regard to the position of women. However, what is significant is that even though these fears were expressed, the verdict was clearly in favor of protecting diversity.

While designing the multicultural structure, the framers of the Indian Constitution designed a structure that protected cultural diversity but in giving content to this idea they differentiated between four kinds of communities—communities based on religion, language, caste, and tribe. Caste groups that were placed at the bottom of the hierarchy had suffered discrimination on account of social segregation and exclusion. Hence, in their case, the immediate concern was to set aside existing social prejudices so that they could have access to resources that were available to the rest of the population. In the case of tribal communities, several of whom were separated and protected from the wider society, as well as religious and linguistic communities, the focus was upon protection of diversity such that each group could live in accordance with its distinctive way of life and culture. But, within this framework, the claims and rights of religious, linguistic, and tribal communities were differentiated. What emerged, and was subsequently strengthened, was a system of differentiated rights within a federal system, and over the years, it is by building upon the latter that minority claims have been, to some extent, accommodated.

3. Accommodating Religious Diversity

The multicultural framework that was initially devised protected diversity by giving communities the right to govern themselves in some respects. Religious communities received rights to govern their religious and associated social and cultural practices. All communities received equal rights to ‘profess, propagate, and practice’ their religion. Additionally, they had rights to establish and manage their own separate institutions—charitable trusts as well as educational institutions. The latter could receive financial and other kinds of assistance from the state; they could also provide religious education for their members, albeit on a voluntary basis. The Constitution, furthermore, gave official recognition to the Personal Laws of four identified communities—Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Parsees. This meant that in all matters concerning family (e.g. marriage, divorce, inheritance, alimony, custody of children), individuals
were to be governed by the personal laws of their respective communities. Thus, the distinctive ways of life of different religious communities were publicly recognized. Protection of diversity in their case translated into group cultural autonomy (for details, see Mahajan 1998: 40–114).

The identified religious communities, which were numerically small and in this sense constituted minorities, were spread over different regions; hence, no corresponding territorial rights could be given to them. However, should they have some form of separate political representation? This was an issue that received serious consideration. Two options existed: (a) institution of separate electorates so that the minority population could elect its own representatives; and (b) retaining joint electorate with reserved quotas for each minority in legislative bodies. The former, it was argued, would permanently divide the citizen population, compelling them to see themselves only, or primarily, as members of different communities. While it would allow community members to determine just who would represent them, it would suggest that each community has separate and discrete interests. This assumption was found to be problematic; in fact it was seen as dividing the country permanently by suggesting that only members of a community could articulate collective interests of that group. The freedom movement had been premised on the understanding that people of India, cutting across communities, had a common interest and political goal. The leadership held on to this belief and asserted the liberal view that representatives in deliberative bodies must think of the welfare of the people as a whole, rather than of a specific group.

Consequently, it was the second option that was preferred. But here the question was—should quotas be reserved in proportion to the size of a community in a given region or on the basis of its strength in the country as a whole? Region based quotas would be more representative of the reality on the ground but it would mean that a religious group, like Hindus, who constituted a majority in the country might have seats reserved for them in a region where they were in a minority. Likewise, some groups that were a minority in the national context might not have separate representation in a given region. Hence, issues relating to the identification of the majority and the minority surfaced. Group autonomy in religious and cultural matters was easily defensible on grounds of diversity, particularly because this was not something that was extended only to minority populations. In principle all forms of diversity, including the one represented by the majority community, was considered valuable. Hence, members of all communities received the right to be governed by their distinctive religious and cultural practices.

The question of separate political representation is almost always riddled with difficulties. If it has the advantage of ensuring that members of different communities are represented in decision-making bodies, it also means that minorities will always be a minority. They cannot see through any legislation without the help of other communities, particularly the majority. In India, in the final stages of deliberation, the idea of granting separate representation for minority communities was abandoned. The minorities were persuaded to withdraw this claim voluntarily. Although much has since been written about the pressures that yielded this outcome (e.g. Ansari 1999), the question that needs to be asked is: would it have been better to grant separate representation for minorities?
Autonomy for religious groups in cultural matters almost always results in the subordination of women. Since most communities are patriarchal in structure, they invariably endorse laws that are biased against women. The situation in India was no different. Here too, endorsing community personal laws meant accepting a framework in which women were not, and are not, treated as equals. This has led some to argue that religious communities should have received rights in the ‘public’/political domain, perhaps in the form of separate representation, rather than rights in the ‘private’ sphere that protected the regime of inegalitarian personal laws (Ali 2000). It is a moot point whether cultural autonomy could have been interchanged for separate representation. However, if separate representation for minorities had been accepted, the Parliament would probably have had to take up the task of reforming their personal laws. At present, constitutionally sanctioned cultural autonomy along with the absence of separate minority representation have created a situation in which the state can justify nonintervention in the personal laws of the community. The minorities can also, with reason, claim that the state or the central Parliament can as a representative of the majority community legislate on the practices and personal laws of that community, but not for the minorities as they are inadequately represented in it. Today, the responsibility of altering and reforming personal laws of minority communities rests with these communities and, by and large the state has refrained from intervening in them.

