

Diversity, Identity, and Linkages
Explorations in Historical Ethnography

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2

Ethnography of the Mahabharata*

This chapter seeks to explore the ethnographic dimensions of the Mahabharata in terms of the parameters of the contemporary ethnographic project (1985–2000) on the People of India (PoI). The dimensions include (i) a notion of space, (ii) the emergence of territorial and ethnic identities, (iii) identification, listing, and distribution of people, (iv) the linkages and affinities among people, and (v) the diffusion of the Mahabharata traditions.

The Mahabharata corpus, as it has come down to us, has evolved, absorbed, and incorporated many traditions across the centuries, particularly during the period between the second century BC and the second century AD when it was mainly compiled. As it developed from Jaya to Bharatato Mahabharata, it became the story of the people of all of India. Indeed, the Mahabharata is a great assemblage of peoples, 363 of them, which is the largest number in the ancient texts. They meet on the battlefield as equals—an enemy is not to be underrated—and are generally mentioned in respectful terms, even outside

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the battlefield. They are also bound by many ties and have many linkages, which speak of the vitality, maturity, and understanding of a civilization process, reflecting the consciousness of a vibrant civilization.

The second part of this chapter deals with the north-east including the hills, which like other parts of India has its linkages with the epic, its heroes, and its episodes through an ongoing process of creative adaptation. There are four aspects to it. First, the participation of Bhagdatta with his army of Chinas and Kiratas in the Kurukshetra war; second, the Sanskritization of tribes and the reconstruction of genealogies linking them to the Mahabharata characters like Bhima, Hidimba, Ghatotkacha, and Arjuna—their, their legends and folklores about the visit of the Mahabharata heroes and matrimonial alliances; Mahabharata themes that figure prominently in the literature and performing arts (leading some communities to call themselves Mahabharata) and fourth the critical re-examination of some of these reconstructions today—as the north-eastern communities engage in a search for identity.

The Mahabharata, probably the first comprehensive ethnography of India, has been explored as such by scholars, particularly historians, who have generally applied the colonial concept of tribe to describe the people (*jana*). While it is not my purpose here to present an overview of the literature in this field, one may briefly mention the leads thrown up by three important pieces of writing. The first is the *Ethnography of Ancient India* by Robert Shafer (1954) which, despite the title, concentrates on the ethnography of the Mahabharata rather than the whole of ancient India. What impresses this author is the 'great number of ethnic names' of 'nations, tribes or regions', about three hundred of them—in fact, it is 363, which is much more than the geographical names given in the Puranas—which he finds 'much more limited and much more corrupt' than the list given in the Mahabharata. He also describes the Mahabharata as an original 'Kuru epic', developed with later compilations and interpolations over several hundred years. He further describes the epic as essentially the story of a native rebellion, led by the Kauravas against the Aryan exploitation symbolized by the Pandavas, who forced 'tribes and nations', particularly the non-Aryans, to pay exorbitant tribute and acknowledge the overlordship

of Yudhishtira. The epic, according to him, is thus an apologia for the Pandavas, their eulogy—in fact an apologia for the extermination of Kshatriyas resulting from the Mahabharata war. Such views however are not entirely supported by the reading of the Mahabharata as it exists today. While Aryanization in terms of the spread of the Indo-Aryan language, Sanskrit, was underway, a synthesis of various cultures was emerging, a mixture of morphological types was going on. The native non-Aryan groups fought on both sides, the larger number, no doubt, on the side of the Kauravas because they were in power and had a larger army. The Mahabharata established the primacy of the Pandavas and their mentor, Lord Krishna, for forty years till it was challenged by peoples on the periphery. Such things were going on all the time in Indian history. Robert Shafer has a point when he says that the people speaking Tibeto-Burman languages once occupied the Ganga valley or parts of it, and probably gave us such names as the Ganga. Anga, Vanga, and Kalinga, though today they are confined to the Himalayas and the north-east. However, it is difficult to agree with the view that at the time of the Mahabharata, the Aryans were the invaders and the land was dominated by non-Aryans, or that the waves of Indo-Aryans moved from Kailash–Mansarovar region along the Sutlej to the north-western part of the subcontinent, and from there towards the Ganga–Yamuna valley. Although Aryanization had been going on at a 'geometric rather than arithmetic rate' (Shafer, 1954: 6) for the last 2,000 years, the process was not so complete at the time of the Mahabharata, nor is it so even today. There is a shade of racism in Shafer's analysis when he talks too literally of the gradation of colours for the four *varnas*. Also it is wrong to say that the Vaishyas were Tibeto-Burmans. The identification of 'races' with cultures and languages is not generally accepted today. Shafer quotes Patanjali to describe the Brahmanas as having a white complexion and yellow and red hair; there are also references to Krishna and other dark-skinned Brahmanas of which Veda Vyasa was an example. The PoI study of Brahmana groups shows that they are quite heterogeneous in terms of biological, cultural, and linguistic traits. The Bhils were not Nahals. In fact, the Nahali language is neither Mundari nor Dravidian. Bhili is now accepted as a member of the Indo-Aryan language family.

Certainly the Mahabharata presents a picture of a mixed society with people, particularly rulers, marrying across social groups, speaking different languages and practising different cultures, and of an emerging synthesis, which has been the hallmark of Indian civilization from the beginning.

K.C. Mishra's *Tribes in Mahabharata* is a major work which describes many dimensions of the Mahabharata including its ethnography both at territorial and ethnic levels. Like Shafer, he deals with the various lists of the tribes compiled in the Mahabharata but persists, like other historians, with the colonial notion of the tribe. This work is followed by Mamata Chaudhary's *Tribes of Ancient India* (1951) in which she puts the number of the tribes mentioned in the ancient texts at about 700, almost half of which is mentioned in the Mahabharata. Although she valiantly tries to define the tribe in the traditional anthropological sense, as an 'aggregate of stocks of kindred persons forming a community, claiming descent from a common ancestor' her use of the word 'tribe', as by other historians using this notion from nineteenth century Indian ethnography, is not free from difficulties. In fact, the right course from the historians would have been to use the native Sanskrit term, jana, mentioned in the Mahabharata and other texts.

This is an issue taken up by the distinguished historian Niharranjan Ray (K.S. Singh [ed.], 1972: 6-15). He uses the native terms jana and jati, which he rightly says have the same roots, that is, jan, that is, to be born into or give birth to. Thus, Ray makes a distinction between jana, which he identifies with the communities, peoples, and present-day tribes, and jati, which he describes as a complex production organization. Both have something to do with birth and biological heredity and hence with familial and social relationships. But behaviorally, as seen through history, they also have a social and economic purpose and function, regulated by birth and heredity. Here was thus a system which was directed not towards mobility but towards stability and security.

Ray mentions a whole lot of janas:

[T]he Savaras, the Kulutas, the Kollas, the Bhillas, the Khasas, the Kinnaras and a countless number of many others whom today we know as 'tribes',

bearing almost the same recognizable names ... It is significant that in this huge body of literature whenever such and other communities of people find mention, they are always referred to in the plural number, collectively as a people or *janah*, *Andhbrah*, *Savarah*, *Kinnarah*, and so on. An analysis of such names and the context in which they are referred to shows very clearly and unmistakably that all such communities had each territorial habitat of their own which can still be identified.

