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Source: *Pacific Journal* 6 (2011): 81-91.

Publisher: Fresno Pacific University.

Stable URL: http://hdl.handle.net/11418/508

Exploring Diversity in Vietnam and India

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How to respond to cultural diversity within any society is often a source of great tension. Whether to embrace the diversity that exists or to reject it, whether to acknowledge that all cultural contributions are equal, or just the ones from form a dominant group, whether to assume that differing cultures can co-exist, or that one dominant culture must be present, are all powerful and enduring questions.

Societies have drastically differed through the ages as to what approach to take to harmonize various cultures that exist. Many an ethnic minority has been forced to endure humiliation and hardship, banished due to what the dominant culture has seen as inferior ways. One needs to look no further than our own history and its approach to dealing with native Americans or African American cultures over the centuries. Historically, the need to justify one's own sense of superiority was often done by denigrating the traditions, and the lives, of outsiders.

In more recent years a movement to embrace the diversity within societies has been both welcomed and reviled. For example, Canada has embraced multiculturalism, with a strong emphasis on highlighting the contributions of the many newer cultures that live in its borders, as well as recognizing the many contributions of its native peoples. From Sikhs to Sufis, Canada has made it clear that its future is one which tries to emphasize its rich tapestry of cultures. England, and indeed several European countries, having embraced a form of multiculturalism in the past several decades, is now worried that that movement may be the basis of a disintegrating future. The rise of fundamentalist Islamist movements within a liberal, tolerant society has shocked many British and brought about calls to reassert the "essence" of more traditional British education and values.

Within the United States a wave of embracing multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s has brought a backlash in more recent years. The backlash has focused on the perception that the United States is losing its "core values" that make up a democratic, liberal society, in the struggle to embrace all ethnic,

religious, and other cultural identities. Books like Samuel Huntington's 2004 publication of *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity*,[1] helped galvanize the opinion of those who felt the United States had for too long embraced sub-national or trans-national identities at the expense of an exclusive American identity.

It is clearly not just the United States that has dealt with these questions over the centuries. In our own experience two societies in which we have had significant experience, Vietnam and India, represent two distinct alternative approaches to the question of dealing with diversity while forging a national identity. A brief look at both of these societies may help the United States as it tries to sail through the murky waters of tolerating or rejecting diversity within its borders.

Vietnam is a land of many colorful and unique cultural groups, termed "ethnic minority groups." Fifty-four such groups are recognized by the Vietnamese government, which together make up approximately 14 percent of Vietnam's population.[2] Such groups, including the Tay, Thai, Muong, Kmer Krom, Hoa, Hmong (White, Flower, and other subgroups), Dai, and San Diu, are all part of Vietnam's cultural makeup. The Kinh, who comprise 86 percent of the population, have a certain fascination with these ethnic minorities, as witnessed by the rapidly increasing tourism by the Kinh in the remote hillsides where many of these groups reside.

This fascination with the "ethnic minorities" is a relatively new one, however. Historically, the Vietnamese Kinh have suppressed and marginalized the various ethnic groups. In its 2,000-year history, the Kinh have dominated the cultural and economic landscape. As they flourished in the Red River Delta in today's northern Vietnam, the various ethnic minority groups were forced to exist on the margins of society, usually occupying space beyond the reach of the Kinh society in the highlands of modern-day Vietnam. Before the advent of the nation-state, with its physically-demarcated boundaries, this effectively meant that the Kinh developed their own cultural identity free from the impact of other cultures. From the Kinh perspectives any outsiders were "ngoi nuoc nguoi," literally translated as "outside country people."

As the Kinh expanded their kingdom in the 15th-18th centuries they slowly marched down the coastline of modern-day Vietnam, eventually swallowing up the Mekong River Delta from the neighboring Khmer Empire. Ethnic groups were largely ignored or pushed into the central highlands, where they continued an isolated existence away from the far more productive rice-growing Red River and Mekong River deltas occupied by the Kinh.

