

# Nationalism vs. Pluralism: The Crisis of Identity in India

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## Abstract:

India has historically been known as a pluralistic society, where diversity of religions, languages, races and cultures is the foundation of the state. The Constitution envisions citizenship as a "thin" identity, where all citizens are equal in the eyes of the law. But the emergence of "thick" cultural nationalism in India in recent decades has tied national identity into a certain religious-civilizational framework. This article analyses the conflict of nationalism and pluralism in the context of contemporary India and shows how these conflicts are creating an "identity crisis" between minorities and marginalised populations. The article argues that, when nationalism becomes culturally one-sided, it undermines democratic inclusion and breaks social cohesion.

**Keywords:** nationalism, pluralism, identity politics, India, democracy, majoritarianism.

## Introduction:

The policy of 'Divide and Rule' of the British Raj tried to divide Indian society along religious and ethnic lines. It was from this bitter experience that the framers of the Constitution realised that the stability of independent India required a structure which would ensure equal rights for all, and not the domination of any particular group. Nehru and Ambedkar knew that forcibly imposing uniformity in a vast country like India would be counterproductive. So, they made a provision in the Constitution where citizens could simultaneously practice their religious/linguistic identity and, to a large extent, be known as an 'Indian'. Which prove that the Constitution of India is not a fantasy or a mere imitation; It was a well-planned political answer to India's long struggle against the exploitation and deprivation of British colonial rule. Every article of this constitution was based on the experience of the long-standing struggles of the Indian people.

India is one of the most diverse countries in the world. The multidimensionality of language, religion, caste, and regional identities is the social reality of India. This diversity is not only the characteristic of the society, but the foundation of the state. After independence, the Constitution of India created a state structure in which the concept of citizenship was universal and inclusive. Modern India is based on the principle that all persons are equal citizens, irrespective of religion, language or ethnicity.

Under the leadership of Nehru and Ambedkar, "Indianness" was essentially based on citizenship. To be an Indian was to bear equal rights and responsibilities under the Constitution. Religion or culture was part of personal and social identity, but not a condition of state inclusion. It was this idea that integrated the pluralistic character of India.

But since the second decade of the twenty-first century, there has been a profound change in the political landscape of India. Nationalism has emerged in a new form, where national identity is increasingly being

defined within a certain cultural and religious framework. "Nation" is no longer just a collection of citizens; Rather, it is becoming a symbol of a special historical and civilizational identity. This transformation has created a fundamental contradiction in India's state thought- **Nationalism versus Pluralism**. On the one hand, there is a nationalism that seeks to define the nation on the basis of a single identity; On the other hand, there is pluralism, which sees the coexistence of differences as the strength of the state. This contradiction is not just theoretical; it has real political and social consequences.

In contemporary India, this conflict is most pronounced on the question of citizenship and inclusion. Traditionally, citizenship was a legal relationship between the state and the individual. But now the concept of citizenship is increasingly beginning to carry cultural meanings. The questions of who is a "real Indian", who is an "outsider", and who is "patriotic" are not legal but have begun to be judged on moral and cultural standards. This trend carries profound signals for a pluralistic society. Because pluralism doesn't just mean the existence of diversity; It is a recognition of differences as legitimate and of equal dignity. When the state or political discourse establishes one identity as a "national standard", other identities are naturally marginalised. As a result, there is a division between "full inclusion" and "conditional inclusion" among citizens.

This process is reflected in every aspect of daily life in society. Food habits, clothing, language, festivals, and even the interpretation of history become political. Behaviour or culture that does not fit the majority narrative begins to be labelled as "non-national" or "foreign". As a result, the individual faces the test of national identity not only as a citizen, but also through their daily life. And this is where the identity crisis starts. Citizenship is no longer unconditional for minorities and marginalised people. The question arises in their minds: Is it enough for me to become a citizen on the basis of the Constitution, or do I have to change my culture and way of life and adapt myself to the identity of the majority? This question creates a profound psychological and political crisis.

In a country like India, where diversity is the reality, this transformation of nationalism challenges the fundamental character of the state. Pluralism is not an additional principle here; This is a condition of social stability. Because in the history of India, unity has never come through uniformity, but through the coexistence of differences. Although contemporary political discourse speaks of national unity, that unity is often confused with homogeneity. Unity means that if everyone is put in the same cultural mould, it is suicidal for a pluralistic society. True unity can be achieved only when all citizens, despite their differences, feel equally part of the state.

In this context, the main question of the study arises: Can one-sided nationalism be sustainable in a diverse society like India? Or does it inevitably undermine pluralism and social cohesion?

