

## THEME PAVILION

### **Composite Culture in a Multicultural Society**

Today nearly all societies are multicultural—they consist of people of distinct diverse culture holding differing views regarding family, companionship, the good life, values by which to live and die.

More and more countries are becoming culturally diverse, in part as a result of globalizing world, technological changes, migration, etc. To the existing list of long-time multicultural countries such as India, USA, Canada, South Africa, Brazil, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Belgium, Algeria, China, the Caribbean Islands, Mauritius, Malaysia, Fiji, Singapore, Lebanon, are being added, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Holland, Norway, Australia, Pakistan and large parts of Africa. Tomorrow the entire world is going to be multicultural.

Diversity poses some basic questions on a world scale, challenging social scientists, educationists and political leaders, among others. What is meant by diversity of cultures? How are societies and nations to deal with this diversity? What attitudes are they to adopt towards it? How are culturally diverse people to live together? What sort of a nation do that people living in it want or should want? What is the relationship between a nation and culture? Does cultural identity determine national identity or rather does a nation have to have a single defined cultural identity? How should a state deal with persons culturally different from the majority? Should the state, for example, have different laws for those having different cultural practices; for example regarding marriage? Do nations have national values, which can be imposed, by the state on all its citizens? In other words, what should a nation do with its cultural diversity?

Should it follow the assimilation path of ending cultural diversity, (i.e. the melting pot model)? Which is seen by the assimilationists as a threat to national unity and disruption, or at least, a dilution of national culture? What are the basic assumptions or components of the assimilationist (or acculturist) position? What are its pitfalls? Is it desirable? Is it even workable? Assimilation even when it is not forcible, means moulding people of divergent cultures with a common pre-existing culture, which really leads to the dominant culture. Would that inevitably involve the use of force, legal or otherwise? And would it not breed discontent among minority cultures and therefore pose a threat to national unity? How far can it be said that the assimilationist model has been discredited and finds few takers in today's world?

## II

The alternative view favours cultural pluralism or multiculturalism. Multiculturalists accept and respect cultural diversity, stress its inevitability, and hold that diverse cultural groups are all equal members of society. Today, no culture can be imposed on others for no minority would accept that. Moreover, they argue, all cultures are, in fact, hybrid, for all of them have developed in interaction and intermingling with other cultures. Furthermore, all cultures have something valuable to say and, therefore, different cultures can learn from each other. In any case, even though different cultures may have different values, no one culture can or should be privileged over another. Going further, most of the multiculturalists ask people to cherish, celebrate and foster diversity, and to create a multiculturalist ethos in society.

Several questions arise. What is the difference between multiculturalists and those among the assimilationists who argue for tolerance for other cultures? Should all cultural practices of different cultural groups be tolerated by appealing to multiculturalism or are there limits to such tolerances? Are there not some aspects of a particular culture which are better than those of

corresponding aspects of another culture, for example, attitude towards a girl child? Is it not by such comparison that people of one culture pick up aspects of another culture? Should such 'learning' from other cultures be actively promoted or left to historical processes? How should diverse cultures in a society relate to each other? Does multiculturalism mean the drawing of permanent lines of cultural division among people on ethnic, linguistic, religious or racial grounds? Should efforts not be made to bring cultures together and to promote interaction among them and even some elements of synthesis? And, of course, what cultural rights and protective measures should cultural minorities enjoy?

### III

Cultural diversity does not mean that nothing like national culture exists in a country. Though not assimilated into a dominant culture, diverse cultural groups, living together in a nation or political unit, do not go on living in mutually exclusive compartments or in isolation or continue to live parallel and separate cultural lives. They not only interact and influence each other and undergo changes, but, interacting on an equal basis, they also create something new, that is, a common or more accurately put a distinct pluralist national component culture.

What is composite culture? According to some, it is something new: For example, new music, new food, new family norms and new relations between the sexes, even new religious beliefs and practices, that is, a new culture. This new culture is the product of contributions from every cultural group of the society or even of the world outside. Moreover, the weight of the contribution that each culture makes to the new composite culture is not related to the weight it has in the population, economy or politics. Moreover, the new composite culture does not try to overthrow its constituent or contributing cultures, but respects them and their identity. Each contributing culture maintains its distinctiveness and also continues its own development though informed by fellow cultures. Both the new composite culture and the contributing cultures develop simultaneously. Not only their present, even the pasts of the many contributory characters are seen as a common heritage of the society.

