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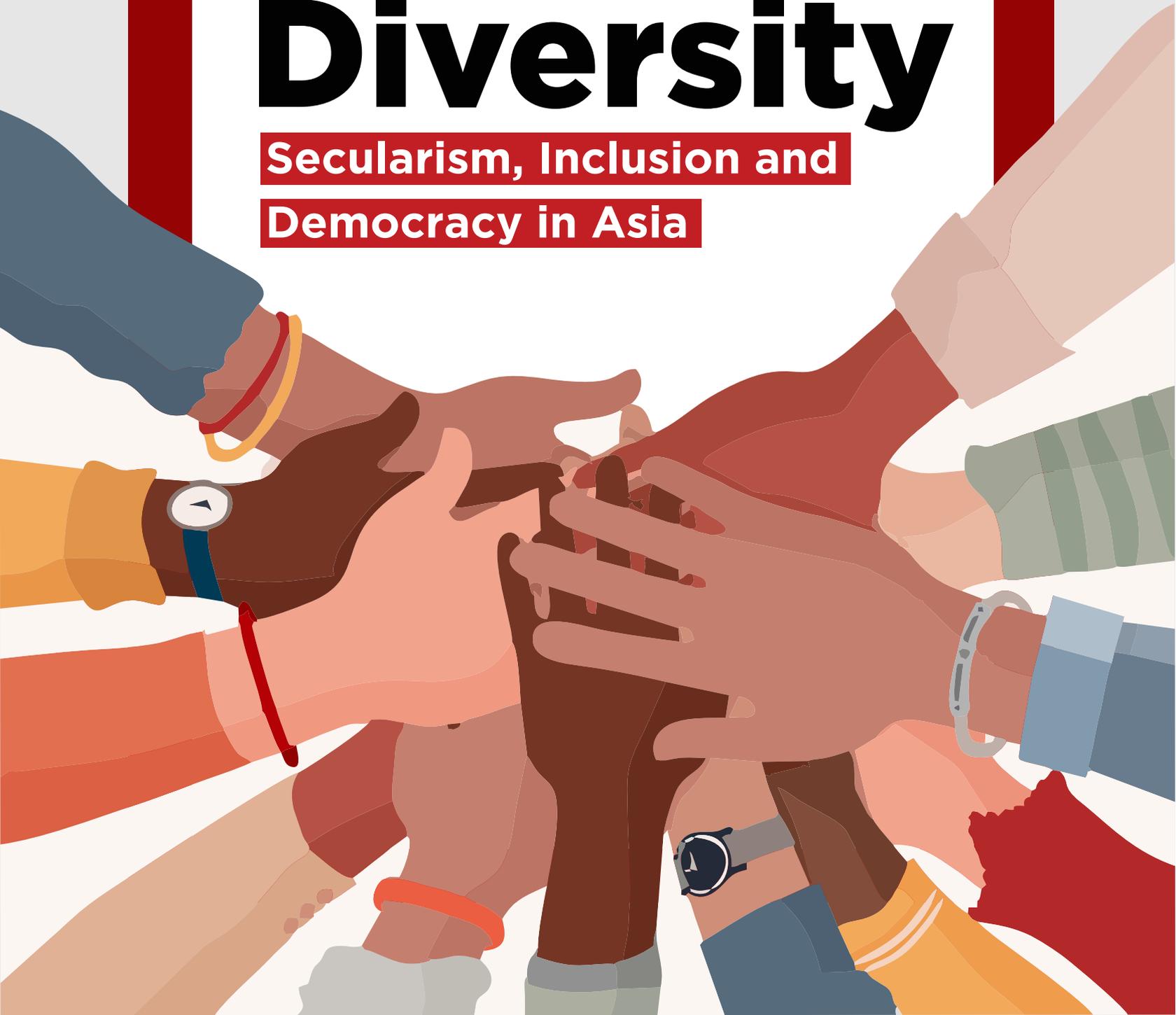
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# Unity in Diversity

Secularism, Inclusion and  
Democracy in Asia





**PRAKSIS** is a semiannual publication of the Network of Social Democracy in Asia (Socdem Asia). It seeks to combine theory and practice by providing cogent analyses to inform the strategy of the progressive movement and help shape the policy direction that should guide the region's governments.

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By: Ruchira Chaturvedi

# Diversity vs. Uniformity

## The Challenge Before India

India is a land of diversities. There are multiple languages, cultures, religions, castes, creeds, cuisines, costumes, etc. Every few hundred kilometers, one will experience a different custom, a different dialect, a different cuisine, a different tradition. A popular Indian saying captures this diversity: '*Kos-kos par badle paani, chaar kos par vaani*' (Just like the taste of water changes every few kilometers, so does the language). And so, there are many strands of Indian identity, all of which have coexisted and flourished together. In that sense, India is a *thali*, which is a dish consisting of a large plate with lots of different bowls containing different dishes (Tharoor 2012). Each bowl has a distinct dish but is ultimately part of the same dish and belongs together on the same plate.

Recognizing India's vast diversities, the country's founders consciously designed both the Constitution and the state to be a neutral arbitrator between India's constituent units — whether religious, caste, regional or ideological. To deepen this democratic engagement with society, the Indian state was stratified at the union, state and local body levels. This is to ensure that India's diversities could engage and actively participate in deciding how the governing institutions of the state could best meet their needs and aspirations. In this imagining, decentralized governance is not just a tool of inclusive governance but also a

mechanism to ensure the equitable distribution of power over access to resources and opportunities between various communities.