This question is not just theoretical; It is directly linked to India's democratic future. The basis of democracy is that people of different opinions, different identities and different lifestyles belong equally to the state. If nationalism views differences with suspicion and establishes a single identity as "true Indianness", then democracy takes the form of majority rule.

Therefore, the conflict of nationalism versus pluralism in the context of contemporary India is not just a clash of political ideologies; It is a battle to determine the character of the state. On the one hand, there is the ideal of civil equality and inclusion, and on the other hand, there is the desire for cultural homogeneity. The outcome of this conflict will determine whether India will survive as a pluralistic democracy in the future or as a majority state.

### **Theoretical Framework: 'Thin' vs 'Thick' Identity Conflict**

A theoretical approach is essential to understanding nationalism, because race is not a natural or organic reality; rather, it is a social and political construct. Benedict Anderson defined the nation as an "imagined community". According to him, the members of a nation do not know each other personally but imagine themselves as part of a larger community. This imagination is built through history, language, symbols, the education system and media.

The process of constructing these "imaginary communities" takes different forms in different states. Modern democracies typically develop a "thin" civic identity—where nationality is based primarily on legal and constitutional relationships. Citizenship is above religion, language or culture. On the other hand, a "thick" national identity is based on specific interpretations of culture, religion, ethnic traditions, and history. This type of nationalism defines the nation within a specific cultural structure.

This theoretical divide is very significant in the context of India. The nation-thinking that India adopted under the leadership of Nehru and Ambedkar at the time of independence was based on citizen nationalism. To be an "Indian" was to be an equal citizen under the Constitution. Religion, language, race or region were part of personal and social identity, but not a criterion for state citizenship. This idea is the basis of India's pluralistic structure. But in contemporary India, we are increasingly seeing a different trend – where national identity is being given a "Thick" cultural form. "Indianness" here is not just citizenship; Rather, it is associated with a particular religious and civilizational identity. This transition is theoretically important, as it is redefining the very concept of citizenship. As an example, in the traditional civil state, citizenship is a legal relationship between the state and the individual. But when citizenship begins to be interpreted in religious or cultural terms, the "thin" civic identity collapses and is replaced by a "Thick" identity. As a result, some citizens are seen as "naturally included" and others as "conditional" citizens.

Will Kimlika's theory of multicultural citizenship shows that for sustainable democracy, the state must recognise cultural differences. He argues that civil equality is not limited to legal equality; The state has to legitimise the existence of different cultural groups. "Thick" nationalism runs counter to this principle. It establishes one culture as a "national standard" and marginalises other cultures.

In India, this process is also visible at the level of daily life. For example, eating habits. In a pluralistic framework, food is a matter of personal and cultural preference. But when a particular food culture is associated with a national identity, different eating habits are identified as "non-national" or "foreign". As a result, civic identity becomes a moral test - who is a "real Indian" and who is not.

Theoretically, this is a move towards "moralised citizenship". Here, the rights of citizens are no longer determined solely on legal grounds; Rather, their culture, behaviour, and beliefs have become the criterion for state legitimacy. This change is against the basic idea of democracy, as democracy gives equal dignity to the citizen, irrespective of their beliefs and way of life. In contemporary India, the nation is being reimagined through a certain historical narrative and cultural symbolism. Changes in the history curriculum, the exaggeration of certain symbols, and the exclusion of certain historical trends are creating a new national imagination. Not everyone is equally visible in this fantasy. Some groups are at the centre, some at the edges.

This marginalisation is not just symbolic; it has real political consequences. When the state itself identifies a particular identity as "national", the other identity holders begin to think of themselves as outsiders. This is where the "identity crisis" was born. The citizen asks, "Am I just a legal citizen, or do I have to change my culture to be fully inclusive?"

Majoritarian nationalism claims, "We are the real people." This claim invalidates political rivalries and cultural differences. In the context of India, this means that people of different religions, languages or cultures are not "purely" Indian, unless they assimilate into the majority culture.

Therefore, theoretically, the nationalism of contemporary India is undergoing a transformation from "thin" civic nationalism to "Thick" cultural nationalism. This transformation is not just a change in state thinking; It is redefining the meaning of citizenship, the limits of inclusion and the character of democracy.

In the light of this framework, the conflict of nationalism versus pluralism can be understood as a profound theoretical clash between the idea of civil equality on the one hand and the desire for cultural homogeneity on the other. In a diverse society like India, this conflict is not just political, but existential because it determines who is "included" and who is "marginalised."

### **India's Pluralistic Heritage and Constitutional Safeguards**

India's pluralism is not a recent political invention; It is deeply rooted in the history, society and cultural development of the subcontinent. India has always been a melting pot of many religions, many languages, many races and many cultures. In this historic process, India did not become a single identity state; Rather, it has become a pluralistic civilisation. Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs – different religious traditions coexist in the same land.

