

DEVELOPMENT MATTERS, BUT SO DOES IDENTITY

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to The Preamble, Union & its Territories and The Citizenship

It is sometimes claimed that once ordinary people benefit from economic development, they automatically set aside issues related to their identity. Such a view was found not only in materialist theories that gave explanatory primacy in human life to economic factors but also among leaders of social and political movements. Nehru, for instance, is believed to have assumed that as India makes economic progress, religious identity would matter less and communal conflict would disappear. It seems that the government's claim on Jammu and Kashmir shares the same premise. Give Kashmiris an economic package, prospects of more jobs, better healthcare, high-quality consumption goods and they will forget their specific identity and assimilate peacefully with the rest of India. 'Development' shall trump identity.

Identity is much misused and abused. We misunderstand it, misconstrue its significance, maliciously politicise it but it refuses to go away. Why? Undeniably, we are biological creatures with basic material needs. But we are also expressive creatures, image-builders, story-makers, concept-inventors, and so live in a world saturated with images, representations, myths, stories, and philosophies. Over thousands of years, multiple imaginary worlds have been fashioned, each of which is the collective possession of different societies. These imagined narratives shape our material needs, making them complex, elaborate and distinct. All humans do not have the same food and sartorial preferences. They design their dwellings differently. They even use their bodies and tongues differently to communicate with one another. In short, our material needs, suffused with imagination and saturated with concepts, are filled with intricacy and nuance.

Moreover, we have developed non-biological needs and dispositions. We reflect on the world and on ourselves. We develop a sense of who we are. We have implicit or explicit answers to the question: who am I? This is partly answered by our culturally mediated material needs: we are, for example, what we eat and do not eat. But equally important for this answer is an ethic that distinguishes the good from the bad, right from wrong, what is worth striving for and what is not. With the help of this, we get a sense of where we stand in this world and what stand we take on it. In short, we are also defined by our specific stand on what happens to us after we die, and, say, on our position on the place of women in society.

So we cannot live a proper life without a framework of culture and ethic — the source of meaning and worth in our lives. Nor without other people with whom we share this framework, without a community. If this identity-endowing, cultural and ethical framework is so crucial to each one of us, then how can economic development alone satisfy us? This unsubstitutable need for selfhood will not disappear just because one's biological needs are fulfilled.

So, not only are identity-related needs extremely important, but these needs are satisfied by a *particular* socio-culturally informed ethical framework. Why not any such framework? Good question, but one that has a rather simple response: we are born into a specific framework, are initiated into it in our childhood, and before long, it makes us who we are. It provides humans with features that define them. These form the core that remains relatively constant, even as everything around changes. Moreover, these constitutive features matter more than anything else. A wart on the body may be permanent, but it won't matter if it is removed. But take away fish from Bengali cuisine and all hell will break loose. Tagore's songs in middle class Bengali homes have the same status. The same is true of the worship of Murugan to many Tamils; the relic of Muhammad in Hazratbal to Kashmiri Muslims; the Kamakhya temple to the Assamese.

These specific, enduring, valuable beliefs and practices are identity-constituting, anchoring people in the world, making them feel at home, giving them succour.

All this is true. But it is equally true that identity-related issues invoke fear. They are prone to being abused. They can even become dangerous. How so? This happens when the relatively enduring character of identity begins to be viewed as immutable and incontestable, and derived from a single, permanent source. An identity is then seen as defining us categorically, once and for all, in an all-or-nothing manner, like something inscribed in our DNA. Anything that disturbs or threatens the structure of our socio-cultural 'DNA' unhinges and enflames us, forcing us to die for it or even to kill.

These conclusions about the nature of identity are troublesome but not ineluctable. First, because, although our identity-constituting beliefs, feelings, values are given in childhood, as we become self-reflexive, we frequently begin to question, revise and even reject them. They must endure but don't have to be immutable. Second, as we grow, we enter different groups, begin participating in more than one socio-cultural framework, develop multiple identities. These identities move in and out of focus depending upon context. It is doubtful if human beings will flourish, perhaps even survive, if they were entrenched exclusively within one framework, bound to one single, permanently embedded identity. Third, each of these identities is itself derived from multiple sources. Consider J&K. Three thousand years ago, like the rest of the north-western region that includes Pakistan and Afghanistan, Kashmiri culture was Vedic. It then probably acquired a layer from Greek settlers and definitively from the teachings of Buddha. By the middle of the 1st millennium CE, it imbibed a strong strain of Shaivism. Later highly syncretic Sufi currents entered and still later, large chunks from modern Islam. Kashmiri identity is a palimpsest that unfolds like a peeled onion, layer by layer. It would be absurd to reduce it simplistically to monoliths like 'Hindu' or 'Islamic'. These are useful simplifications in ideological or political battles but half-truths, even lies. The core of Kashmiri identity is a complex compound, flowing from multiple sources, not reducible to a simple, single element. What's more, this is true of every regional identity in India, of Indian identity in general, indeed, of every group identity in the world.

What is the political implication of these observations? Modern socio-economic conditions require states to take care not only of people's material welfare but also their identities. But these conditions also foster ethno-nationalisms that insist on one state for every monocultural identity. Deep down this is a lie, because it defies the intricacies of human cultures. So, is there a viable modern political system that protects the complexity of human identities and mitigates their rough, violent edges? There is. A decent federal system that allows a great deal of political autonomy to distinct cultural groups, protects important common (national) interests and enables fruitful encounter of regional cultures does that. Disturbing this federal arrangement for the sake of a simplistic idea of unity is not a smart thing to do. At worse, it paves the way for prolonged conflict that endangers development. Paradoxically, then, we might well be undercutting development in the very name of development.

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