

The pernicious idea of exclusive belonging

It erases the multiplicity and fluidity necessary for self development and cultural growth



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The idea that each human being belongs to only one religious or linguistic community, a single culture or a unique civilization appears to be ubiquitous. Many have begun to believe that our identity is defined by membership to only mutually exclusive groups. If we are Bengali, then we cannot be Odia or Assamese; if Hindu, then not Muslim or Christian.

This idea of exclusive belonging is relatively recent. Indeed, even today, a substantial number of humans appear not to have it. Or if they do, only very faintly. Multiple belonging is common because we imbibe from other cultures when we go to them. And because ideas and values, energetic and nimble footed, come to us as they seek uncharted territories. This fluidity in understanding who we are is ineradicable, infinitely better than a condition in which we are confined to a fixed, categorical idea of identity.

IDENTITY IS MULTILAYERED

That we belong exclusively to one culture, religion or language is undesirable and unfeasible. It is not feasible because our overall identity is far more complex and multilayered than what we articulate or others believe. To take the manifest part of ourselves as our only identity is to accept a truncated, impoverished self. It is undesirable because it forces us to rely exclusively on one tradition when in fact we can be nourished by many. We live much better when we are open to multiple influences, enriched by varied currents of thought and value.

INTERSECTING CULTURES

Take any one of us living in say in Delhi. We are heirs to myriad streams of Hindi/Urdu/Punjabi. Local dialects apart, these are shaped by old Sanskrit and old Persian, close cousins in an ancient family of languages — consider words such as asura/ahura or yajna/yasna). Those who speak them do not realise that several words on their tongue are of Arabic origin (Aadmi, Maalik). Since languages are not simply a means of communication but constitute multiple worlds, the crisscrossing and overlapping worlds they inhabit are infinitely more complex and expansive than is recognised. Monuments and public spaces that surround us (Humayun's Tomb, the Ramlila Maidan, Parliament building) and the varied cuisines that shape our taste and sensibility are also creations of intersecting cultures. And so are the identities they shape.

The same is true of moral frameworks that ground our commitments and convictions — structures of values that have developed over 5,000 years. I doubt if there is any Indian who has not been shaped by multiple ancient strands that compose Hinduism, the precepts of Buddha and Mahavir, the partly homegrown Islamic and Christian traditions, the teachings of Nanak and Kabir, not to forget the enormous impact that western values have had since Vasco Da Gama stepped ashore, all the way to the globalised world we now inhabit. The idea of exclusive allegiance to any

one of these flies in the face of evidence and is based on ignorance or deliberate denial. Why should we, instead of embracing all of them, insist on exclusive belonging and loyalty to just one?

A SERIOUS OBJECTION

At this point it might be objected that a person's identity is defined not by everything that has influenced her but by those elements she has evaluated to be of greater importance. Someone can say that her fundamental commitments flow from a single framework — and this alone defines her identity. Identity is defined by what is publicly affirmed because of judgement of its real significance. It announces where we truly belong, to what we owe our overriding allegiance.

A person's identity, the argument goes, is defined by his orientation to an incomparably higher good. It underlines the quest to be a certain kind of person, to give oneself a direction. Does this often not require removing all 'alien or bad features'? Is not this movement towards something higher often a battle between the good and the evil within? Why cannot this be seen as a certain kind of purification? A shuddhikaran for a Hindu or for that matter, a jihad for a Muslim. If so, does it not follow that one is a Hindu because of one's aspiration to realise what is most valuable in Hinduism rather than in any other ethical tradition? To tell such a person that there is a Muslim ingredient in his self is irrelevant because the whole point of his existence is to become a good Hindu and remove extraneous, non or anti Hindu elements. This seems like a forceful rebuttal. But it overlooks two stronger challenges.

First, the encounter between two different ethical traditions results in mutual transformation of what is truly worthwhile in these traditions. Arguably, the ethics of Vedic people originally comprised three ends of life: kama, artha and dharma. It needed the teachings of the Buddha to add a fourth value, Moksha. Similarly, the Arya Samaj challenged idol worship as a perverse substitution of original Vedic fire rituals, but can one deny that it was also influenced by the Islamic conception of a formless god? Religions have frequently shaped each other's conception of the ultimate good, even as they conceal or stigmatise the source.

Second, and equally important, most of us are powered by multiple moral sources. We acknowledge within us the presence of different even incompatible normative orientations. Consider the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur's disclosure that the private reading of the Bible was central to the pietistic Protestant milieu in which he was born. This part of his upbringing, leaning on prayer and the undogmatic examination of conscience, had little intellectual content about it. But Ricoeur was equally impacted by another milieu wherein critical thinking and public standards of rationality were essential. He says: 'I always moved back and forth between these two poles: a biblical pole and a rational, critical pole. A duality that has lasted through my entire life. I remained faithful to this double allegiance.' I believe this self description captures the life of many intellectuals. Many scientists take their Hindu outlook seriously; many philosophers are at home in their Jewish, Islamic or Catholic spiritualities. Loyal to both, they feel that something terribly important would be lost if either was snatched away from them.

MULTIPLE ALLEGIANCES

Indeed, I will not be surprised if there are many Muslims today who are inspired by both the Ramayana and the Koran. This was something commonplace till the Mid 20th century in large parts of Haryana's Meo community. It is still common to find some of our greatest singers, musicians and poets moved equally and simultaneously by Hindu and Muslim mysticism. I recently saw a film on Bismillah Khan in which he tells viewers how blessed he was to live in Benaras. "... I can step down the ghats, bathe in the Ganga, walk up to the masjid for namaz, and then head straight to the Balaji temple for riyaz...". The fact is that large numbers of people in the past embraced not just dual but multiple allegiances and this is unlikely to disappear in future. The demand for a single, exclusive allegiance makes for a sorry, desiccated self.

The idea of exclusive belonging or allegiance is a pernicious intrusion into world cultures. Equally dangerous is a political project that foists a singularity or homogeneity and calls for the obliteration of multiplicity and fluidity – so that we become purely one or the other. The demand to 'purify' ourselves, rid ourselves of anything 'foreign' that contaminates is not only hard to meet but, if we are to lead better, richer lives, not worth compliance.

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