

## Who do you think you are?

In the film, *The Party*, there is a line ascribed to the Indian character Bakshi played by Peter Sellers. In response to a taunt, "Who do you think you are?" Bakshi responds: "In India we don't think who we are, we know who we are." For those of us, who are never quite sure what it means to know who we are, such confidence is a great source of envy. But it is sometimes alarming, when we not only seem to know who we are, but also seem to know who everyone else is. We easily ascribe identities to others, nest those identities in a set of expectations, and confidently proclaim the obligations that follow from those identities.

Collective identities matter to people. They may give a sense of belonging. They can sometimes produce solidarity. Sometimes they are premised on a sense of superiority and domination. Sometimes they are a defensive reaction against oppressive constructions that target people for being who they are. Collective identities are produced through complex social, psychological and historical mechanisms. Sometimes identities precede political action, sometimes they are constructed through it. But in our public discourse there is something deeply suffocating and inimical about the use of collective nouns and pronouns to capture identities. Almost all words that designate any collective identity — "Hindus", "Muslims", "Dalits", "Indian", or even categories of gender — are almost casually used to imprison people than recognise them. This is not the occasion for theoretical exercises in notions of identity. But the utter lack of self-awareness, and false confidence with which these terms are invoked should make us pause.

While it is a truism that identities matter, it is also a truism that when they are carelessly ascribed, they become inimical to freedom. What does it mean to invoke the term "Indian Muslim"? What does it mean to say, "I am Hindu" or I am "Jain or "Tamil?" These words have contextual uses, and can be aspects of people's self-definition. But they easily become tyrannical when the common sense pitfalls of any collective noun or pronoun are ignored.

The pitfalls that make the easy ascription of collective identities fraught are obvious. But they bear repeating. In invoking a collective identity, are we too easily ascribing a unity of purpose, meaning, experience and capability to members of large group that they cannot possibly have? In ascribing that unity, or measuring that identity against a benchmark, we abstract away the different textures, struggles, individual engagement through which that identity becomes a hard won achievement, or the diverse forms in which it is imagined. Second, Nietzsche once said, that only ahistorical beings can be defined. To confidently name an identity is, in some ways, to freeze it; it is to impose a stable set of expectations that circumscribe our possibility of action. We become manifestations of that larger collective identity rather than agents who shape it.

Third, identities almost always seem to trap us in binaries, what Bhikhu Parekh in a lecture once evocatively called "the false antinomies between closed wholes". Identities are often maintained by policing boundaries, if you are one thing, you cannot be another. Or worse, the truism that the solidarity behind collective identities is often sustained by identifying a threat or an enemy. One of the paradoxes of India is that at the level of vernacular practice, our identities can be a lot more permeable. It is when we put the pressure on naming them (Is "X" practice Sikh or Hindu?) that identities go from being open fields that we freely inhabit to closed fortresses that we zealously guard. Fourth, public invocations of identity are insidiously colonising and easily displace reason and argument. Which collective identity you can be slotted under is then assumed to give you authority over some subjects not others, define your moral responsibilities, and even be a predictor of what you might say. If an argument takes the form, "Speaking as 'X' I make the following claim," it is the speaking as X that is supposed to give you authority not the validity of your claim.

India, of course, has the most nauseating history of imposing compulsory identities on people,

through caste. But other casual invocations of public identity also extract huge moral costs. Just as nationalism is a form of collective aggrandisement and narcissism, so do most collective identities run the same risk. Collective identities efface individuality. The emphasis in describing everyone first by the collective noun into which they can be slotted often completely forecloses any space of interiority, no space for inwardness, or psychological complexity. Aurobindo was right in thinking that at some point rigidified external social identities made India something akin to a charnel house of rotted interiorities, to use Lukacs' phrase. If you wanted to explore the depths of being and the complexities of existence, you had to escape society; society always had its scripts ready for you. Our constant inability to think of individuals outside of the collective noun under which we slot them has a similar effect. And by subsuming people under abstractions, collective identities do away with ordinary human sympathies.

Collective identities are also becoming scripts others control. They take away possibilities of self-definition. When we use terms like Hindu, Muslim, Women, Dalit, casually in public discourse, what do they actually mean? What expectations are associated with them? Are the listeners associating the same meaning with that collective noun as the speaker? Do the listeners burden those who inhabit these identities with different stereotypes than those who invoke them? Indian public discourse is so suffocating in part because these collective nouns are the medium through which we constantly misrecognise each other. Casual stereotyping is just one manifestation of that.

These categories are perhaps inescapable. But we can be more self-aware about their imprisoning logic. Contrary to the character Bakshi's confidence, we don't know who we are. We get that confident certainty that we know who we are, or who other are by slotting them into boxes. By naming them, putting them under a collective noun, we avoid the labour and hard work of having to know who we are and who others are. Naming has become a substitute for knowing. Perhaps we will be more liberated not if we have the illusory confidence that we know who we are, but if we replied like Bulleh Shah: "Bulla ki jana main kaun?" For it is the tyranny of naming that destroys our freedom, and makes us presumptuous enough to define others as well.

END

Downloaded from [crackIAS.com](http://crackIAS.com)

© **Zuccess App** by [crackIAS.com](http://crackIAS.com)