



UNITY IN DIVERSITY AS A LIVING MODEL OF MULTICULTURALISM IN INDIA

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Abstract

Multiculturalism is usually explained through Western theories. These focus on immigration, minority rights and diversity managed by the state. This paper looks at multiculturalism again, but through the Indian idea of Unity in Diversity. It presents this principle as a lived reality that is shaped by history and everyday practice. It is a process rather than a policy response to difference. The study uses insights from Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, Bhikhu Parekh and Homi K. Bhabha. It places Indian multiculturalism within liberal, dialogic and postcolonial perspectives. At the same time, it also highlights how social practices in daily life sustain diversity. The argument is that India challenges Eurocentric views. It shows that plural identities like religious, linguistic, regional and cultural can coexist without being absorbed into one dominant culture. Through historical study and analysis of language, the paper explains how hybridity, recognition and ethical engagement act as forces that sustain coexistence. It also points to present day challenges. Inequality, political mobilization and identity based conflict continue to test the strength of Unity in Diversity. These tensions show that multiculturalism is also fragile. It is not a settled achievement but an ongoing practice that requires revival. By presenting Unity in Diversity as a living model, the paper expands global theory on multiculturalism. It brings India's experience into the discussion as a source of insight. In a world that is characterized by polarization and identity conflict, India offers lessons on how unity can be sustained without erasing difference.

Keywords: Unity in Diversity, Multiculturalism, Cultural Hybridity, India

Introduction

Multiculturalism is now a prominent way to understand how cultures live together in this connected world. It examines how different ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural groups coexist within a single society. Much of this theory comes from Western settings and often linked to immigration, minority rights and assimilation. Yet, non-Western societies also show important models of multicultural life. India is a unique case where diversity is not only managed by policy but practiced as part of its civilizational identity.

The concept of "Unity in Diversity" embodies an Indian perspective on multiculturalism. Here, difference is accepted without forcing sameness. No single identity dominates. Instead, society allows many traditions, practices and identities to overlap and coexist. This connects with Charles Taylor's view that recognition of difference is vital for multicultural societies, since cultures grow through acknowledgment rather than assimilation (Taylor 25). In India, this recognition is present in everyday social life. Theories of multiculturalism often highlight group rights. Will Kymlicka, for example, emphasises how minority cultures seek protection within liberal democracies that are shaped by a dominant national culture (Kymlicka 10). India complicates this view. It does not have a single cultural core. Instead, its identity is plural and



composite which is formed through centuries of interaction among many communities. This reflects Homi K. Bhabha's idea of cultural hybridity, where meaning arises in a "third space" through exchange rather than fixed origins (Bhabha 37).

Looking at Unity in Diversity as lived practice, rather than abstract theory, it shows India offers a dynamic model of multiculturalism. This model is process based. Studying Indian multiculturalism expands the reach of multicultural theory. It also challenges Eurocentric views that treat diversity as a problem to be solved, rather than a condition to be sustained.

Understanding Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is not one fixed idea. It includes many theories about how difference is recognized, negotiated and sustained. In general, it resists assimilation and supports the coexistence of diverse identities within shared structures. Yet, each tradition imagines this coexistence differently. Liberal theories, such as Will Kymlicka's, stress the state's role in protecting minority cultures through group rights. He argues that cultural membership gives people meaningful choices, making preservation vital for freedom (Kymlicka 83). This model treats multiculturalism as policy. It assumes a stable national culture, which does not fit India, where no single narrative dominates.

Dialogic and ethical models shift focus to engagement. Charles Taylor highlights recognition, claiming identities form through dialogue and equal respect is essential for justice (Taylor 34). His view suits non-Western contexts but still relies on modern democratic frameworks, leaving little space for older civilizational pluralism. Bhikhu Parekh offers a more embedded model. He sees societies as interacting traditions, not isolated groups. Diversity enriches public life and openness to learning strengthens society (Parekh 123). His ideas fit India well, though they remain tied to political theory rather than everyday practice. Postcolonial theory challenges fixed identities. Homi K. Bhabha's "third space" shows culture as negotiation, where meaning arises through hybridity and translation (Bhabha 38). In India, hybridity is visible in language, religion, art, and customs which shows multiculturalism as lived interaction.