With the passage of time, each of these communities lent their names to the territory inhabited by them, and the territories came to be known as *padas*. Most of the local names of districts, divisions and states that we know of today, have come down to us from the *padas* of old; but quite a number of them have also lost their name and identity in their larger and more powerful neighbours ... (K.S. Singh [ed.], 1972)

A careful analysis of the long list of janas in the epics, and the Buddhist, Puranic, and secular literature of early and medieval times and the context in which they are mentioned, makes it very clear that hardly any distinction was made, until very late in history, between what we know today as 'tribes' and such communities of people who were known as the Gandharas and Kambojas, Kasis and Kosalas, Angas and Magadhas, Kurus and Panchalas, for instance. At any rate, in the whole body of historical data at our disposal, there is hardly anything to suggest that these communities of people belonged to two different social and ethnic categories. In fact, in the literary sources I have referred to, between the communities of people whom today we refer to as 'tribe', and those that we know from history as belonging to more advanced stages of socio-economic and cultural growth, there is hardly any evidence to show that in the collective consciousness of India there is any difference between the two sets of janas.

According to Ray, there are three type of janas—first, those of foreign origin who were absorbed into the brahmanical religion and the socio-economic production system of jati.

One has only to remember what happened to the Sakas, the Kushanas, the Abhiras, the Jnatikas or Jats, the Gujars, the Huns or Hunas, and other allied peoples, many of whom are mentioned as *janas* in the list of people as given in the epics and the Puranas, in the Buddhist and secular literature and in a land grants and other historical documents. The Islamized Turkas,

Afghans, Iranians and Mongols were certainly able to maintain their religious and cultural identity, even to extend the frontiers of Muslim society within India, but let it be noted that they too had to succumb to the socio-economic organization of Brahmanical Hinduism, to the same production system as that of the *jati*. Indeed, once they had fallen into the production system of the *jati* it was no longer possible for them to resist its social implications. The same thing happened to the communities of people of the Tibeto-Burman stock who trudged into Assam and our north-eastern regions in the thirteenth century. Those of the *janas* of foreign origin that came to exercise political authority as kings and as member of royalty, nobility and the court, were given the *jati* status for Kshatriyas; those that eventually took to agriculture came to be self-styled as Vaisyas; but the larger majority had to be content with very low *jati* status in Hindu socio-economic hierarchy, including those like the Hunas who allowed themselves to be recruited as mercenary soldiers by regional rulers. (K.S. Singh [ed.], 1972)

Second, there were *janas* of indigenous (this term has become controversial) origin who were absorbed into the Hindu-brahmanical social organization. Those '*janas* who were defeated in war and taken prisoners, were immediately made economically and socially subservient altogether, being reduced to slaves, labourers and servants. Eventually, they came to be incorporated in[to] the Hindu social organization, but seem to have been given a place at the lowest bottom, not very different from that of the *Chandalas*.'

Third, there were *janas* who were in the periphery of Aryavarta:

These were *janas* that today lie all along our eastern and north-eastern frontiers and along the central and western Himalayas up to a height of 13,000 feet, *janas* that are predominantly of the Tibeto-Burman stock, except perhaps the Nagas and one or two other less[er] known *janas*. This entire Himalayan area from our eastern frontiers to Ladakh is naturally a very sensitive one, and for more than one reason, a very significant one as well from the political and economic points of view. Many of these *janas* do not, for obvious reasons, make their appearance in history or in our historical geography before the nineteenth century, but many others do, for instance, the Nagas who are mentioned by Ptolemy in the second century AD, the Khasas, the Kiratas which seem to be almost a blanket name for all the Tibeto-Burman peoples in our eastern and north-eastern frontiers, the Kinnaras of the Kinnaur district of Himachal, the Kullutas of the Kullu valley, the Bhotas of the Bhutan-Sikkim

area, and a few others whose names appear in the traditional Puranic list of *janas*. Our medieval Assamese, Bengali, Maithili and Hindi literature, too, gives us a few names of such peoples.

Then there is a belt of *jana* territory in middle India and the Islands. Then there is the whole belt along the old Paryiyatra, Vindhya and Suktimat hills which are collectively known to us as the Vindhyan ranges, stretching from almost the borders of Rajasthan to what are called the Chhotanagpur and Orissa hills which are but extensions of the Vindhya ranges. All along these ranges and their slopes and feet and in the forests and valleys nursed by them live and have been living for centuries some of the oldest *janas* known to our history and culture[,] the Nishadas and the Savaras, the Kollas and Bhilla, for instance, and many other cognate and semi-cognate *janas* of whom history and historical geography have not kept any record. But we know from one of our epic[s], the Ramayana, that part at any rate of this area was the region that was called *janasthana*, the land par excellence of the *janas*. Ethnically the majority of the *janas* seem to be of proto-Austroloid origin though a few of them speak [a] language of Dravidian affiliation.

Besides these two geographical areas of non-*jati* *janas* there is also a good number of them in smaller aggregates and dispersed in relatively smaller areas in almost all the southern States, especially in Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, and [in] Maharashtra. But these *janas* are all more or less in close contact and communication with socially and culturally, politically and economically more powerful communities belonging to the *jati* complex. And finally there are the isolated aggregates of relatively much less developed *janas* in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. (K.S. Singh [ed.], 1972)

The PoI project based on an ethnographic survey of all people of India reinforced the view that India is a land of many communities. These communities called *janas* in the ancient texts are the original formations, the basic units of our civilization, rooted in ecology, in the resource endowments of various regions, and in their social and cultural organizations, their languages and dialects. Even though they have evolved from the simple to the complex social organization or complex systems of production as Niharranjan Ray puts it, they share many traits of a community, such as endogamy, resource-based occupations, notions of purity and pollution, order of hierarchy in incipient or developed forms. From this point of view the tribes are at one end of the pole and the present-day scenario at the other end, but

both are people, the jana, the inhabitants of the land. The tribes are the relatively isolated janas, distant and backward. The distinction made by Ray between jana and jati is not supported by the ancient texts (the Mahabharata, as will be described later, treats janas as neither tribe nor caste, but as people) which generally treat them interchangeably, and later mention jatis more than janas which is fact fades away.

II

We now turn to the salient features of the ethnography of the Mahabharata.

The first is the notion of space, which is crucial to ethnography as people at one level of their multi-level identity generally derive their identity from space. In the ancient period there was the notion of *bhumi*, *vasudha*, or *chakravarti-kshetra*, which was the political space to be conquered and ruled. Jambudvipa was the name given to this space. This name, for the first time, occurs in the Asokan inscriptions. The Mahabharata has a chapter entitled 'Jambudvipanirmanakhanda'—section V of Bhishmaparvan. Jambudvipa derives its identity from the jambu tree which is both mythical as it is believed to stand near Mount Meru, and real because the land abounds in jambu trees. It has been rapturously described by ancient environmentalists as a wonder tree gifted with many attributes and properties. However, the notion of 'Jambudvipa' gradually expanded from its first description which applied to the Asokan empire to mind-boggling proportions as this was gradually extended to include greater India and even beyond that to all continents (except the Americas and Australia). It is said in the Mahabharata and its later versions that there were seven divisions (*varshas*) of the Jambukhandā (section XI of Bhishmaparvan) including Bharata. Bharatavarsha, located in Jambudvipa, gradually became a part of it (*Jambudvipe Bharatkhande*).

The Mahabharata speaks of the love of the land, and states that the tract of land known by Bharata's name is the beloved land of Manu and Indra. The notion of Bharata is also derived from the founder of the Bharata lineage, which gradually widened to cover the entire country south of the Himalayas and bounded by the oceans. This notion

of Bharatavarsha crystallized in the *Vishnu Purana* and came to be celebrated in the literary works composed by Kalidasa, Rabindranath Tagore, and Subramanya Bharti.

