

# From Bharat to India

Given the diversity and complexity of India, the only constitutionally valid common denominator is citizenship



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'From Bharat to India' is an eye-catching title, obverse as it is to prevalent terminology. This is the description that eminent sociologist and former president of the International Sociological Association, T.K. Oommen, has used for part two of his autobiographical essay; the first section, 'Workography', was published some years ago. This neat, albeit unusual, bifurcation of life sheds light on his thought process.

## A secure society

Over the years, Prof. Oommen has written extensively on the concept of social security. He says the principal challenges to the evolution of a nation lie in minimising disparity, eradicating discrimination, and avoiding alienation. He has listed nine categories of socially and/or politically and/or excluded groups in our society: "Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs, cultural minorities – both religious and linguistic, women, refugees-foreigners-outsiders, people [of] Northeast India, the poor and the disabled". He has suggested that "the three sources of exclusion in India – stratification, heterogeneity and hierarchy – create intersectionality." This insecurity manifests itself in genocide, culturocide and ecocide and in its absence, a society may be conceptualised as secure.

The concluding sections of the monograph are on the idea of India, on social formation and the moulding of individual identities. Prof. Oommen dwells on the diversity of our social make-up and makes the telling point that his identity as a Dravidian can be traced to 5,000 years ago, his identity as a Syrian Christian to two millennia and as a Malayalam speaker to six centuries. Each of these coexists with his being an Indian for seven decades and, by the same token, qualifies the latter. The Indian polity, he says, "has the most elaborate set of identities based on class, religion, gender, caste, region, language and their intersectionalities as well as consequent permutations and combinations. To ignore this complex social set up and speak in terms of 'multiple identities' is not only simplistic but also misleading. And, given the long history of India and its shifting frontiers, it is not easy even to identify the identity markers of Indian citizens and demarcate the numerous identity groups in India." A fruitful route forward

would be to look at "the major steps in the social formation of India".

These remarks suggest a re-look at the contours of the current, politically fashionable debate about unity in diversity and social inclusion. This does not seem to be happening; instead, as a reputable journal has put it, 'bulldozing the idea of India' seems to have become the preferred option of those associated with the ruling circles. This is neither desirable nor healthy for the polity and while there is endless talk of the Constitution, the principles of liberty, justice, equality and fraternity that are intended to give unity to the nation are being sidestepped.

Recalling these principles compels us to revert to B.R. Ambedkar's last speech in the Constituent Assembly on November 25, 1949 and to his three warnings to ensure continuance of democracy "not merely in form but also in fact." These were constitutional procedures, avoidance of hero worship, and social democracy instead of mere political democracy. The latter, Ambedkar emphasised, necessitates equality and fraternity. Why then is the principle of fraternity absent from the pronouncements of leaders? Its absence suggests a disconcerting pattern and leads to the endorsement of differentiations between citizen and citizen. How would such polarisation promote national unity?

## The common denominator

Given the diversity and complexity of India, the only constitutionally valid common denominator is citizenship. This is the point at which fraternity can and should be practiced among equals. Prof. Oommen, however, is not content with this and seeks "an isomorphous model for India's socio-cultural reality". He opines that it is "only through the conflation of state and nation" can our Republic be considered a nation. Cultural monism and secularism are insufficient, he says; instead, "the idea of conceptualizing India as a multicultural polity is more amenable than a secular India." The sheet anchor of this has to be citizenship.

There is a teaser towards the end in relation to Article 351 of the Constitution on the national language. Hindi is to be enriched by 'Hindustani' along with other languages in the Eighth Schedule; yet the latter does not figure in the list of the Eighth Schedule. Prof. Oommen instead suggests that "India shall be a multicultural nation and not a nation-state having many identities and that eventually the preferable solution would lie in a confederation - USSA (United States of South Asia)." Could this be one way of giving shape to Bharat?