There is thus a strange dialectic at work between separate political rights for nonterritorially concentrated communities and special cultural rights for them. And it is this that requires some closer consideration. In India, it was the consensus on granting special cultural rights that marked the initial compact. Consequently, in the last decade when the dominant political party in government—the BJP—has raised the issue of legislating a uniform civil code in lieu of existing community personal laws the minorities fear that the terms of their incorporation into the Indian polity are themselves being questioned. Even though a uniform civil code, along the lines recommended earlier by the Law Commission and several women's groups, may be a way of providing justice for the marginalized women, yet doing away with the plural system of personal laws appears as a tool of homogenization. The apprehensions of the minority communities are in part fueled by the ground reality that the party mooting this change is closely associated with the agenda of consolidating the national identity around the Hindu cultural identity. Hence, there is an anxiety that the norms of the uniform civil code may be set by the cultural code and imagination of the majority Hindu community. The challenge that confronts India today is how to ensure justice for all while simultaneously retaining its multicultural identity. And it is this concern that has prompted many, even in the women's movement, to argue for gender-just personal laws rather than a uniform civil code.

Another point that needs also to be noted here is that the Indian Constitution protected diversity by protecting the religious liberty of all communities. Religious minorities were not individually identified for separate and special consideration. However, while all communities—the majority as well as the minorities—enjoyed freedom to live in accordance with their own religious and cultural practices, the state could intervene to minimize and eradicate the practice of untouchability. State intervention to end the practice of untouchability, and with it, of forced segregation and exclusion, was motivated by the concern for equality. However, since untouchability was a practice associated with Hindu beliefs and way of life, this also meant that
the state was expected to interfere in aspects of Hindu religion and way of life. If we look at the record of the last fifty years, we find that the Supreme Court of India has acted to minimize unwarranted interference in the affairs of the Hindu majority community, yet there is now a growing sentiment that the minorities are ‘pampered’ and their autonomy is protected while the state intervenes in the affairs of the majority. In part this impression is an outcome of the fact the state was authorized to act against some of the injustices emanating from the caste system, but over the years, the state, seeing itself as representing the will of the majority, has also acted to alter the Hindu personal law so as to make it more fair to women. Similar interventions have not been made in the personal laws of minority communities, and one can with justification say that the assurances given to the minorities at the time of making the Constitution warranted this course of action. Yet, the majority community has used this to argue that they are being unfairly and unequally treated.

Such assertions on the part of the majority religious community are a means of consolidating and building a cohesive Hindu identity and of consolidating the hegemony of the majority but they are significant in so far as they highlight the problems that arise when we efface the distinction between the majority and the minorities. When the reference is to communities alone, then what is expected is identical treatment. Any deviation from that norm appears to be an expression of partiality. It is only when communities are differentiated, either as majority and minorities, however problematic these terms might be, can we justify different treatment in the interest of ensuring fair and even treatment to all.

4. Promoting Linguistic Diversity

Affirmation of cultural diversity took a somewhat different form in the case of linguistic communities. Here, diversity was recognized but, at the same time, it was believed that to reinforce the unity of the country, which is inhabited by people of diverse religions, there was need for a shared language. Thus, even as the presence of different languages and linguistic communities was acknowledged, it was felt that the nation-state required a single language for communication; as such, one language had to be privileged, at least in relative terms. Armed with this perspective, the Constitution began by according official recognition to six languages that were spoken in the country but this number has since grown. Today there are eighteen languages that have been designated as official languages but only one language—namely, Hindi—has the status of national language. What is important here is that Hindi, written in Devanagri script, was chosen as the national language. As Hindustani, a combination of Hindi, Urdu and, to some extent, Punjabi, was the language spoken by an overwhelming majority there was a proposal to declare Hindustani as the national language. Alternately, it was suggested that Hindi written in the Urdu and Devanagri script could be accepted as national language. Since Urdu had, in the course of the anti-imperialist struggle, come to be associated with the Muslim community, this may have been a way of accommodating the largest minority community in the public arena. However, both proposals were rejected; the latter by a single vote. Thus, while linguistic diversity found a place in the constitutional frame, the desire to construct the nation-state around a single homogeneous identity prevailed in this respect.