Together, these perspectives suggest multiculturalism is best seen as a dynamic process. It is shaped by history, ethics and cultural negotiation. This paper uses an interdisciplinary approach that is liberal, dialogic and postcolonial while centering lived experience. In this way, Unity in Diversity becomes a working model of everyday multiculturalism in India.

Historical Roots of Unity in Diversity in India

India's multiculturalism is rooted in history. Cultural plurality existed long before the modern nation. Unlike societies where diversity came mainly through migration, India's heterogeneity grew organically. Centuries of interaction among linguistic, religious, ethnic and regional groups shaped this diversity. The principle of Unity in Diversity rests on this long tradition.

Ancient India shows early pluralism. Vedic, Buddhist and Jain traditions coexisted. They debated, reinterpreted and engaged with one another. This reflects Bhikhu Parekh's idea of cultural openness, where traditions evolve through dialogue (Parekh 48). The medieval era deepened this ethos. Hindu, Islamic, Persian and regional cultures interacted. Islam's arrival led not to replacement but to synthesis. Bhakti and Sufi movements promoted inclusivity and rejected rigid boundaries. These syncretic traditions illustrate Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, where meaning arises through translation and exchange (Bhabha 56).

Colonialism brought new challenges. British rule imposed Western structures and divisions. Yet it also fostered awareness of India's plural identity. Nationalist thinkers emphasized unity



without erasing difference. Nehru's idea of India as a "palimpsest" captured this layered coexistence (Nehru 61). After independence, the Constitution established pluralism. It recognized languages, religions and regions. This echoes Charles Taylor's claim that recognition of difference is vital for dignity and harmony (Taylor 26). In India, recognition is lived daily, not only through law.

India's history shows multiculturalism as continuity, interaction and negotiation. Unity in Diversity is not a modern slogan. It is a pragmatic response to sustained diversity. By grounding multiculturalism in history, India challenges theories that see diversity as a recent problem. Instead, it presents it as a long condition of social life.

Linguistic Diversity as Multicultural Practice

Language is central to India's multiculturalism. It marks identity and enables negotiation. India has hundreds of languages from families such as Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Burman. This plurality has supported coexistence, with many languages functioning together in shared spaces. Unlike monolingual states, India resisted imposing one national language. The Constitution recognizes many languages, selecting dignity and identity. This reflects Will Kymlicka's view that language communities provide freedom and continuity (Kymlicka 76). Yet India goes further, treating multilingualism as normal and not exceptional. Daily practices show this diversity in action. Translation and adaptation are common in schools, workplaces and public life. These practices echo Homi K. Bhabha's "third space," where meaning emerges through negotiation across boundaries (Bhabha 54). Languages influence one another, creating hybrid forms.

Historically, Sanskrit, Persian, Tamil and vernacular traditions coexisted. Literary exchange enriched culture and challenged hierarchies. This supports Bhikhu Parekh's claim that societies thrive through reciprocal learning, not uniformity (Parekh 112). Regional literatures remain strong alongside national and global languages. India's multilingualism also challenges Western models that see language differences as a problem. Here, individuals shift between languages depending on context. This adaptability shows multiculturalism as a process that is sustained by communication across differences. Thus, linguistic diversity in India is more than identity. It is a living practice. Through it, Unity in Diversity is enacted every day.

Unity in Diversity as a Living Model of Multiculturalism

The discussion so far shows that Unity in Diversity in India is more than a constitutional declaration or cultural slogan. It is a lived reality that is enacted continuously as a model of multiculturalism. Unlike theories that see diversity as a threat to national unity, the Indian case shows multiculturalism as a continuous process. It is sustained through everyday practices, historical continuity and ethical engagement across differences.

Unity in Diversity works by normalizing plural identities rather than reducing them to one dominant narrative. Indian society allows multiple religions, languages, regions and customs to coexist. Assimilation into a single framework is not demanded. This reflects Bhikhu Parekh's view that multicultural societies thrive when diversity is treated as intrinsic to collective life, not as a deviation from the norm (Parekh 65). In India, diversity itself is the standard. Daily spaces define this lived multiculturalism. Markets, schools, workplaces and neighborhoods show how people move across cultures. They shift between languages, religions and social practices depending on context. This adaptive negotiation echoes Homi K. Bhabha's idea of the "third space," where identities are not fixed but formed through interaction (Bhabha 55). Such spaces allow coexistence without erasure and they keep identities distinct yet connected.