This Jambudvipa is criss-crossed by mountains, rivers, forests, deserts, pasture lands, and sea coasts. The name of these mountains and rivers also occurs in many lexicographic works. The six mountains extend from the eastern to the western boundaries including Himavatta, and there are hundreds of rivers with beautiful names of which many can be identified in different parts of the country today.

The land was divided into *janapada*, peopled by specific groups. The relationship between jana and janapada was intimate. Both were interchangeable concepts. The Mahabharata describes the Jambukhandā in mythical terms as a great sect of humanity where men are all of golden complexion and women are like apsaras, and all are without sickness and sorrow and always cheerful. It also notes the bio-ethnic diversity of India where reside people of different jatis (*vaasanti teshu saltvani nanajatini sarvashah, idam tu Bharatam varsham tato haimavatum param*). The space was also traditionally divided into countries (*varshas* or *rashtras*). A *rashtra* is a territorial unit occupied by people, like Adirashtra and Goparashtra.

There was also the notion of sacred land. The core of the culture and religion of the Indo-Aryans was formed by Kuru-Panchala and Matsya land. There were lands which were degraded such as the Sindhu land or the Vahlīka where foreigners lived.

The Mahabharata mentions jati occasionally as segments of jana; for example, various jatis of Kiratas are mentioned (*Kiratanam cha jatayah*), or jati and jana seem to be interchangeable terms. There is also a mention of *kula* (*vaisya-sudra kulani cha*). However, most of the names are in terms of jana and janapada. Later texts mention as many as sixty-five jatis and seventy-one occupational groups. Historians are more concerned with jati than jana, and with the transition from varna to jati, the proliferation of the jati, and so on.

As mentioned earlier, the Mahabharata is the most comprehensive ethnography of ancient India in terms of the identification and listing of communities or janas and their territories or janapada. There were 363 of them in all.

The listing of communities in the Mahabharata is based on a number of inventories including 'geography' (231 entries), the *digvijaya* list (212), the *dyuta* or tribute to the Pandavas (296), army formation (158), and additional data (108) as Shafer (1954) puts it. There are a number of repetitions in the list however. The *digvijaya* campaigns were led by the four Pandava brothers—Bhima in the east, Arjuna in the north, Nakula in the west, and Sahadeva in the south. Karna also was on his *digvijaya* trail, mostly in the east and also in the north. The list contains a lot of names of the people (*jana*). A few places are also mentioned, such as Avanti, Kunti, Kuru, Kasi, and so on.

To illustrate our point, we will name some of the communities here. The north-west (Central Asia, Persia, and Afghanistan) was dominated by 'foreigners', namely the Pahlavas, Sakas, Hunas, Yavanas, Kambojas, and Bhlikas. The west, roughly comprising Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, had communities such as the Daradas (Darda of today), Pisachas, Vahilkas, Yadavas of various segments, Surashtras, and many others. The northern Himalayan region had the Trigartas, Khasas, and others, who were also spread across the plains. The east had the Angas, Vangas, Kiratas, Chinas, and Pundras. The south had the Cholas, Pandyas, Keralas, Andhras, Dravidas, Karnatas, and Mushakas.

Apart from these ethnic categories, there were also communities who derived their identities through ecology. The mountain dwellers included the Arbuadas (Mount Abu), Haimvatas, Vindhya-mulakas; from the deserts, the Marudha; from rivers and waterfronts, the Kausijakas (Kosi), Saindhavras (Sindhu), and Sindhu-Sauviras; from the pastures, the Pasupas and Govindas; from the frontier, the Aparants. However, a large number of people belonged to the forests, *jangalas*, *dandakas*, and so on, because these were abundant in those days. They should be seen together with the forest dwelling communities such as the Adirashtras, Vanarasyas (there is a community called the Vana-manush too), and Nishadas. Some contemporary tribes can be identified as well, like the Mundas, Savaras, Kokuratas or Korkus, Karushas or Kurukhs, Kollagirs or Kolis, and Nishadas or Bhils.

An analysis of this list of communities shows that they were mostly concentrated in the north-western and western parts of the

subcontinent and the central region later known as Madhyadesha. The number in the south, the east, and the north-east are few.

When the first encounter of peoples took place in the court of Yudhishtira or on the battlefield, some looked so different, even strange, that they were noted for their style of living or dressing, or plain mythologized as in Greek accounts. There were the Ekapada, that is, the people who ran so fast that it appeared they had only one leg (the author was told about a community among the de-notified groups in western India which fitted this description). There were the Lambakarna, that is, the people with long ears—obviously those who wore turbans with their tails hanging on both sides. And the Trinetra, the three-eyed people, who were probably those who put on a prominent *tattoo* mark or a *tattoo tilaka* shaped like an eye in the middle of their forehead.

The Mahabharata describes some people as low, barbarous, sinful, born of the mythical cow of Vasishtha. But it also contains positive descriptions of the people described as the Mlechhas, such as their martial prowess, their resources including chariots of good quality or horses of good breed, their fertile country, and sometimes their dress and language which was not intelligible. The epic also shows how various communities, who met on the battlefield or outside, had generally developed a mature, healthy, and respectful relationship among themselves, which derived from the sharing of certain values that were common. There were also experiences of living together including studying together—Bhagadatta and Pandu had studied together—abiding friendships, and so on. Some communities had even made attempts to avoid the war. Thus, the Cholas and Pandyas, according to the local version of the Mahabharata, tried to mediate, throwing a feast to which they invited both the Kauravas and the Pandavas, though eventually they sided with the latter.

People are described in clusters such as Kuru-Panchala, and Kasi-Kosala-Karusha. Migrations of peoples are indicated generally not only from the west to the east or from the north to the south (Malwa), but also from the east to the west, particularly those who were driven out by Jarasandha. The power equation among communities was in a state of flux. The Kurus were the dominant group with the Yadavas as

a close second. Some communities were in a state of decline such as the Haihaya, Videha, and the Gangas in the north-west. The sheer range of ethnic diversities is fascinating.

The Kiratas or the Indo-Mongoloids need to be specially mentioned here because in recent years there is an effort to distinguish the East Asians from the Central Asians. In the Mahabharata, we can identify the East Asian in terms of the Chinese or the Tibetan-Mongoloids, and the Kiratas. The Nagas of the north-east are mentioned by Ptolemy. Central Asian Mongoloid groups including the Sakas and Hunas, were also known. The Mahabharata gives a graphic description of the Kiratas. They were golden coloured (yellow) tribes whose army looked like a forest of yellow *karnikara* flowers, and they lived on tubers and fruits. They were clad in skin, were strongly built, and wore steel coats of mail. They came from Himavat and seemed from a distance to be of a smoky colour. They had well trained elephants.