It is this carefully designed system that has broken down, because of the imposition of one leader, one ideology and one culture (including, but not limited to the imposition of one language, one religion, etc.). Apart from the fact that this imposition negates the civilizational imagining of India as a plural, cosmopolitan and liberal society, this imposition has fundamentally altered the role of the state. It is no longer a neutral arbitrator between India's constituent units, and it no longer extends goods and services to *all* citizens. Its engagement, delivery of public goods and services, and the application of the rule of law is increasingly contingent on ideological and political conformity. Just to cite two examples, while comedians, activists, academics have been arrested under draconian laws for jokes they did not crack or thoughts they did not even articulate, mob lynchers and inciters of hate and violence have been let off without any penalties simply because they are affiliated with the ruling dispensation.

This is not an isolated case. There are tens of thousands of such cases across the length and breadth of India. No longer do people trust the state to uphold the rule of law or function in a constitutional manner.



Image: www.news18.com

“The state is no longer a neutral arbitrator between India's constituent units, and it no longer extends goods and services to *all* citizens.

This has sparked fissiparous tendencies and millions of Indians have erupted in sustained protests on various issues. For example, faced with the threat of being disenfranchised by the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), Muslims across India protested for months on end. Similarly, faced with three controversial farm laws that threatened to destroy their livelihoods, farmers erupted in protests for over a year. Likewise, students across India have been involved in multiple protests to resist draconian laws imposed on them because of their ideological orientation and which deprive them of scholarships, hostels and future opportunities. Furthermore, constitutional guarantees as well as statutory rights and protections for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs)

have been methodically undermined. Various demands have been raised by members of the ruling dispensation to remove or review caste-based reservations, that were supposedly meant to undo the “graded inequalities” of the past (Press Trust of India 2019).

Similarly, the state refused to stand by a judicial challenge for a law meant to safeguard Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (STs) against atrocities and even slashed the budget for the welfare of SCs and STs by over 50 percent (Raju and Deshpande). Muslims and SCs are also being constantly targeted in the name of 'cow protection' and their livelihoods are under attack. The state has also misused investigative agencies to harass political and ideological opponents.



Image: www.trtworld.com

**“Non-state actors have lynched, raped, murdered and even rioted against Muslims, Scheduled Castes, women and ideological minorities.**

Apart from actively using the law and government apparatuses to suppress India's constituent units, the state has also ignored the spate of violence unleashed by non-state actors. Widely acknowledged to be affiliated with the ruling dispensation, non-state actors have lynched, raped, murdered and even rioted against Muslims, SCs, women and ideological minorities. In each of these incidents, the state didn't just ignore these crimes (Press Trust of India 2019; see also Mashal et al. 2022) but valorized the perpetrators as heroes (*The Times of India* 2018; see also *The Wire* 2016). By doing so, the ruling dispensation has methodically circumscribed and undermined every institution meant to hold it accountable, whether it is the Parliament, the judiciary, the media, the information commissions, and even the opposition parties.

It has been argued that the indirect effect of all these is the undermining of the state's sovereignty, which no longer holds a monopoly on violence — i.e., a Weberian state (Deshpande 2017). This is a phenomenon that is understudied, but it is extremely dangerous for India's social contract

that the state has partially outsourced its monopoly on violence. It could be argued that this outsourcing is a deliberate attempt to accord primacy to the ruling dispensation's ideological affiliates (the Sangh Parivar) over social and cultural matters. This will have grave consequences for India.

Much like during the freedom struggle, the governing institutions of the state (the political executive, the police, the judiciary, the media, the investigative agencies, etc.) are being pitted against India's diversities, especially religious and ideological minorities. This has already been characterized as an unspoken dictatorship. The question is, how can progressive forces alter the status quo given that the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against them?

First of all, any hegemonic force can only be defeated through guerrilla tactics. In fructifying this, India's diversity is its biggest strength. Every caste, creed, and ideological minority in different regions is uniquely placed to challenge and destabilize the homogenizing blitzkrieg that we face. The electoral victories of Congress Party (Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan), *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (Tamil Nadu), Trinamool Congress (West Bengal), as well as the victories of the farmers and anti-CAA and NRC protestors demonstrate that taking on the behemoth normatively and in a hyper-localized manner yields dividends. To do this, progressives will have to forge alliances with each other, create a meta-ideological narrative that is premised on India's civilizational ethos of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the World is one family) and proffer an inspiring alternative vision. They need to acknowledge that their greatest strength lies in their diversity. What they, therefore, need to do is strategically leverage their unique perspectives and approaches to become more than the sum of their individual parts. India's history is rife with examples where the same approach has been used to unseat dictatorial conquerors.

What progressives, especially in the political parties, civil society and the media, must urgently do is to pass the baton to those who have the fire in them to disrupt the status quo and are sufficiently well equipped to counter the tactics, techniques and stratagems of the ruling dispensation. It is no longer business as usual, since the norms and protocols that shaped politics before 2014 no longer exists. It is a whole new world, and it requires a whole new set of stakeholders. This is especially pertinent given 65 percent of India's population is below 28 years of age (while the average age of a Parliamentarian in India is 57 years old).

In the national interest, progressives will have to bite the bullet. ■

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