At the time of framing the Constitution it was agreed that for a period of fifteen years English, along with Hindi, would continue to function as a national language. The use of English, as the
medium of communication for purposes of the Union, was expected to give way to Hindi over time. But in the post-independence period the imposition of Hindi has been resisted strongly by non-Hindi-speaking states in the South and the Northeast. As a consequence, the homogenization that might have been effected through language has been checked, if not entirely thwarted. Diversity has prevailed further through the linguistic reorganization of regional states. The Constitution had given linguistic minorities the right to establish separate educational institutions to protect and promote their language and culture, and they could receive assistance from the state. Over the years the Supreme Court has argued that educational institutions established by linguistic minorities are not restricted to teaching only their language and culture; they can provide comprehensive education in every field of knowledge in their language. Further, and perhaps even more significantly, a series of popular assertions in the 1950s compelled a stronger recognition of linguistic diversity. A movement for recognition that began in Andhra Pradesh, and later found support in analogous mobilizations in Maharashtra, Punjab and several other regions, prompted the establishment of a Commission and the enactment of the State Re-organization Act 1956. Over the next several years, regional state boundaries were redrawn such that a linguistic community occupying contiguous territory could become a self-governing majority in a given region.

The creation of linguistic identity based units, each with political rights to govern itself, within the framework of the federal system, was significant because it marked a departure from the thinking that informed the structure of minority rights in the Constitution. The view that prevailed in the Constitution respected diversity and wished to protect it, yet it maintained that affirmation of particularistic identities in the political sphere would fragment the country. The linguistic reorganization of states set aside this belief; it suggested, at least implicitly, that in the case of linguistic identities, cultural and political boundaries could overlap without dividing the country. This has indeed been reaffirmed from the experience of the last few decades.

What is also noteworthy is that linguistic reorganization has enhanced the structure of diversity enormously. As the language of the majority linguistic community in the region became the official language of that state, the medium of instruction and public examination, communication and media networks, it grew and flourished. On another plane, the creation of linguistically defined federal units provided opportunities to regional linguistic elites who might have remained marginalized in the national level. India is a land of enormous linguistic diversity, with over 1600 mother tongues being used in the 1950s. Quite obviously, all the languages that were in use did not receive recognition, let alone a separate territory. It is not possible to discuss here the complexities of the politics of language recognition, but gradually, mobilized and assertive linguistic communities achieved official recognition in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution; and when possible, a ‘homestate’ (Kamat 2003: 152). The effect of granting recognized linguistic communities some autonomy over a defined territory has been extremely positive. Languages that had what may be called, a ‘homestate’ have consolidated, while languages that received recognition but no homestate have not been able to sustain themselves. To take an example: Konkani speakers in Goa diminished significantly, from being approximately 88.8 percent of the population in 1961 to 64.8 percent in 1971 (Kamat 2003: 162).
Self-government rights and limited political autonomy for territorially concentrated linguistic identities have reinforced the multicultural framework and helped considerably in deepening diversity. But it has also highlighted the difficulty of the task at hand. As was mentioned earlier, eighteen languages have been recognized as official languages by the Constitution. Yet there are several languages that are waiting to receive similar recognition. Tribal languages, such as Santhali, Bhili, and Gondi, that are spoken by more than a million people, have not received similar recognition. Languages like Sindhi and Urdu have now received the status of official languages but as the speakers of these languages are distributed over several regions, there is no possibility of them having a homestate. Under the circumstances, the survival of these languages as well as the status of the users of these languages depends hugely upon the rights granted to internal minorities within a region.

The principle that minorities within a region must receive the same rights as any other minority within the nation-state is often readily accepted but actual practices on the ground usually tell a different story. In India, many minority languages within the region do not have second-language status and in some cases this status has been withdrawn from previously recognized minority languages. This may seem to be a practical problem involving the failure to implement policies that have been agreed upon, but they hint at the political construction of diversity. In a context where ninety-six languages are still nonscheduled even though these are living languages with sizable numbers of speakers, and only eighteen languages have been declared official languages, with only fifteen having some homestate territory, the role of political authority in defining and shaping diversity has been extremely crucial. As a consequence, in the struggle for recognition it is the assertive and mobilized communities, possessing some degree of political and economic power, that have been most successful in achieving their goal.

Moreover, in a land of considerable scarcity and competition between elites for resources, the overlapping of cultural and political boundaries has at times yielded particularistic chauvinism. The expression of such sentiments has been the sharpest in regions where the regional linguistic elite did not occupy prestigious social, economic, and political positions. Here linguistic identity movements, on securing statehood, have endorsed exclusionary policies and been hostile to other, especially powerful, linguistic groups within the region. The fact that measures which attend to the expressivist needs of cultural communities may also be appropriated to serve instrumental needs underlines the necessity of devising a framework where the minimum rights of minority groups within the region are protected. Indeed, the ethnic violence unleashed by such expressions as ‘sons of the soil’ (Weiner 1978) movements suggest that protection of the rights of all people in the region should perhaps be a condition for granting separate rights, like those of self-governance or separate statehood, for identified national minorities.