When the French colonized what became known as "Indo-China" in the mid to late 1800s the boundaries they demarcated included both the dominate Kinh as well as the many ethnic minority groups in the central and northern highlands of Vietnam. The French, eager to promote their own cultural identity and expand their influence in the region, worked primarily with the dominant Kinh. Other than French missionaries, who often found a more receptive audience among the ethnic minorities, the French focused on influencing the Kinh cultural norms.

The Kinh resisted the French, as did some of the ethnic minority groups. During the resistance to French rule in the early 20th century, the Indochinese Communist Party willingly recruited ethnic minority groups to work with them to try to force the French to leave. Notably, the Vietnamese Kinh liberation leader, Ho Chi Minh, actively worked together with ethnic minority groups in Vietnam to achieve their goal of independence from the French.

When independence was won from the French in 1954 the Kinh set about trying to establish a viable new state. Inheriting the boundaries established by the French, Vietnam became home not only to the dominant Kinh but also to the many ethnic minorities. The question of how to integrate these groups into society was a puzzle that the Kinh had never had to seriously deal with before.

This puzzle became more complicated with the "American War" in the 1960s. As the United States increased its political, economic, and especially military involvement in southern Vietnam in the post-French era, they often recruited ethnic minorities in their fight against the newly emergent Vietnamese communist government in the north. The variety of ethnic minority groups, generically labeled "montengards" by the French, were seen by the Americans as a bastion of resistance against the powerful Kinh-based communist govern-

ment. Fostering old animosities towards the Kinh, the Americans convinced a variety of ethnic minorities in the central highlands of Vietnam to fight with them in a covert war. The ethnic minorities, many times proximate to the famed "Ho Chi Minh Trail" in the mountainous jungles of Vietnam, were used by the CIA and U.S. Army to sabotage and destroy caravans of supplies destined for the communist fighters in the south of the country.

When one adds religion into the mix, things become even more murky. Many of the ethnic minority groups were proven to be ripe ground for foreign missionaries; disillusioned as such minorities were with the Kinh-dominated political system under which they lived. Secluded as many groups were in the remote mountainous areas inland or at the border between Vietnam and China, they were fiercely independent from mainstream Kinh culture and thought. When American missionaries began working there in the mid 1900s they quickly found these groups were much more receptive to the Christian Gospel then the dominant Kinh. As noted above, some of these same groups allied themselves with America's war aims. When the war was over, there were religious, cultural, and political reasons to be suspect of ethnic minorities.

This complex history was not lost on the Kinh majority who dominated the cultural and political landscape in the post-war years. Since 1975, when Vietnam again became one united nation-state, the Vietnamese communist government has set about dealing with its question of diversity by both integrating the subservient minority and punishing those groups who were in opposition to its struggle against the Americans. While there has been lip-service paid to the achievements and uniqueness of minority cultures within in its borders, for the most part the Vietnamese government has attempted to subsume ethnic minority cultures within the larger framework of the dominant Kinh.

The Vietnamese government makes much ado about assistance and inclusion of these ethnic groups and indeed, on the surface, there are impressive and visible signs of attention. One piece of evidence is the existence of ethnic minority boarding schools, generously assisted by the government so poor children of various ethnic groups can receive both education and basic support for living. During our work with Mennonite Central Committee in Vietnam in the late 1990s, one of the ongoing projects was to assist such a school, providing

a foreign volunteer to teach English in Hoa Binh Province and to live at the school, among the students there. On school breaks, this volunteer was invited to various students' family houses and trekked around the mountainsides, sipping tea with family members and listening to their stories. Such connections were invaluable to forming relationships with and gaining inside glimpses of the marginal minorities of Vietnam. However, it also became clear to the foreign volunteers who were involved with the school that the focus of this and other such boarding schools was to take the best and brightest from the ethnic minority communities, socialize them in the ways of the Kinh majority people and put them in leadership positions where they, now indebted to the government for their education and leadership position, would interpret and promote the majority's way of thinking and being to the local community. This is a useful system for the Vietnamese government, but clearly not altogether an altruistic one.