The Nagas from elsewhere in the country are not included in the list of janas and janapadas, but some of their branches are mentioned, like the Kokara (identified by the author with Kokrah, that is, modern Chhotanagpur). However, recent researches in history and anthropology of the Nagas persuade us to look afresh at the Naga material in the Mahabharata. They are supposed to have occupied *patala* which was near Hastinapur. But the Nagas as a folk community occupied a much larger and more diversified space including hills, plains, sea-coasts, and so on, having only the Naga totem as their marker. According to the Mahabharata, one branch of Nagas, the Takshakas, occupied the territory from Takshasila up to Hastinapur, and the other branch, the Karkotakas, was distributed from Vindhya to Khukhra which later became the name of medieval Chhotanagpur. The Pandavas had incurred the wrath of Takshaka by burning down the forest for their capital. The Nagas seemed to have supported the Kauravas in the battle even though Kunti was a Naga-*kanya*. In fact, both the Yadavas and Nagas were in close interaction with one another as they settled down as agriculturists. Balarama, who was an incarnation of Seshanaga, had the plough as his weapon. After the Mahabharata war, Arjuna went out on a mission to placate the Nagas, married Ulupi and begot a son, Yeravan. But Takshaka never forgave the Pandavas. The

Nagas had killed the Pandava ancestor, Parikshit, whose son Janamejaya took a terrible revenge by massacring the Nagas and scattering them far and wide. Many Naga families in middle India trace their origin to this episode. Janamejaya later married Takshaka's daughter and peace was restored between the Nagas and the Pandavas.

III

The Mahabharata traditions have become diffused widely. Like all regions of India and many parts of South-east Asia, the north-eastern region perceives its linkages with the Mahabharata tradition in a number of ways. The Mahabharata heroes including Lord Krishna is believed to have visited some places in this region, and certain episodes in the epic are associated with their literature, folk tradition, and performing arts. The Mahabharata heroes also married locally (K.S. Singh, 1992).

The most explicit reference to the north-east, including the hills, occurs in the Mahabharata war with reference to the heroic deeds performed by, and the powerful support given to, the Kauravas by Bhagadatta, the ruler of Pragiyotisha (the land of the early sun). He was the son of Naraka, the founder of the dynasty bearing the same name, who was born of the union of Bhumi (Mother Earth) and a wild boar. There is a profound symbolism in the original myth bereft of the brahmanical embellishments that occurred later. The boar was the most powerful creature of the period, which could move with the speed of wind and gore to death an elephant or a tiger. It could lift the earth and was apotheosized into an incarnation of Vishnu. The Earth was mother to many tribes including the Mundas (*enga* is their word for mother). Naraka was the founder of the first and the longest surviving dynasty before the Ahoms appeared on the scene. According to another tradition, Naraka was born at the foot of the hills. He was the lord of the Kiratas, the Himalayan mountain people, and the Chinas (the Tibetan-Mongoloids) representing the East Asians, and the kingdom included the north-eastern hills and the low-lying marshy land south of Assam. Naraka, who had become irreligious and presumptuous and possessed of demoniac ideas, was killed by Krishna. He was

succeeded by his son Bhagadatta. Krishna is also said to have rescued 16,100 women from the custody of Naraka and married them. B.K. Barua (1951) describes Bhagadatta as follows:

Bhagadatta is frequently mentioned in the Mahabharata as [a] powerful warrior. He is celebrated as a 'warrior king' and 'the mighty king of the mlecchas', and is described as 'the best wielder of the elephant goat', among the kings assembled on the Kaurava side in the Great War and as 'skillful with the chariot'. Bhagadatta alone of the northern kings is famed for his long and equal contest with Arjuna. He is dignified with the title 'Siva's friend' esteemed as being not inferior to Sakra in battle. He is also specially named 'the friend of Pandu', and is referred to in terms of respect and kindness by Krishna when addressing Yudhishthira: 'Bhagadatta is thy father's aged friend[,] he was noted for his difference to thy father in word and deed, and he is mentally bound by affection and devoted to thee like a father'. Bhagadatta was killed in the Mahabharata war and was succeeded by his son Vajradatta

(B.K. Barua, 1951: 18–19).

Krishna is said to have again intervened in the affairs in Assam. The Bodos told the author that they had given Krishna his spouse Rukmini who was a Kirata woman of immense beauty. Krishna fell in love with her, and she taught him the art of dancing known as garba which is performed during Navaratra. While the author is not sure of the authority that the Bodos cited for it, this version figures prominently in the local literature as well. In fact, it is celebrated in a work called *Rukmini Harana*. Rukmini's father, Bhishmaka, had his capital at Kundina, a name which survives in the Kundil river at Sadiya.

A somewhat controversial connection with the Mahabharata tradition relates to Manipur. According to an eighteenth-century account, a Manipur ruler, Garib Nawaz (1707–1748), publicly embraced Brahmanism and is said to have replaced the original name of Kanglei (pak), that is, the dry land, with Mekhala (female wrapper worn by Parvati which fell on the land) and Manipur. Shiva drained away the water in the valley through a tunnel which was made by his trident (*trisula*). The serpent god Ananta was so overjoyed that he sprinkled the land with sparkling gems (*mani*). Arjuna is said to have visited Manipur twice. On the first occasion he married the princess

Chitrangada and begot a son named Babhruvahana. Historians, however, are unanimous in rejecting the identification of modern-day Manipur in the Mahabharata, choosing to identify the place in Kalinga along the Mahendra mountains, that is, the Eastern Ghats. However, the Brahmakhanda of the Bhavishya Purana, a work of the fourteenth century, mentions a cluster of kingdoms in the east including Brenda, Tamralipta, Hidimba, Manipurakam, Tripuram, and so on. But this evidence is of doubtful value.

The resurgent Meiteis in their search for identity repudiate the Mahabharata connections (Kabui, 2003). However, the Puranic version continues to be peddled. For instance, in the TV serial titled *Mahabharata ke Baad ki Katha* ('The Story after the Mahabharata') there is a new spin on the Mahabharata connection with Manipur. The mother of Bhishma, Ganga, through her sister Kamakhya, the presiding deity of Assam, conspires to get Arjuna killed by his Kirata son, Babhruvahana, to avenge Bhishma's death at the hands of the Pandava hero! But Krishna's intervention restores the life of Arjuna.

The third intervention by Krishna occurred when he rescued his grandson Aniruddha from the custody of Bana, and got him and Bana's daughter Usha married formally. Tejpur has now been renamed Sonitapur, the capital of Bana, where his fort and the place where Usha and Aniruddha met and secretly married according to Gandharva rites are still identified.

The Sanskritization of tribal chiefs between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the linking of these rulers with the Mahabharata heroes. Bhima was the favourite link through his wife Hidimbi, who is considered a Himalayan spirit (Aryan, 1992), and their son Ghatotkacha is identified with the Kachhari rulers. The capital of the Kachhari kingdom, Dimapur, is a corruption of Hidimbapur. In fact, Hidimba was the old name of Kachhar. According to Endle (1911), the Kachhari ruler Krishna Chandra and his brother Govinda Chandra were both placed inside the body of a large copper image of a now reminiscent of *hiranyagarbha* ritual for purification, and accepted Bhima as their mythological ancestor. The Darsang Kachharis speak of themselves as Bhim-ni-Fsa, that is, the children of Bhima, though

according to Endle, they seem to attach little value to this highly imaginative ancestry (Endle, 1911: 6-7).

In fact, there seems to be a systematic attempt to subvert or explain away the linkages of the Mahabharata with some people in the north-east as perceived by them from an earlier period. As the Manipur story shows, the break with the Mahabharata relations seems to be complete. A historian has no doubt to be rigorous in the pursuit of his craft; his methodology should be based on facts and on his broad understanding of societal processes. However, one cannot ignore the anthropological dimension, particularly of archaeology, linguistics, and oral traditions being used slowly now to reconstruct the scientific history of the pre-literate people, as is being attempted in the north-east. Perceptions of linkages among peoples and with regional and pan-Indian traditions have been documented by anthropologists, and this is a resource that cannot be ignored. In fact, such anthropological inputs are required to reconstruct the people's view of the larger society, no matter how weak the historical foundations might be. If the Bodos have a view of their relationship with pan-Indian traditions, this cannot be described as something imaginary but has to be seen as people's efforts to link with historical traditions.