While these issues persist and they need still to be addressed in many regions effectively, there is little doubt that the linguistic reorganization of states, by converting some linguistic minorities within the national context into regional majorities, has given political recognition to popular sentiment. This may have in some cases created new forms of ethnic conflict but it has also eliminated several sites of ethnic conflict within the nation-state. Political rights of governance to linguistically defined communities have sustained diversity, and provided opportunities and options to the speakers of that language even outside the homestate. All this has enriched and
deepened democracy within the nation-state, with more and more people coming into the political process and regional parties, in addition to national parties, articulating their interests.

5. Cultural Diversity and Tribal Communities

The third set of communities that received attention within the multicultural structure in India was the tribal communities. During the period of colonization, the British had followed the policy of, what might be called, protective segregation. From time to time the government through a notification would prescribe a line that was called ‘the Inner Line...to protect any subject living outside the area from living or moving therein’\(^8\) (quoted in Baruah 1989: 2088). Within the area designated by the Line, tribal communities were allowed to manage their own affairs ‘with only such interference on the part of frontier officers in their political capacity as may be considered advisable with a view to establishing a personal influence for good among the chiefs and the tribes’ (ibid.). When India became independent this ‘exclusionary’ policy was followed to some extent. Since it was feared that segregation might deprive tribal communities of opportunities for development, a policy of ‘integration’ as distinct from ‘assimilation’ was formally endorsed (Heimendorf 1982). Within it, the distinctiveness of the tribal ways of life was acknowledged and diversity of cultural forms was protected. Certain areas were accordingly identified as ‘excluded’ or ‘partially excluded regions’. Here, something akin to the idea of Inner Line prevailed; that is, within the ‘excluded areas’ free movement and passage of outsiders was curtailed, and within the identified region, tribal communities were given special rights to govern themselves in accordance with their customary law and distinct social and religious practices.

It was in this way that cultural difference and diversity represented by the tribal communities was protected by the Constitution. In addition to recognizing diversity it was argued that these communities, while pursuing their own way of life, must be integrated as part of the Indian federal polity. For this, separate representation was envisaged for members of the identified Scheduled Tribes. Members participating in the debate maintained that in the absence of special representation these communities might remain isolated and unrepresented in the political system. Hence, an effort was made to bring them into the political process without undermining their cultural distinctiveness. In other words, while the concern for including them into the polity took the form of special representation, ensuring the survival of their distinct cultural identity led to the granting of a special status to those regions where there was a significant concentration of the Scheduled Tribes. Over the years, the latter has enabled many vulnerable communities to survive and protect themselves from pressures that come with the large-scale influx of ‘outsiders’. It is pertinent here to note that in areas, for example, in Tripura, where similar provisions for exclusion and protection did not exist for tribal communities, their share in the total population decreased enormously from 64 percent in 1874 to just 28 percent in 1981, with migrants, particularly from the neighboring country, Bangladesh, constituting approximately 70 percent of the population. Similarly, in Assam a comparison between the census of 1891 and 1971 shows that more than half the population living there were either immigrants or their descendants (ibid.).
Special status accorded to identified states, or regions within a state, where the Scheduled Tribes were present in significant numbers, took the form of 'multilevel' and 'asymmetric' federalism (Arora 2001). In substantive terms the latter implied that the various constituent units of the Indian federation did not possess identical powers; some, given their social and political history, received special rights and powers. While for purposes of representation at the federal or central level they were treated alike, and the same principle was applied to determine the extent of their representation, in other respects they were not considered alike. Some with special status had special powers and jurisdictions. The most striking, and in recent times the most controversial, case of special status is the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution the state of Jammu and Kashmir was to be governed by its own constitution and the role of the Central Parliament was restricted primarily to foreign affairs, defense and communications (Arora 1995: 78–9). In all other matters residuary powers resided with the state legislature. Here, the special powers given to the state of Jammu and Kashmir flowed from the Instrument of Accession that the state signed with India when it joined the Union. This was clearly an exception. In other cases, particularly in the Northeast region, asymmetrical powers to the constituent unit were not a consequence of a political agreement or treaty. In most cases special status was accorded to protect and represent the cultural diversity of the region and to allow tribal communities to continue with their distinct customary practices. Article 371, clauses A and G, of the Indian Constitution, for instance, provided the states of Nagaland and Mizoram special rights to govern themselves in accordance with their distinct social practices, customary laws, and community control over ownership and transfer of land and its resources.

Patterns of asymmetrical federalism are today not uncommon in multicultural democracies. Most theories of multiculturalism in fact advocate and justify the need to give special powers or special rights to a constituting unit with a view to enabling its members to protect their distinct way of life. Asymmetric federal arrangements work on the twin principles of separate territorial jurisdiction and special status for cultural communities that are concentrated in a particular region. It is assumed that national minorities that have lived for a long period on a specific territory must have rights over that territory, or at least some degree of political autonomy to manage their own affairs. In India, the federal structure by and large based on linguistic identities, accommodated diversity. Within this wider framework of federalism, asymmetric units were created to give special attention to the history and needs of specific groups of people. It is today most widely applied for accommodating and protecting the diversity embodied in the tribal ways of life.