Despite this diversity, India has long found ways of social coexistence. Of course, this coexistence was not always peaceful; There have also been conflicts and conflicts. But over a long course of history, Indian society has survived largely through "tolerance" and "harmony". There has been a kind of mutual influence and acceptance between different religious and cultural streams. Sufism and the Bhakti movement are the best examples of this fusion, where humanity and spirituality have been bridged even in different religious spheres.

It is this historical pluralism that deeply influenced India's national thinking at the time of independence. After the end of colonial rule, the biggest challenge before the leaders in the question of nation-building was how to integrate this diverse society into one state. As a result, the Constitution of India adopted pluralism as the fundamental foundation and grants religious freedom to all citizens, recognises linguistic and cultural rights, and ensures special protections for minorities. Secularism here is not just the separation of state and religion; Rather, it is a principle of equal respect for all religions. Rajiv Bhargava explains this model as "principled distance": the state does not align itself with any one religion, nor does it completely separate itself from all religions.

This constitutional framework establishes India's pluralism not only as a moral ideal but also as an institutional reality. The reorganisation of linguistic states, the right of minority educational institutions, the provision of self-government for the indigenous communities – all are the real embodiments of this pluralistic philosophy.

But pluralism is not limited to the policy of the state; It is also reflected in the daily life of the society. In many parts of India, people live in the same neighbourhood with neighbours of different religions and languages. The influence of each other on festivals, food habits and folk culture is evident. Making idols of Muslim artists during Durga Puja, participation of Hindu neighbours on Eid- such experiences have strengthened the social foundation of pluralism.

This reality shows that Indian pluralism is not just "tolerance"; It is the result of interdependence and cultural interaction. People don't just tolerate differences, but in many cases make them a part of their lives.

But today, this tradition is facing a new challenge. When attempts are made to define national identity in a single cultural criterion, this pluralistic foundation begins to weaken. While pluralism sees diversity as a strength, one-sided nationalism views differences with suspicion.

### **Identity Crises Under Majority Nationalism in Contemporary India**

In recent years, nationalism in India has become increasingly "civilizational". In state and political discourse, India is now portrayed as the bearer of a particular religious tradition. Political scientist C. Jaffrelot characterises this trend as a transition from "state nationalism" to "ethnic democracy". The Citizenship Act (CAA), anti-conversion laws, and curriculum changes are all manifestations of this new nationalism, where dissent is often portrayed as a "threat to national unity".

When a state's nationalism becomes "Thick" or culturally homogeneous, there is a profound existential crisis among the diverse groups living in that society. In a country like India, where human identities are layered, that is, a person is a Bengali, a Muslim and an Indian at the same time, the nature of the crisis is very complex.

The main characteristic of cultural nationalism is that it sees citizenship not only as a legal right, but also as a matter of "moral and cultural obedience". As a result, there is an invisible pressure on the minorities and marginalised people to prove their patriotism. Citizenship here shifts from 'guaranteed rights' to 'conditional rewards'.

In this crisis, the most common and personal choices of the individual are transformed into political symbols: Food habits and clothing. Consumption or exclusion of certain foods (such as beef) or clothing (such as hijabs) is presented as a criterion for 'nationality' or 'anti-national' behaviour. Linguistic dominance: The politics of the 'Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan' genre created an artificial conflict between their linguistic identity and national identity for the people of the states of South India or North-East India.

### **Impact on Democracy:**

Democracy is not just the rule of the majority; It is a system to ensure the protection of dissent and the rights of minorities. When nationalism takes the form of majoritarianism, the fundamental pillars of democracy are damaged.

The democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, the Election Commission, and the media, are supposed to play the role of neutral umpires in a pluralistic society. But under the influence of one-sided nationalism, these institutions often began to compromise with the cultural ideology of the state. As a result, the path of legal redress to the common man is narrow.

According to theorist Jean-Werner Müller, majoritarian nationalists claim that they are the only representatives of the "real people". Through this claim, they portray dissidents as "national enemies". This cuts the way for democratic deliberation. Labelling dissent as 'treason' reduces the scope for healthy debate and criticism in the public sphere.

The lifeblood of democracy is an inclusive culture. In contemporary India, this culture is being replaced by a polarised popular culture. And the lack of tolerance for social media and political discourse is undermining democratic values from within.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, in a continentally diverse country like India, one-sided cultural nationalism is incapable of maintaining social cohesion in the long run. Only civil nationalism or constitutional patriotism can coexist

with pluralism. India's democratic future depends on the restoration of the "thin" constitutional identity that is capable of holding all "thick" social and religious differences in equal status. The main challenge of India's national thinking today is to maintain this balance of unity and diversity.

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