IV

The Mahabharata describes the Jambudvipa as a cluster of communities which are homogeneous and occupying specific territories (janapadas). Later these communities broke up into segments. For example, the Abhiras were stratified into the four varna categories of Abhira Brahmana, Abhira Kshatriya, Abhira Vaishya, and Abhira Sudra. The Gaddis and Pangawals of Himachal Pradesh still have Brahmana and Rajput segments who can intermarry. The People of India project shows how all regions of India, big and small, are in a microcosm multi-ethnic, multilingual, and multi-regions. And yet, there is a good deal of sharing of traits, biological and cultural, within a region. In other words, the Mahabharata notion of jana or people of a territory still endures.

To conclude, the Mahabharata is an impressive piece of ethnography. It is not comprehensive in the sense in which modern ethnography is. But it is vibrant. It covers the human surface of India in terms of description which is no doubt scanty, and relationship with communities which is interesting both on the battlefield and outside of it. Above all, it explores the ethnic diversity of the land.

There is a continuity in ethnographic traditions which links up the Mahabharata with the present-day endeavours to understand the extraordinary range of diversities—biological, linguistic, and cultural—and also the dynamic process of interaction among the people of India. The Mahabharata material, therefore, is an integral part of the evolving traditions of Indian ethnography and will always remain relevant to its understanding.

8

The People of India

Diversities and Affinities

Over the last twelve years the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) has been engaged in generating, retrieving, compiling, and analysing a vast amount of data on the human heritage of India. In 1984, fresh initiatives were taken to retrieve, compile, and analyse the data on the anthropometric survey of India undertaken in the 1960s (Basu and Sreenath, 1995, 1996a and b) and the dataset yielded by the All-India Bio-anthropological Survey initiated in the 1970s (Ghosh, 1988). The two datasheets have already been published in many volumes, and the remaining volumes are likely to be published in a couple of years. Similarly, the data on the survey of linguistic traits, undertaken in the 1970s, has been published (Krishan, 1990).

Against this background the ASI launched the People of India (PoI) project on 2 October 1985 with a view to generating a brief, descriptive anthropological profile of all communities of India, the impact on them of change and development, and the linkages between them. The format, both structured and open-ended, had four parts. The first related to the ethno-origin and distribution of communities and their self-perception, the second dealt with social organization of the community, the third with economy and the impact of change and

development, and the fourth and last one explored the linkages, both traditional and modern, among communities. Ethnography has a continuing tradition. However, in colonial times, ethnographic communities were primarily studied as islands. The post-colonial ethnography explores the linkages and relationships of the communities engaged in the task of nation building on multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies. The honeycomb model of interaction was suggested for such societies in which communities are engaged in the process of vibrant interaction.

THE LOGISTICS

Over almost a decade following the launching of the project, it has been possible to identify and locate the study of 4,694 communities in all states/union territories of India, and computerize the data for this large number of communities. Yet, in spite of all efforts to identify all communities, there still remains a grey area, though a small one, where identities are still fluid and identification problematic. The communities thus identified included the Scheduled Tribes (461), Scheduled Castes (445), and other communities. The transfer of the data to computers started at an early stage in March 1988, and for the first time in the country a software was developed on ethnography, which was also probably among the first of its kind in the world. This was a vast project in which not only scholars from all parts of India and at all levels participated, but also common people and local scholars who not only generated information but also wrote out the material. Therefore, at one stage this project was described as one on the people of India by the people of India. Four hundred and seventy scholars participated in it including 245 from outside the ASI. Twenty-six institutions other than the ASI were involved as well. About 120 workshops and rounds of discussions were held in all states/union territories in which about 2,000 scholars participated to plan the studies and evaluate the findings. The investigators spent 24,880 days in the field and interviewed 21,536 people, of whom 5,353 were women, in villages (4,513), mostly multi-community villages, and in towns (941) spread over most of the districts (438) and eco-cultural regions as identified under the

project. The states were further divided into about ninety-six natural eco-cultural zones defined by dialect, folklore, history, administration, and so on. About 21,362 photographs covering 2,548 communities were generated to build up the visual documentation of the people of India. A large number of maps showing the distribution of the communities were also prepared.

The project was entirely *swadeshi*, or homespun. All knowledge is both universal and specific, and anthropology as a branch of knowledge is closely related to culture and environment. In this discipline every culture is unique, and so is every trait. This project also sought to explore the idioms, the structures, and the cognitive processes reflected in the understanding and perception of people about themselves, and their relationship to one another and with the environment.

The above surveys covering biological, linguistic, and cultural dimensions which have evolved in tandem seek to generate a composite profile of all the people of India. Each community is covered in terms of biological variation, linguistic traits, and cultural and socio-cultural aspects. The output is enormous. Out of the forty-three-volume Pol project, twelve volumes have already been published and the remaining are to be published over the next two to three years. Thus, by the end of the century we should have a large corpus of materials running into about a hundred volumes covering the biological, linguistic, and cultural profiles of the people of India.

It is interesting to note that the explosion of so much information—and so much knowledge—about people has coincided with similar developments at the international level. In fact, in no other period of human history has so much information and so much knowledge been generated and disseminated about people and about diversities. With this knowledge of diversities, a new notion of community—or the old notion reinforced by current concerns—has emerged. This is the notion of community rooted in its environment, its resources, and in various networks of relationships. The environmental movements, the movement of the indigenous people, the ethnic explosion, and many other developments have tended to converge and reinforce the notion of community, irrespective of labels, as something far more basic in its formation than we have understood so far.

Yet another development has been an attempt to establish linkages where they exist among diversities of all kinds. There is a wide range of information today on biodiversity, which is now being linked up with linguistic and cultural diversities. In fact, all three dimensions are closely related, each reinforcing the others.

The people of India derive their identity from India, that is, Bharat. The notion of Bharat which has evolved came to be applied to the landmass lying south of the Himalayas, bounded by the oceans. The authors of the Puranas have written about this territorial configuration. Poets from Kalidasa to Rabindranath Tagore and Subramanya Bharti have eulogized it. It was in the course of the freedom struggle that this territorial identity was fused with deep emotion, as compositions glorifying the land and seeking freedom for it—usually described as ‘Mata’ or ‘Bharat mata’—poured out in various languages. Jawaharlal Nehru declared that ‘Bharat mata’ was the people of India.

BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY OF THE PEOPLE

DNA-based studies should tell us finally about the pattern of the peopling of the subcontinent. All that is known for definite at this stage is that the *Homo sapiens sapiens* originated in eastern Africa from where they migrated in waves upon waves to different parts of the world including our own. According to present estimates, Australia was peopled about 40,000 BC and the Americas around 15,000 BC by the Caucasoid. Even without going so much into prehistory, it could be mentioned that different communities of India recall their recent or not-so-recent migration in their oral traditions, jati Puranas, and history. Migrations have varied in range. An Indian is a migrant par excellence. Communities have settled in different ecological and climatic regions of India and derived their identity from hills and valleys, the plains, islands, and villages, particularly the ancestral villages.

The communities are rather unevenly distributed across states and union territories. By far the largest numbers of communities (above 350) are in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. They vary between 250 and 350 in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra,

Orissa, Karnataka, and Gujarat. The range varies from 150 to 250 communities in West Bengal, Rajasthan, and Kerala. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Tripura, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, and Punjab have communities ranging from 15 to 150. The number of communities drops to below fifty in Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Sikkim, Goa, Chandigarh, and the Bay islands. Each state/union territory has been treated as a unit of our study. The various stated regions of India are not only politico-administrative units, they are also linguistic units and ethnic units because most communities (72 per cent) are located within each one of them. Only a few (about 24 per cent) are distributed over adjoining areas, and about 4 per cent are distributed over a larger part of the country.