The Northeast region, where tribal majorities enjoy special powers through a system of asymmetric federalism, is also a region with an enormous degree of internal heterogeneity. It is estimated that more than 600 tribes live in this region. In some cases, like Manipur, nontribal communities too have a long history of living on that land. Indeed they (the Meetei community) see themselves as the original inhabitants. But they exist today with several other tribes who have made Manipur their home. In such cases of vast internal diversity territorial solutions do not always provide adequate solutions to the needs of culturally distinct communities, all of whom are a minority in the national context. When there are contending claims over a territory, or when culturally distinct groups/minorities coexist in a given region, then separate territorial
jurisdiction for each cultural community may only render vulnerable, and at times, unsustainable constituent units. Such situations therefore require a different framework of accommodation.

In India a structure of multilevel federations has at times been devised primarily to deal with such situations of diversity. Even though there is no coherent policy in this regard, attempts at grappling with identity-based ethnic conflict and competing claims for recognition have led to experimenting with multilevel federations. Multilevel federations are an important innovation of the system and may well provide a framework to deal with diversities that have coexisted in a region for long periods of time. In many parts of South Asia, where movement across boundaries has been less restricted and relatively more free, the claims of diverse communities living on the same territory cannot be discounted. In all such contexts, where separate territorial jurisdiction as a distinct unit of the federation is not possible, it is multilevel federations that may provide a viable way of giving some degree of self-governance to diverse communities without bestowing exclusive rights over a territory.

Multilevel federation entails the creation of, what might be called, subfederation: a separate structure of governance along with powers to deliberate on issues that contribute to the distinctiveness of a cultural community. In a culturally diverse region, one option is to have separate representation in legislative bodies and other decision-making institutions for different communities. But here the minorities remain a minority in each unit and may have limited opportunity of influencing policy. By comparison, in multilevel federalism, territorially concentrated minorities in a region can enjoy certain rights to govern themselves on matters that are considered central to the survival of that community as a distinct cultural group. This gives the elites within the community power to influence decisions on crucial cultural and political issues, and the opportunity to access valued resources and positions. Thus, a kind of dual membership is constructed: the community exists as a separate entity in a defined area but it remains, for purposes of participation and representation, a member of the regional state.

In India, in some areas of the Northeast, where culturally distinct communities, such as tribal and nontribal populations, hill tribes and tribes living in the plains, live together in the same territory, multilevel federal arrangements have from time to time been designed to give voice to diverse communities. While the state constitutes the federal unit of the polity, within a state another level was added to the political and administrative structure in the form of Regional District Councils. To take an example: to accommodate the hill tribes of Assam in 1969, an ‘autonomous’ state of Meghalaya was formed within the state of Assam. This arrangement did not however last long and eventually in 1971 Meghalaya got the status of an independent state, constituting a separate federal unit. In another instance, in response to the demands of the Bodos, tribal populations living in the plains of Assam as distinct from the hill tribal communities, Bodoland Autonomous Council was formed in 1993. This was intended to provide an institutionalized structure of autonomy to the Bodos within the state of Assam, with powers to legislate on thirty-eight identified subjects, including matters related to education, ethnic and cultural affairs, social and economic issues (Dasgupta 1998: 200). Institutional arrangements of this kind have also been applied in other parts of the country: Telengana region in Andhra Pradesh being one case in point. Such frameworks of governance have, by and large, been developed in response to popular mobilizations and struggles. The success of these
arrangements is heavily dependent upon the attitude of the different levels of the federation. But there is little doubt that the willingness of the state to experiment with such frameworks of federalism and decentralized governing have played a significant role both in meeting minority aspirations and minimizing ethnic discord.

6. National Unity and Group Autonomy

The Indian Constitution laid the foundations of a multicultural democracy by according public recognition to cultural difference and respecting diversity. But recognition of diversity took different forms in different spheres. As would be evident from the previous sections, in the case of religious communities protecting diversity translated into group cultural autonomy. In the case of linguistic communities, cultural autonomy was subsequently combined with some degree of political and territorial autonomy. In the case of tribal communities, political and cultural autonomy was supplemented by protective measures that gave these communities special rights over their land and the provision to continue with their customary social and cultural practices. Over the years, these measures, which were aimed at recognizing and protecting diversity, have yielded several problems. Cultural autonomy and corresponding rights for religious minorities have posed the question of equality for vulnerable groups within the community. In particular, the issue of equality and fair treatment for women within the community has been a matter of grave concern for the polity. Linguistically and culturally defined territorial units have raised concerns about the fate of cultural minorities who wish to retain their own identity within the region, and perhaps share power with the new elite.