The Vietnamese government has, to be sure, also done much to try to improve economic opportunities for various ethnic minorities. The World Bank and other international organizations were duly impressed with the Vietnamese government's attempts to promote economic livelihoods among "the poorest of the poor" in Vietnam.[3] This was done through various schemes, including providing improved infrastructure in the central highlands to provide better access for the remote ethnic groups to bring produce to market and interact with the larger world. The largest of these projects, Highway 7, more popularly known as the "Ho Chi Minh Highway" is currently being built along the western spine of the Vietnamese highlands, through many ethnic minority lands. Such projects clearly bring in improved access to markets, education, and health care, all needed to improve the economic conditions of the relatively poor ethnic minority groups.

Unfortunately, these same projects also allow Kinh people better access to the lands and resources of the ethnic minority groups and more opportunities for seizing these resources for their own benefit. One notable example was in the late 1990s near Da Lat, in the southern highlands, when large groups of enterprising Kinh were encouraged by the government to encroach on more accessible mountainous land held by the minority groups to set up a thriving cof-

fee production. The eventual result was to greatly expand coffee production in Vietnam, enabling it to eventually compete on a world-wide level but also driving coffee prices down internationally.[4] The minority groups who were pushed off their traditional lands staged major uprisings which were duly quelled by the strong central government.

The recent upswing in protestant Christian missions among ethnic minorities in Vietnam has only further complicated the relationship between the Kinh majority and the many other groups. In the far northwest of the country the Hmong have been particularly attracted to Christianity, with reports of up to one-third of the population converting. With memories of the war years and the suspect nature of this "outside" religion, the Vietnamese authorities have been quick to try to repress the spread of Christianity among the Hmong. Detention and harassment among leaders among Hmong Christians have been common.[5] In the eyes of the Vietnamese government, minority Christians have three strikes against them: they are intrinsically cultural outsiders, they are often not sympathetic to the current political system, and they are influenced by a "foreign" religion. The result is a government that often makes the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International lists of repressive regimes.

From the Kinh-dominated majority, however, the actions by the government are very much in line with their perceived need to maintain order and stability in a complex society. Few Kinh that we knew in Vietnam, including ones working to assist these ethnic minorities, were sympathetic to the concerns of international human rights groups or the American government when it concerned treatment of ethnic minority groups. The Kinh that we interacted with were, in large part, unaware of a larger debate about strategies for dealing with diverse societies. They were, to be sure, concerned about the economic welfare of minority groups and were keen to see them become more self-sufficient and their means of livelihood improved. But there was little discussion over whether the Kinh themselves needed to adjust their cultural attitudes. The Kinh were the dominant society: the dominant Vietnamese language, religious traditions, and cultural norms of that society were never really questioned.

INDIA

A strikingly different situation is found in what is now referred to as India. Similar to Vietnam, India has an ancient historical tradition. Unlike Vietnam, India does not have a single dominant ethnic group that has guided its societal development. It rather has, from a Western perspective, mind-numbing diversity, ranging from ethnic groups—more than two thousand in total—to languages—four major families (Indo-European, Austro-Asiatic, Davidian, Tibeto-Bruman) to every major religion in the world. Add to this mix the economic and social stratas as magnified by the Hindu caste system and the stark contrasts between groups becomes staggering. In this single modern nation-state lies the diversity of most continents.

There are many "Indias;" any time a sweeping statement is made about India, one must of necessity ask, "Which India?" Such amazing diversity lends itself to a cacophony of colors in exotic dress and religious parades complete with firecrackers, drums, dancing—fascinating to the foreigner. However, India lives in an uneasy truce, various groups existing side by side. Such uneasiness often erupts into protests, demonstrations, and violence. While these often emanate from a religious basis, they often have contained in them a degree of ethnic origin.