Probably nowhere in the world has there existed so many communities—4,694 including the main communities (2,205), major segments (589), and territorial units (1,900). These communities have been identifying themselves in various ways through history, by territory, by varna and jati, by occupation, and so on. In addition to the names or nomenclatures of communities, there is an impressive range of synonyms, surnames, and titles. No community is without divisions, and there are a large number of segments.

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

The diversities in terms of linguistic traits are wide ranging. There are as many as 325 languages divided into five language families. Twenty-five scripts are in use. The linguistic situation is because Indians have a natural ease with language and most of them speak a number of languages, or at least two. And yet it is fascinating that many linguistic traits have penetrated across the five language families. India has been variously described as a socio-linguistic area, a single semantic area, a single linguistic and cultural unit. In the language contact situations, the incidence of bilingualism is rather much too conservative (13 per cent estimated in 1981). One of the reasons for this could be mother tongue loyalty. Some tribals are trilingual. No state in India is unilingual in spite of the preponderance of the speakers of the state language.

Most Indians have been a highly mixed people from the early periods of prehistory or history. The skeletal remains at the rock shelter site in Mirzapur dating back to 15,000 BC and those belonging to the Mohenjodaro–Harappa sites suggest the existence of mixed populations. Though racial classification of populations has now been discarded, morphological and genetic variations among populations are being explored; these are present on a larger scale within a community than between communities. There is thus a greater biological diversity among the people of India than among people elsewhere. Yet, at the regional level their likenesses appear to be more than their differences, and the number of genes in which they differ are only a few in comparison with the vast number of common genes. This may be due to the fact that there were waves of migration on a scale larger than probably anywhere else in the world, and that the mating patterns remained relatively flexible for a long period, allowing for a free flow of genes. Caste endogamy emerged in its rigid form at a later period in history. Within a region there was a greater admixture of populations and clustering of traits; there is therefore a much greater homogenization in terms of morphological and genetic traits among communities at the regional level, and most of the communities within a region or state therefore share many traits. This has been brought out significantly in the anthropometrics survey of the populations in various states.

Indians have their own notion of beauty as represented by colour and texture of the skin, which is influenced by the climate. There is a whole range of shades, from fair to dark complexions, described in various evocative terms in classical literature and folklore, existing together. There is a popular saying that a bride should be fair like Sita and a bridegroom should be pleasantly dark like Rama.

Indians are reported to have relatively larger eyes. This may be because our eyes are popping all the time; there is so much beauty, so much diversity to behold!

As mentioned earlier, the communities should be best seen in the context of the ecosystem and eco-cultural zones, as most of them are rooted in their resources. They derive their identity from their environment, and their occupations are based on their resources.

Even the migrant groups seek to assimilate into their new environment except in the matter of the language they speak at home, or in terms of marriage. The rootedness in local eco-cultural systems is an outstanding characteristic of our communities, no matter what religious label is attached to them—Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and so on.

Again, an important feature of our ethnographic scenario has been the range of migration of communities, families, and individuals—most of the communities are migrants—across the length and breadth of the country, their adaptation to local traditions, and their contribution to the development of local traditions, even as or before the 'son of soil' phenomenon emerged.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY

There is also an extraordinary range of diversities in terms of cultural traits, which tend to cluster at various local and regional levels. People cutting across castes and communities share a great deal within an eco-cultural linguistic region or its sub-region. As many as 775 traits have been identified, relating to ecology, settlement, identity, food habits, social organizations, economy and occupation, linkages, and impact of change and development. Within a region, communities cutting across religions share a great many traits. The sharing of traits has to be seen at some other levels also. For example, it appears that a number of states belonging to a linguistic/cultural region share a very high percentage of traits with Muslims (97.7 per cent), Buddhists (91.9 per cent), Sikhs (88.99 per cent), and Jains (77.46 per cent). Other communities which share a high percentage of traits are: Muslim-Sikhs (89.95 per cent), Muslim-Buddhists (91.18 per cent), and Jain-Buddhists (81.34 per cent).

Therefore, the traits we share are far more than the traits that we do not. A reason for sharing of traits on such a large scale could be the fact that most of the communities have emerged from the same ecological, ethnic, and sociocultural background, even though they have later embraced different religions or other ways of life.

FOOD AND DRINK

In spite of the high value attached to vegetarianism, only about 20 per cent of Indian communities are vegetarian. There is vegetarianism of all shades and nuances shaped by the compulsions of ecology, value system, availability of food, and so on. There are vegetarians who take eggs, fertilized or non-fertilized; there are also vegetarians who abstain from onion and avoid garlic. The men are mostly non-vegetarian. A shift from vegetarianism to non-vegetarianism is reported in many communities, and similarly a shift from non-vegetarianism to vegetarianism is also reported but rather weakly, mostly among the Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

With growing affluence, there has also been a sharp increase in the consumption of alcoholic beverages by men. Traditionally, women occasionally consume alcohol in a number of communities. Smoking is very common. Chewing of tobacco and the use of snuff are also widespread. Chewing betel is common in a large number of communities. We are, therefore, largely a drinking, smoking, and meat-eating people.

OCCUPATIONS

As many as twelve major occupations and 307 current occupations, bringing the total to 349, have been identified all over the country. With the diversification of the economy and social mobility, a number of occupations are practised by members within a single jati or community. There are few communities whose members follow only one occupation. The average number of occupations per community stands at 5.3, of which 1.8 is traditional and 3.5 consists of newly acquired occupations. There has been a decline in traditional occupations like hunting, gathering, trapping birds and animals, pastoralism, shifting cultivation, salt-making, and toddy tapping, with the shrinkage of resource base, depletion of forests, and so on. Settled cultivation is the leading occupation, pursued by members of many communities, followed by wage labour and animal husbandry, fishing,

and textile weaving. Of modern occupations, government service is the most sought after; members of as many as 3,051 communities reportedly work for the government. Participation is on the increase in business, trade, industrial work, private service, and self-employment sectors.

DISTINCT IDENTITIES

The regions of India have evolved since the prehistoric period into language areas (since the medieval period), and into politico-administrative units as states (twenty-eight) and union territories (seven) today. They have been culturally distinct, the various communities within their ambit sharing a great deal by way of language/dialect, folklore, elements of material culture, customs (*lokachars* and *desachars*), local regional dress and ornaments, cuisine, and so on. So strong has been the alchemy of regional identities that those who have gone in have become a part of it. If the matrimonial columns of national dailies are any indication, most people want to marry within their language group.

The Constitution of India, which speaks of the people of India in a collective sense, identifies five groups—the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, the religious and linguistic minorities, the educationally and socially backward classes, and the Anglo-linguistic minorities. All these groups are spread all across the country. Most of them are rooted in their milieu. They have been heterogeneous in terms of their perception of themselves, their differing versions of origin, their kinship structures, their life-cycle ceremonies, their occupations which have now diversified, and so on.

The knowledge thus generated of such formations is two-fold. At one level, a community is projected as homogeneous, marked by the birth and sharing of many elements of culture. At another level, structurally a community is found to be essentially heterogeneous, its members speaking many languages, having different cultural traits, and various morphological and genetic traits, which, as mentioned earlier, are reported to be on a larger scale within a community than between communities.