The Indian polity today faces the questions of ensuring equality for marginalized groups within the country and protecting the diversity represented by internal minorities within a region. Both these pose serious challenges and the inability to deal with them adequately has been a matter of deep concern. Yet, even as we recognize the tasks that lie ahead and need still to be tackled in a few regions, it is also important to note that cultural and political autonomy granted in different ways to different groups has strengthened India. If most of the communities continue to live within the country, despite prevailing situations of ethnic conflict in some regions, it is because there is a structure in place that does acknowledge diversity and a democratic system that tries to accommodate this diversity through a federal framework.

What is equally noteworthy is that the multicultural structure has over the years been strengthened and enhanced. At the time of independence, diversity was accommodated but within a liberal understanding that operated with the private–public distinction. The political leadership in India applied this distinction in the case of communities to distinguish between their cultural claims and political claims. The former was more readily accepted but the latter met with several reservations. An exception was made in the case of tribal populations but religious and linguistic communities received only special rights to express and protect their cultural difference. However, in the post-independence period, this private/public divide was rethought as the linguistic reorganization of states, which started in 1956, gave political rights and some autonomy to communities that were identified on the basis of language. What is equally significant is that the Indian experience over the last fifty-five years shows that anxieties arising around claims of cultural communities for recognition need to be reconsidered. Like many twentieth-century liberals, several leaders in India were wary of all forms of community
affiliations and identities; consequently, they invoked the category of citizen and called upon
democratic states to set aside all other community affiliations and consider individual members
of the nation-state as citizens of the polity. But the subsequent experience has put to rest many
of these fears about the possibility of cultural identity-based political units fragmenting the polity.
In fact as nonrecognition is often a source of disadvantage and discrimination, acknowledging
differences in the political arena and making them the basis of governance in a federal structure
has deepened democracy. It has brought new and previously marginalized groups into the
political process and given them opportunities that they did not enjoy.

Recognition of diversity and political rights of self-governance for cultural communities has not
always come easily, and, as is often the case, it has been the product of sustained struggle and
political negotiation. While the state has in many regions relied on force to deal with demands of
autonomy and secession, policies involving recognition of differences, even in the political
sphere, have not been abandoned. Indeed, it is when the state has been willing to strengthen
the federal structure and accommodate diversity through mechanisms and innovations within
the federal democratic framework, that it has been most successful in dealing with and
minimizing ethnic discord and conflict.

The concerns of diversity and national unity are the two poles within which the Indian state has
had to negotiate and strike a balance. As a country that came into existence with the grief of
partition, territory has always occupied a sacred position. Consequently, demands for secession
have almost always met with great resistance. But it is striking that in a country, which at the
time of independence was surrounded by more than 500 separate princely states, most of
whom joined the Indian polity, there have been relatively few movements for secession. On the
whole, whatever success the Indian state has had in managing and minimizing such demands is
attributable almost entirely to its ability to respect and accommodate diversity within a
democratic and federal structure. By comparison, it is regions where the democratic structures
have been supplanted or thwarted for whatever reasons, and where the institutions of
federalism could not function effectively and freely, that have been the main locus of ethnic
conflict and discord. But where democracy and federalism have worked effectively and been
strengthened, and dissent or demands for autonomy have been met, violent conflict has been
reduced and eliminated.

While discussing claims of cultural communities and conflict it is necessary also to mention that
in developing societies, like India, where there is acute scarcity of resources, cultural identity-
based mobilizations are often linked to, and appropriated by, groups to further their material
interests. Consequently, demands for recognition are not purely claims for due
acknowledgement of an identity; they articulate objective interests and are at times a means of
gaining access to resources, jobs, and opportunities. In the struggle for economic and political
benefits the battle is against competing elites in the region, particularly internal and external
migrants, rather than the Indian State. Moreover, in a federal system, depending upon the
configuration of political forces and alliances, the Indian State can be a facilitator and an ally in
the quest for increasing opportunities for a given community. At another level, where the
demands and dissent of the people are concerned, in a functioning federal polity, they can be
channeled and directed against the local ruling elite. Either way, the perceived enemy or the
'other' is not the Indian State. Only in cases where the regional groups and elites find the State unresponsive to their needs, interfering in the effective functioning of democratic institutions, or misrecognizing them systematically, the regional/subnational sentiment positioned itself in opposition to the Indian nation-state. In most other situations, a minority nation sentiment at the regional level has not posed a serious threat to the integrity of the nation-state.

Thus, even though identity-based constituent units have raised concerns about the fate of internal minorities within the region, they have coexisted with relative ease with a pan-Indian national identity. This is not to say that there are no demands for secession. But in most cases these were first demands for giving the federal unit more powers or autonomy within the existing structure. Only the failure to meet these demands fueled, for instance, in Punjab and Kashmir, the movement for separation (see Gupta 1996; and Akbar 1985). In a few other cases, most notably, the Mizos, the creation of a homestate with some degree of political and cultural autonomy paved the way for dialogue and peaceful negotiations within the framework of the Indian polity. These experiences have shown that claims of cultural communities for territorial jurisdiction and autonomy can be addressed and accommodated without fracturing the unity of the nation-state.