The vast diversity of India significantly contrasts with that of Vietnam. Forged over many centuries separately in the northern and southern Indian subcontinent, there were few times that the modern state of India existed as one undivided kingdom. Much less was there ever a time when ethnic, religious, or cultural uniformity existed. Even when an Islamic presence swept down from the northeast and became established as the Mughal empire in the 17th and 18th centuries, its influence dissipated in the southern reaches of the subcontinent. In the vast Deccan plateau, which stretches well over one thousand miles, multiple language, ethnic, and religious groups continued to co-exist in the land. Akbar the Great, one of the foremost Mughal leaders, established a tone for the way in which religious diversity would be approached in this diverse landscape. He brought into his ruling council leaders from all the major faiths and tried to see the common good in all the religious traditions. Here was an Islamic leader who did not insist the numerical majority Hindu culture

convert to Islam. Rather, religious tolerance was the order of the day, a theme that has ebbed and flowed through modern Indian society. On the other hand, the Mughal influence brought an increasing Islamic worldview to the northeast of the Indian sub-continent, later resulting in a great religious cleavage creating the two separate states of Pakistan and India.

When the British began to dominate the Indian sub-continent they concentrated on cementing their own political rule over the vast differences throughout the region. It was the first time in the three thousand years of Indian history that it was truly was under one exclusive political and economic power. The British, eager to maintain their control and not incur great opposition to their rule, allowed a good deal of local political and cultural autonomy. This included allowing local *nizams*, or princes, to practice effective self-rule over their territory without undue interference from the British—as long as appropriate taxes were paid.

The rather modern European notion of the "nation-state" was introduced into Asia through the British. The nationalism of this "imagined community" that Benedict Anderson described being created in Indonesia,[6] was also created by the early Indian nationalist leaders in the course of opposition to British rule. When Gandhi's self-rule movement began to unite India it was done largely out of a unified desire to rid the sub-continent of foreign rule. For Gandhi, being "Indian" was not directly tied to a certain ethnic or religious group, but rather to geography and an idea—that the people of this sub-continent deserved to be free and independent. Gandhi tried in vain to maintain that more expansive and inclusive vision of what being an Indian meant, but religious forces greater than that vision ultimately triumphed, and Islamic-dominated Pakistan and secular-democratic India were born side by side in 1947. Other smaller sub-units of India remained autonomous or independent for many years because of India's relatively 'laissez faire' approach to government, including Kashmir, Goa, and Hyderabad, coming under official Indian control only after a period of larger Indian government pressure.

Modern India seems, therefore, to be caught between these two competing ideas—Gandhi's vision of an inclusive society where religious and ethnic diversity is allowed to flourish under a larger secular-democratic vision—and the

increasingly polarizing vision of India caught in the maelstrom of religious exclusivity. Various politicians through the years since independence have sought to create a guiding myth of India's dominant Hindu past, to the chagrin of those who see India in a much larger way, embracing, or least accepting, its diversity as a given.

Among the many consequences of these two competing visions of India's diversity is the response to Christian missions in India. Protestant missionaries have been present in India for over a century, entering through the auspices of the British colonial rule. Their greatest evangelical success has been in working with the "untouchables," now known more respectfully as the Dalit communities. Foreign missions organizations from the Mennonites, Baptists, Lutherans, and many other mission societies worked for decades in these communities, finding a relatively welcome reception among them. This was due in part because their conversion to Christianity meant social liberation: the exclusion they faced in the Hindu caste system was rendered obsolete upon their conversion to Christianity. In theory, Christianity taught them that all are held in equal regard under Christ and that there is no distinction between those from differing caste backgrounds after conversion to Christianity. The reality has naturally been not quite that simple, with caste often manipulating a continuing but latent form of social hierarchy even within Indian Christian culture.