Indian society is marked by division. There are no communities without divisions. On the face of it, segments (including exogamous divisions, groups, and subgroups), synonyms, surnames, and titles add up to a mind-boggling figure of about 80,000. However, at another level, they form a fascinating tapestry marked by different levels of perception, identity, and status. They also demonstrate a wide range of interaction and sharing, of linkages and commonalities, among communities in a linguistic-regional context.

Each region—and even a few of the sub-regions—has its own cluster of communities, and its own hierarchy of jatis. All communities are placed in a hierarchical order. Based on self-perception and others' perceptions, the communities are now ranked as high, middle, and low. There has been an all-pervasive impact of the development process, even though access to developmental benefits as also to market is rather uneven. As the movement towards political equality grows, and as it is translated into economic terms, there is a swelling of the middle rank. Members of more and more communities from the lower order move into the middle zone. This explains the phenomenon of the burgeoning middle class, an amorphous category which encompasses a whole range of people moving up and down into a growing arena of economic activities. The PoI project highlights the rise of the middle class over a large social spectrum including most communities and from almost all regions. However, there are still some communities which have no adequate representation in these ranks. But even the most remote communities have been down in the vortex of Indian politics, and they are participants in the political process. However, this process has still to move forward so as to encompass all in order that our democracy—the social base of which is widening—becomes truly and fully a participative one.

CHANGES AND DIVERSITY

None of the identities, whether in the form of communities or in the form of segments, have ever remained frozen in time and space. One need not go far into history to see how identities have evolved. One has only to compare colonial ethnography and the PoI to

identify the areas of change. There are five of them. First, the myths of origin differ sharply. As the movement towards political equality grows, the old myths of origin marked by the notion of degradation are discarded. The current perception of origin reflects a new sense of self-respect. Second, the old varna hierarchy seems to have collapsed or been gradually replaced by the three-tier structure of high, middle, and low positions. Third, there has been a range of occupational diversifications within a community, breaking the old nexus between a community and its traditional occupation. Fourth, there has been a pervasive impact of the development process. Finally, the mutual perceptions and relationships between communities, particularly modern relationships, are being radically altered with political and economic change.

It should also be noted that the relationships between the main communities and their segments have been a dynamic one. The old endogamous units or jatis within a community or caste have broken down, and the caste or the community has emerged as the larger endogamous unit. This is also one aspect of the consolidation of a community.

The extent of diversities existing in the country have alarmed some observers, even serious scholars, who believe that identifying—much less, studying—such diversities will be an invitation to disaster, break up the country and society, and so on. Diversities cannot be ignored but should be observed to see how they function. They are natural, native, part of our biological, linguistic, and cultural heritage, and without diversities we would not have survived as a civilization, or as a cultural system. Diversities are intrinsic not only to human evolution but also to human existence. They form a pattern of their own; they have a rhythm of their own.

And yet, various cultural and linguistic traits tend to coalesce in their own formations, in a manner which is natural, spontaneous, and effortless. Diversities, linkages, variation of traits and their convergence—they always go together—are the components of our biological, linguistic, and cultural heritage.

So much of diversity and so many of the linkages are located within the civilizational framework that the people of India have built up

over the centuries. Both are reflected at the cognitive levels, in different schools of philosophies. There has not only been an understanding of self amidst diversity, but also a willing acceptance of the other. Out of the objective reality of diversities has emerged an understanding of them, which, in spite of conflict and tension and occasional bloodbath, has generally endured. Out of this understanding has emerged a spirit of tolerance also. These diversities have flourished in a state of relative cultural freedom. Therefore, they go with freedom. Diversities and linkages, freedom and tolerance go together.

EFFECTS OF ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION

A question that arises is whether the cultural diversities will survive or fade away with the globalization of the economy. A high priest of economic globalization recently observed in Delhi that while the economy is being globalized, governance remains national, and culture continues to be local and ethnic. There are fears not only in the developing countries about Western hegemonization of indigenous cultures, but also in some sections of the people in the developed countries about the possible impact of economic globalization on cultural homogenization. The question, therefore, that is being asked everywhere is whether culture, like economy, will also become globalized or homogenized. The answer to this question lies in the understanding of culture. If we take a long-term view of culture and see it as a river that absorbs many streams and flows on, then we shall be able to take a balanced view of the changes that are likely to occur. There is no doubt that some aspects of culture like food habit, dress, music, and so on, which are even ordinarily more prone to change, will be influenced, particularly for those who join the international circuit or those who are directly exposed to global influences. Such changes have occurred throughout history but the pace of change is much faster, almost mind-boggling, today. There are many other aspects of culture that might not experience the same impact of change, or might not change at all, for people in various age groups. In fact, there is a possibility that with the perceived threat to identity, a return to the roots might be faster as one can see in the movements of

the indigenous peoples or in the environmental movements all across the world.

As we observed in the beginning, we have been able to generate, under the PoI, a composite profile of the people of India in its biological, cultural, and linguistic dimensions. However, the process of updating the material and generating fresh material and perspectives on change has to continue. The database has to be continually updated and enlarged to meet the requirements of the people. The Department of Biotechnology (in the Ministry of Science and Technology) has identified a number of projects on genomic diversities. On the basis of the cultural data generated by the PoI project, efforts are now being made to explore the molecular basis of genetic variation among some of our population groups. As we have covered only 800 communities under various parameters of anthropometrics and genetic surveys under the PoI, it should be possible now to launch a pan-Indian survey of all populations, with the new tools of molecular biology. A second phase of the PoI cultural project is also on, to analyse the traits at a natural level and in greater depth. The possibilities of a linguistic survey are being discussed, though mutedly. Language does not always divide but can serve as an instrument of integration. Language is a microcosm of many influences, which are absorbed as it grows and spreads. Therefore, we may look forward to the emergence of a more composite profile of all communities of India, in the first or second decade of the next century.

9

Pluralism, Synthesis, Unity in Diversities, Diversities in Unity*

PLURALISM

This chapter discusses pluralism at the cognitive level. First, we take up Anekantavada as a theory of diversity, probably the first of its kind, and as a tool of investigation and of understanding society. Anekantavada has its critics but almost everybody accepts that it is empirical, dynamic, realist, and pluralist.

It should be noted that while diversity of perceptions, approaches, and practices are recognized by some schools including those of the idealist philosophy, it is Anekantavada described by S. Radhakrishnan as a doctrine of realistic pluralism that tries to explore diversity logically and in depth (Radhakrishnan, 2004).

We are told that there are three tenets of Anekantavada. One, that there is a possibility of many perceptions of an object; two that everything is relative and multi-dimensional; and three, that there is

* Based on a talk on Anekanta given in May 2002 as part of the Anekanta series at the India International Centre under the auspices of the Jain Vishwa Bharti Institute.

an inbuilt co-existence of opposites, that one dimension is as possible as another and it is only in relation to other factors like time, place, and context that one dimension gains predominance over another. All this is subsumed under the doctrine of *syadvada* or *saptabhāgi*. From the acceptance of the multi-dimensional nature of objects and their probability is derived the moral imperative of *ahimsa* or non-violence.

We thus see in Anekantavada a recognition of diversity, relativity, dynamism, and change which is of profound importance in understanding society. Society too is multi-dimensional, consisting of multiple and contradictory trends, and variations in all their aspects which are bewildering in their range and depth. Some processes acquire salience owing to a combination of factors. Then they dissolve and another formation emerges. It is almost like a dialectical process, which goes on all the time, at all places, and in all communities. The world is in a flux; it is chaotic, uncertain, unpredictable. The social sciences have moved from unary to binary to multinary perceptions.