In particular, according a certain degree of political autonomy to linguistic groups in the form of constituent units of the federation does not pose a threat to the integrity of the nation-state. Linguistic identities easily coexist with and even supplement national identity. These are not, in other words, competing identities; in fact nonrecognition of linguistic identities and their aspirations to form self-governing units may have posed a threat to the unity and territorial integrity of the state. In India, formation of language-based regional states has, at one level, enhanced diversity. It has provided an environment in which languages, marginalized in the national context, have successfully sustained themselves and grown. At another level it has, by accommodating the felt needs of the people, minimized potential sources of conflict with the nation-state.

Citizenship, as Carens points out, has multiple dimensions—legal, political, and a psychological dimension (Carens 2000: 161–76). It is only when identities which are important to the individual receive positive affirmation that individuals develop a stronger sense of belonging and identity. And vice versa, when identities remain largely unrecognized or misrecognized, then individuals may be citizens of the polity without having a corresponding feeling of patriotism or attachment. This is certainly affirmed in the Indian case where we find that recognition of linguistic and cultural identities through frameworks of asymmetric and multilevel federalism have helped to overcome alienation, thereby inculcating a sense of belonging to the state. This has strengthened bonds of citizenship and assisted the process of building an integrated nation-state. In many cases, it has in fact made the ‘transition from insurgency and brazen violence to benign constitutionalism’ possible (Dasgupta 1998: 210). ‘Institutional processing of ethnic demands, including violent ones’ has transformed some so-called ‘dangerous enemies’ into ‘constructive contributors of the democratic processes’ (ibid.).

The willingness to extend recognition to culturally distinct groups is perhaps one of the distinguishing elements of the Indian political experience. Baruah argues that as ‘a result of this policy the condition of most indigenous peoples of northeast India contrasts sharply with that of
indigenous people in peninsular India and other parts of southern India. The point was underlined sharply when the leader of the Chin tribal insurgents in Burma—a group that is culturally contiguous with Mizos in India—declared ‘...that the Chin National Front...said that “we will secede from Burma and join India, where minorities are assured of greater rights” ’ (Baruah 1989: 2087). Assertions of this kind may not adequately reflect the specifics of the minority issues in Burma or South Asia, but they suggest that the policy of recognizing culturally distinct groups and creating institutional structures that enable them to govern themselves, can be a way of building loyalties and support for the nation-state.

In a democracy the ability to accommodate and recognize collective community aspirations play a critical role in holding the nation-state together and minimizing moments of internal dissent. The experience of India, and perhaps of all of South Asia, seems to indicate this. The willingness to accept diversity and to be favorably disposed to considering frameworks of multicultural accommodation constitute the basic minimum, without which issues of development, and at times even survival, of democracies in the region may be seriously jeopardized.

7. Three Caveats

Minority communities can be disadvantaged in two fairly different ways within the nation-state: (a) through policies of cultural homogenization and nonrecognition of difference; and (b) through systematic misrecognition and selective targeting of a community and its members. In India greater attention was given to curtailing the former. A number of strategies of multicultural accommodation—such as special cultural and political rights for minorities to live in accordance with their cultural practices and to govern themselves, to set up institutions to protect and promote their language and culture—were endorsed in pursuit of this end. Each of these strategies was aimed at making the public arena more heterogeneous and reflective of existing diversity within the nation-state. By comparison, little effort has been made to check negative stereotyping of minorities or to prevent targeting of certain minority community members. Indeed, in the last decade such attempts at vilifying identified minorities, designating them as ‘antinational’ has steadily increased. The fact that such minority targeting was coming from political groups closely allied with the dominant political party in government at the central level, has yielded a deep sense of anxiety and fear among the members of the major minority communities—Muslims and Christians (Hansen 1999). As a consequence, even though cultural diversity is protected, minorities face another form of marginalization and discrimination within the polity. This sense of alienation and vulnerability has been compounded by periodic episodes of communal violence, in which members of a minority community are systematically victimized, their lives threatened, and their property destroyed. Collectively, the political rhetoric of hate and incidents of targeted violence in which the state machinery is complicit or a silent spectator, have brought home to the minorities the reality of being disadvantaged and discriminated against.

Quite evidently, discrimination engendered by acts of communal violence and negative imaging requires policies and strategies quite different from those that are necessary for minimizing
disadvantage ensuing from state policies entailing cultural assimilation and homogenization. Special rights given with a view to protecting and promoting diversity can restrict the threat of cultural homogenization, but they do not always address discrimination that arises from stereotyping and selective targeting of minorities. In particular, combating communal violence requires a strident and unconditional defense of basic rights of individuals as citizens. However, it is here that the state has been often negligent and remiss. If the multicultural fabric of Indian federal democracy is to sustain itself then affirmation of special rights needs to go hand-in-hand with affirmation of the basic rights of individuals as citizens of the polity. Cultural difference is certainly valuable but in the absence of physical security neither homogenization nor diversity can be adequately safeguarded.