Several other questions are: What is the role of government in engendering common composite culture? And what is the extent of the composite culture? What role positive or negative do the press, television, radio, education, travel, sports, advertisement, mass market in consumption goods and trade and industry play in the process? And what is the relation of the national composite culture to the emerging, though in its infancy, composite world or universal culture? Lastly, is composite culture a temporary, passing phase that will culminate in a single national culture in the long run?

Two other important questions are: Are democracy and secularism critically related to the maintenance of cultural diversity and the healthy growth of a composite national culture? And what in this respect is the role of the way history is taught in a society?

### IV

The above line of discussion raises some very important issues. Can people with diverse cultures form a nation? After all, culture is very important in nation-making and nation building and people put very high value on their culture. This is where recognition of cultural diversity and the simultaneous evolution of composite culture become crucial. In a multicultural society, growth of composite culture is necessary for the formation and growth of national identity and national unity. Once the multiculturally constituted composite culture is widely accepted, it forms a pillar of nationhood. Cultural diversity then nurtures national unity.

Does this, then, mean that nation is no longer defined on the basis of language, race, religion, ethnicity or a pre-existing national culture? Does it then get defined by economic and political interest, though buttressed by common composite culture? And would, in the absence of composite culture, diversity of cultures fail to overcome divisive forces in a nation?

There is another allied question. How important a role should sub-national identities play in the political life of the members of a nation? Can they or would they play a role equal to that of the national identity? Would, at some stage, many citizens opt out of sub group loyalties and proclaim themselves to be only members of a nation, living in its rapidly evolving composite culture?

## V

How do all these issues relating to the diversity of cultures impinge on India? India is home of nearly all the religions of the world. The Indian Constitution recognizes 18 national languages and there are hundreds more spoken by over one million persons. Its inhabitants include hundreds of tribes. It has no dominant or majority language. Followers of Hindu religion do constitute a majority but, Hindu religious practices, as also those of its largest religious minority, the Muslims, are diverse in the extreme.

There exist two broad approaches as to how to deal with India's cultural diversity and cultural and national identity. The approach developed by the leaders of the Indian national movement and the framers of the Indian Constitution and the approach propagated before 1947 by the Hindu and Muslim communalists and after 1947 by the Hindu communalists. The first approach is akin to that of the proponents of multiculturalism and composite culture. Its proponents argue that a composite culture has been developing in India since the dawn of its history, that the process is continuing into the present that Indian nationalism was basically economic and political and not cultural in its character and that even while promoting composite culture, nationalism must still retain its basically political and economic orientation. Agreeing with Jawaharlal Nehru, they also celebrate India's cultural diversity as also stress its inevitability. The second approach argues for a single cultural identity based on 'Hindu culture' which was according to the proponents of this view, formed during the Vedic period and nurtured till about the 6th century A.D. They also argue that Indian nationalism was in the past and has still to be cultural nationalism.

## VI

The two-day seminar being organised for the purpose, on 28 and 29 January 2006 would also deal at some length with the nature of India's cultural development over the centuries as also at present and its relation to nationalism and the competing definitions of India as a nation. The question raised above would be primarily discussed in the seminar in the context of concrete national studies.

In a book fair of the magnitude of the World Book Fair, it shall be in the fitness of things to allow books to do the talking. Therefore, a 'Theme Pavilion' has been set up with a select display of published books in 13 Indian languages complemented by representative items of multiculturalism with active cooperation from Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, and contributions from Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Lalit Kala Akademi, National Museum, National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum (Crafts Museum), Bharat Bhavan (Bhopal), Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya (Bhopal) and Adivasi Lok Kala Academy (Bhopal). As the term culture encompasses the entire human life from birth till death, from genesis of human existence till the present times, select items of culture—be it paintings, ceramics, sculpture, costumes, crafts, musical instruments, dance forms or ideologies—which depict several streams of thought shall also be on display here.