Variation has been described as an attribute of all living beings, or *jivas*—a philosophical principle which goes against the trends towards homogenization or hegemonization.

Over the past twenty years, we have been exploring diversity and affinities among Indian populations. A few findings may be discussed here. First, South Asia is now regarded as the most hybridized region of the world where various genepools intermingled. Second, the Indian subcontinent, next only to Brazil and Indonesia, is ecologically the most diverse and the richest repository of plant genes. Third, India has the largest number of languages (321) and scripts (25). Fourth, India has the largest number of ethnic groups—about 3,000 core groups, 10,000 endogamous groups, and 80,000 components of groups such as synonyms, segments, titles, and surnames. Lastly, nowhere else in the world has there been such a convergence of all types of diversity as in India.

Diversity is one aspect of the Indian formation. Through all forms of interactions, conflicts, and struggles there have emerged affinities in all domains. We are mostly a mixed people, and there is no genetical basis to either caste or varna. The human genom sequencing achieved

recently suggests that we are all kin under the skin and yet there are variations. No two human beings are absolutely similar. There are more variations in terms of morphological and genetical traits within a community than between communities. Our languages belong to five different language families that have interacted and borrowed vocabulary and syntax. Bilingualism is high. The communities have interacted in space and time, and developed a culture of interaction or a composite culture which shows the extent of sharing, togetherness, and rootedness (of most of them). It has happened naturally and spontaneously as part of a civilizational process, at the level of the people.

Diversities and affinities are best seen at the regional or micro level. Each major region of India, and some of its sub-regions, are mini Indias, meeting grounds for various streams with their own cluster of communities with their titles, surnames, synonyms and segments, their languages and dialects, folk culture, and folk religion. Everyone of us is a microcosm.

However, we should not romanticize either diversity or affinity in general terms. Both are accommodated within an order of hierarchies which are unequal and iniquitous. We have a very unequal society, which becomes sometimes a violent one, in which all types of atrocities are committed against all—women, children, Dalit, tribes, and others.

Within this broad context of our studies in diversity and affinity, we should share some information about the Jains. But first about Lord Mahavira who demonstrated austerity of the most extreme kind—the nakedness of the spirit. Jainism gave the world the most revolutionary message of non-violence, and preached and practised it in an absolute sense, both at normative and behavioural levels. We are always puzzled as to why the Buddha and Mahavira never met even though they shared the same annual circuit from Vaishali to Rajgir (because their paths never crossed and they represented two different paradigms, one of extreme austerity and the other of the middle path), why a religion that preached non-violence produced a Kharavela and generals in the army of the Rashtrakutas and the Chalukyas, and why a religion that preached non-stealing (*asteya*) and non-hoarding (*aparagriha*) should produce traders and businessmen. Probably the

answer lies in the theory of Anekantavada which speaks of the co-existence of opposites, or the fact that the principles of non-stealing and non-hoarding shaped a lifestyle of simplicity and thrift, *a la* Max Weber, that made for accumulation, or more seriously in the working of historical processes, and the fact that life and culture have always been creative, resilient, ongoing, and have always reached out to new challenges, lying beyond the limits of religion.

We have studied 100 Jain communities all across India, noted the enormous scale of occupational diversification beyond the stereotypes of trade and business that has occurred, the range of progress and advancement that this small community has registered, and the enormous contributions that it has been making to the development of language, literature, culture, and economy through the ages, and to the understanding of Indian pluralism. Through history the Jains have moved from eastern to western India, where they are present in sizeable numbers as far as their communities are concerned. In spite of a homogenous religion with two sects, Jain society is marked by division and hierarchy, differentiation and stratification, rootedness in local culture, language, and kinship structure. Jain society is in transition. Sex ratio is adverse and therefore women related issues need to be addressed as well.

There does not seem to be any direct or organic linkage between diversity of the kind we have discussed earlier at the objective level, and diversity as perceived at the cognitive level. It is interesting to see how the classical texts including lexicographical works identify, list up, and sometimes describe, ecological features such as hills, valleys, rivers, oceans, deserts, pastures, and forests, and finally the peoples—from the Mahabharata, which is the first ethnographic work and the first lexicon of Jambudvipa, to Amarkosh, *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Varna Ratnakar* and through many similar works undertaken at the regional level. In Tamil Nadu there are Jain lexicons from the tenth century onwards and elsewhere we have an impressive literature on diversity. In fact, this pre-colonial heritage needs to be explored further to see how diversity was perceived, identified, and documented in various ways. The Indian mind was preoccupied with diversity, dissection, categorization, and classification.

SYNTHESIS

The colonial scholars held that India was never a nation, but only a geographical expression. To this the nationalists pointed out that it had always been a cultural unity. The lexicographical works that inventorized mountains, rivers, peoples among others conveyed a sense of connectivity and territorial integrity.

The nationalists spoke of synthesis and assimilation as the hallmark of Indian culture. Sri Aurobindo wrote:

India's national life will then be founded on her natural strengths and the principle of unity in diversity which has always been normal to her and its fulfillment the fundamental course of her being and its very nature, the Many in the One, would place her on the sure foundation of her Swabhava and Swadharma. (Sen, 2003)

The idea of unity in diversity emerged in the writings of some of the British ethnographers and historians. As H.H. Risley says:

Beneath the manifold diversity of physical and social type, language, custom and religion which strikes the observer in India, there can still be discerned, as Mr. Yusuf Ali has pointed out, a certain 'underlying uniformity of life from the Himalayas to Cape Camorin. There is in fact an Indian character, a general Indian personality, which we cannot resolve into its component elements. (Risley, 1915)

From uniformity to unity was the second step. The historian Vincent Smith spoke categorically of unity in diversity:

India offers unity in diversity. The underlined unity being less obvious than the superficial diversity and its nature and limitations merit exposition. The mere fact that the name India conveniently designates a subcontinental idea does not help to unify history and more than the existence of the name Asia could make the history of that Continent feasible. Though the unity sought must be of the nature more fundamental than that implied in the currency of a geographical term. (cited in Indira Gandhi Memorial Trust, 2003: 28)

The nationalists took up the theme of unity in diversity. However, Partition was a traumatic experience. Unity in diversity was a mantra chanted ritually on every occasion. President Neelam Sanjiva Reddy was probably the first president to speak of a plural society in 1976. In

the 1980s, there was a new confidence in our diversity. Diversity came alive on Doordarshan, in the media, and through various festivals; festivals of India and Apna Utsav were the most important cultural events of the period.

Since the 1960s there has been an explosion of information about diversity. An enormous amount of knowledge became available about ethnic communities, their movements, and pluralism. Movements for self-determination occurred all across the world. Movements for conservation of environment, human rights, rights of Indigenous people, and so on, focused on diversity and identity. Therefore there was at the academic level, a leap from the notion of unity in diversity to the notion of diversity in unity, underlining the growing knowledge of diversity. Prime Minister Vajpayee in his Red Fort speech of 2003 spoke both of unity in diversity and diversity in unity.

The ethical implications of the theory of diversity first propounded by Anekantavada and debated now at various fora should be considered carefully. Diversity recognizes identity, uniqueness of all traits and cultures and their autonomy, and communities' freedom and role in self management of resources. Therefore tolerance based on understanding, which is the essence of non-violence as propounded by Anekantavada, and as accepted all over now, is the tool that humankind will need to fight the forces unleashed by fundamentalism in the present century.