Unlike other models that depend mainly on state policy, India's approach is rooted in social habits and cultural memory. Constitutional protections are there but Unity in Diversity is most visible in practices. Tolerance, shared participation and mutual recognition maintain it. Charles Taylor's argument about recognition as a moral necessity is relevant here. Indian multiculturalism depends on acknowledging difference as legitimate within shared frameworks (Taylor 31).

Unity in Diversity also accepts conflict. It does not deny disagreement or tension. Instead, it treats them as natural in plural societies. What makes the Indian model distinctive is its resilience and capacity for negotiation. This comes from long traditions of dialogue and coexistence. This process oriented view challenges Western approaches that seek fixed resolutions or rely mainly on policy to manage diversity. By presenting Unity in Diversity as a living model, this paper rethinks multiculturalism beyond Eurocentric boundaries. India shows that multiculturalism can grow organically through cultural interaction and ethical engagement. At a time of identity based conflict, the Indian experience offers lessons. It demonstrates how societies can sustain unity without erasing difference.

Challenges to Unity in Diversity

Unity in Diversity is a core principle of Indian multiculturalism but it is not that easy. Pluralism in India faces tensions from inequality, political mobilization and historical grievances. These challenges prevent diversity and show multiculturalism as challenged and ongoing. A major challenge is the politicization of religion and culture. Communal tensions, often heightened by politics, threaten the balance between unity and difference. When identities become rigid political categories, dialogue and negotiation weaken. Bhikhu Parekh warns that using difference as exclusion erodes the ethical base of plural societies (Parekh 162). Multicultural coexistence thus requires active ethical commitment.

Social and economic inequality also complicates the framework. Caste hierarchies, regional gaps and minority marginalization restrict equal participation. In India, constitutional protections alone are insufficient without deeper reform. Language politics add further strain. Multilingualism defines India, yet debates over dominance and national language policy often arise. These tensions show the limits of functional multilingualism and the need for constant negotiation. These challenges do not doubt the Unity in Diversity. But they highlight its fragile and dynamic nature. Indian multiculturalism endures not by removing conflict but by offering mechanisms to address it. Recognizing these strains strengthens the view that Unity in Diversity is a living model that must be renewed through dialogue and social justice.

Global Relevance of the Indian Model

In today's world of migration, polarization and identity conflict, the question of sustaining unity without erasing difference has become critical. Western liberal democracies often frame multiculturalism as a response to immigration and minority integration. India offers another perspective. It shows how multiculturalism can be historically embedded and socially practiced. Western frameworks usually assume a core national culture that accommodates minorities. India demonstrates that national identity can be plural and layered. By normalizing multiplicity, India challenges Eurocentric assumptions about cohesion.

India's handling of linguistic and religious diversity also carries global significance. Multilingualism and religious plurality are treated as normal, not as problems. The Indian model also highlights everyday practices. Unlike Western approaches that rely heavily on institutions. India shows the importance of shared spaces and informal negotiation. This is



especially relevant for societies where policy alone cannot sustain multiculturalism. Identity politics and inequality remain challenges. These struggles mirror global issues and confirm that multiculturalism is never complete. Will Kymlicka's call to balance recognition with social justice is crucial for assessing India's strengths and limits (Kymlicka 111).

Conclusion

Unity in Diversity in India demonstrates that multiculturalism can be lived as an ongoing practice rather than imposed as a policy. Rooted in history and everyday interaction, it shows how plural identities like linguistic, religious and regional can coexist without assimilation. This reflects Homi K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity, Charles Taylor's emphasis on recognition and Will Kymlicka's concern for structural safeguards. At the same time, challenges such as inequality and identity politics remind us that multiculturalism is never complete but requires constant renewal. India's experience expands global discourse by offering a non-Western model where unity rests not on uniformity but on ethical engagement with difference. In a world shaped by migration and polarization, the Indian model provides valuable lessons for sustaining coexistence without erasure. It demonstrates that unity can thrive through dialogue, hybridity and respect for difference.

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