The point that needs to be emphasized is that both kinds of rights are important for the individual. If the absence of public recognition of difference creates a sense of alienation and disadvantage in the public arena, then inadequate protection of the basic rights of citizenship leaves members of minority communities vulnerable. In a democracy both sets of rights complement each other, and if we are to eliminate the multiple sites of discrimination that exist in a polity, then the value of both rights needs to be understood and asserted. In developing countries like India, and perhaps in much of South Asia, where there is considerable competition for resources, nonrecognition of difference is likely to be a rallying point for communities that are marginalized economically, politically, and culturally. At the same time, in the absence of personal security, protection of difference is likely to make communities more closed and internally united. Under the circumstances, vulnerable members of a minority community are more likely to silence all voices of dissent, even those that arise from within, and imagine themselves as a homogeneous and unified group. Such expressions are, in addition to nourishing closure and orthodoxy within the community, going to reify differences and a sense of separateness between communities. Thus, while both sets of rights are important neither is enough by itself. The future of democracy and territorial integrity in this region therefore depends vitally upon the capacity of governments to protect both basic rights of citizenship along with accommodating differences in the public and political arena. The precise form will always vary from context to context but what may remain constant is the urgency to secure both types of rights in conjunction with each other.

Second, while designing a multicultural framework we need also to be sensitive to the fact that concerns of recognition are often combined with those of redistribution. Mobilizations that seek recognition for a specific language or culture are at times layered by the desire to access or corner resources and opportunities, at least within a region. In many developing societies, like India, cultural assertions are usually overdetermined by these twin concerns. Anxieties about the status of a particular cultural community or its survival at times elicit the support of groups that seek political recognition with a view to consolidating economic and political opportunities for members of that community. As and when claims of recognition are thus accompanied by concerns of, what may be called, redistribution, cultural communities tend to become exclusionary and hostile to the internal others. Consequently, when claims of recognition are met by granting separate territorial jurisdiction and cultural autonomy to a community within the federal structure, adequate safeguards need to be built-in to ensure that the newly constructed majority within the region does not follow policies that exile or annihilate other minorities within
the region. This is particularly important in situations where regional majorities have a disproportionately smaller share in the holding of assets and opportunities within. In many parts of India and South Asia as a whole, regional majorities arising through reorganization of territories and political recognition have unleashed a reign of violence and terror against powerful internal minorities. Consequently, it appears that political recognition of diversity poses as many problems as it solves. The fate of internal minorities is certainly an important issue, and one that frameworks of multicultural accommodation need to address. But this problem cannot be resolved by denying recognition to diverse cultural communities and resisting political accommodation of differences for the latter may only escalate ethnic conflict and violence, and that too in a shrill voice of secession. Democracies need to attend to issues of redistribution as they address concerns of recognition; and what is also important is that political autonomy and territorial jurisdiction for cultural communities may have to be linked to protection of internal minorities and their rights to live, work, and retain their distinctiveness within the region.

Lastly, effectively minimizing the multiple sites of minority discrimination within the nation-state requires, in addition to measures that protect diversity, policies that initiate and encourage conversation across cultures. While it is necessary that individuals have access to their culture and the freedom to live their lives in accordance with their cultural inheritances if they so choose, some consideration needs also to be given to multigroup initiatives. Access to one's culture must, in other words, be supplemented by awareness of the culture of other communities within the region. Given regional cultural diversity, at one stage in India it was suggested that individuals should receive education in their mother tongue, and along with it, they must also learn the national official language and a third language, preferably another language spoken in the state. The idea being that in this way the majority might well learn the language and literature of the minority and the minority might likewise learn the language and the culture of the majority. I am using this example here only to illustrate policy frameworks that may be used to nurture intercommunity conversation. The essential point being that the state needs, while protecting diversity, to devise frameworks where individuals, while being located in their own culture nevertheless open themselves to engagement with others. A secure cultural framework may be a condition necessary for undertaking this but by itself it will not translate into awareness or respect for the other. Multicultural frameworks that seek to minimize minority discrimination and enhance equal citizenship need therefore to provide access to one's culture along with encouraging conversations and multigroup engagements.

It is often assumed that public recognition will break down stereotypes and extend recognition to the 'other'. In actuality public recognition and a heterogeneous public sphere may coexist with negative representation of minorities. Formal inclusion of minorities in the public and political arena is certainly an important step in giving them a sense of participation and equality, but if long-standing images and representations have to be challenged we may require more than formal protection of cultural difference. Collective engagement, particularly with the other, and measures that extend our horizons and take us beyond the boundaries of one's group identity can play an important role in this. A multicultural democracy requires for its sustenance not isolated islands and multiple cultural solitudes but communities living together and participating as equal partners in the national political life.