The larger question of tolerance for religious diversity is increasingly being tested in India on several fronts. In parts of the northeast and northwest militant Hindu groups are insisting on a vision of India where Hindu customs and traditions are preserved and strengthened at the expense of other faith traditions. Strident Hindus see the reality of their own country, where over 100 million Muslims exist within its borders (the country with the second highest number of Muslims next to Indonesia) as a threat to their own survival. They likewise see the threat of other religious groups, especially Sikhs and Christians, as anathema to their own interpretation of India's history. The rise of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), a conservative Hindu-based political alliance, is a testament to this increasing frustration by many Hindus. Its rise in the 1980s came at the expense of the long-dominant Indian Congress Party. Though a stagnant economy and a legacy of Congress Party corruption were also involved, the

rise of the BJP as a political force to be reckoned with has given pause to some in India who wonder whether India's tolerance, and even embrace, of diversity is becoming a thing of the past.

The BJP has made a strong call to the nation to embrace its Hindu heritage. While in power in the late 1990s there was a rise in sectarian violence, often against Muslims and Christians, which some attributed to the climate of intolerance fostered by BJP rhetoric.[7] It is within this context that some in the Christian church have found there to be increasing difficulties in India. Even while India claims to be a modern secular nation-state there remains in India a strong sense of one's distinct ethnic and religious identity. While there is official freedom of religion in India, and while the vast majority of diverse Indians live side by side in relatively peace, there is clearly a sense that there is a growing amount of religious and ethnic strife. For example, in the state of Bihar in northeast India there has been a history of discrimination and persecution against some Christians. Churches have been burned and pastors killed for trying to promote Christianity in the region.

For those Christians who have converted from Hinduism there is also an economic dimension to the question of diversity. The government has attempted to deal with the question of inequity in society by setting up preferential education and job options for those on the bottom rungs of society. This has largely been done on the basis of caste in India, with a certain number of university slots and government jobs reserved for Dalits, or untouchables. For those Dalits who have converted to Christianity there becomes an ethical and economic dilemma. When they convert to Christianity they no longer are Dalit, but are instead now free of their downtrodden Hindu identity. But in order to receive a chance for higher education or reserved jobs in government positions they must declare their former identity to still be true—that they are in fact still Hindus. This has led many Christians in rural areas, where poverty is still very endemic, to live a dual life. Officially they are still Hindus, and as such are able to take advantage of government programs designed to help their economic situation. Unofficially, and especially on Sundays, they are Christians, and participate in the life of the village church. Hindus who have not converted regularly complain about these Christians, seeing the duplicity in their actions as a sign of

their lack of commitment to their faith. Local government officials have asked pastors for official church roles, to see who are claiming benefits which they are not officially entitled to receive.

India remains an enigma of diversity. More than one billion people live under the same political and economic system and claim common national identity. Yet within the state there is a dizzying array of differences. The riddle that keeps India together is its embrace of its common dream of what it means to be Indian. One wonders, however, if this collision between colonialism and history can survive the increasing polarization and identity politics so common throughout the world. Today the pride of being Indian has long overcome many serious divisions in society. Whether that pride can continue to surpass the more obvious sense of belonging to a unique religious or ethnic group is a question that will take several decades to answer.

NOTES

[1] Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We: America's Great Debate*, London: Simon and Schuster, 2004.

[2] http://www.international.gc.ca/cfsi-icse/cil-cai/magazine/v04n03/3-2-eng.asp, accessed October 2, 2011

[3] "World Bank Lauds Poverty Reduction," *The Vietnam Investment Review*, November 4, 2002.

[4] World Bank Vietnam, *The Socialist Republic of Vietnam Coffee Sector Report*, June 2004.

[5] "Montagnard Christians in Vietnam," *Human Rights Watch*, http://www.hrw.org/reports/2011/03/30/montagnard-christians-vietnam, accessed October 1, 2011.

[6] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York: Verso, 2006.

[7] http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2008/10/14/tide-of-intolerance.html, accessed October 2, 2011.