

# Cultural Diversity, Religious Syncretism and People of India: An Anthropological Interpretation

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## Abstract

*Ethnic origins, religions, and languages are the major sources of cultural diversity. India is a country incredible for its diversity; biological and cultural. However, the process of synthesis and integration has been extensively at work in most parts of India. Indeed ethnic identities and even the culture traits of Indian people have never been frozen in time or in space, they have been in state of flux. Though each group or community has a distinctive identity and ethos of its own, it does not exist in a social vacuum. Rather, it forms part of an extended and dynamic network. The sharing of space, regional ethos and cultural traits cut across ethnic and sectarian differences and bind the people together. Thus, we witness a firm balancing between cultural diversity and syncretism pervading the foundation of Indian civilization. Indeed by extension, such cultural phenomena are observable, to lesser or greater degree, in the entire sub continental – civilizational arena.*

*The preexisting sub continental - civilizational continuum historically includes and encompasses ethnic diversity and admixture, linguistic heterogeneity as well as fusion, as well as synthesis in customs, behavioural patterns, beliefs and rituals. In the present era of growing cultural condensation, syncretism-synthesis is fast emerging as a prevailing event. This paper explores, by discussing ethnographic examples from different parts of India and beyond, the multi-dimensional and many layered contexts of reciprocally shared cultural realms and inter-religious and synthesized cultural formations, including common religious observances. Cases pertaining to adherents of major and minor religions, including Dalits and Adivasis are dealt with to determine the major trends in the sphere of syncretism. This paper is an attempt at building a broad perspective of diversity, convergence and dissemination of cultural practices and religious beliefs, highlighting the patterns and processes through which religions and cultures on both sides have been creatively blended.*

I

Ethnic origins, religions, and languages are the major sources of cultural diversity. India is a country incredible for its diversity, biological and cultural. It is the natural resources that attracted to the subcontinent many streams of people at different times, from different directions; bringing together a great diversity of human genes and human cultures. Thus the bulk of the Indian population represents racial admixture in varying degrees. Unlike several other lands where the dominant human cultures have tended to absorb or eliminate others, in India the tendency has been to nurture diversity, which has been favoured by the diversity of the country's ecological regimes [Gadgil and Guha, 1992]. Powerful kingdoms and enumerable dynasties, contributed to the shaping of India's cultural regions. An important source of diversity among the people of India is the cultural identity of particular communities and regions. Despite maintaining distinct identities several *jatis*, sects, and communities have organic links with other segments of the population of the region, which develops a cultural persona over time.

Indian civilization has had a pluralistic character from the start. The pluralistic and composite ethos of Indian civilization, which began evolving during the Vedic period, was supplemented by the rise of Buddhism and Jainism, and was further reinforced during the early medieval period, which witnessed the early zenith in the Bhakti Movement. This composite tradition attained primacy during the late medieval period. Linguistic and philological evidences demonstrate the incorporation and adaptation of regional features into the mainstream of Sanskrit culture distinctly. Certain kinds of echo formations, which are characteristic of the Austric family of languages, found their way into the Indo-Aryan speeches. The presence of non-Aryan elements, especially Proto-Dravidian, in vocabulary, syntax and phonetics in

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Vedic Sanskrit is now fairly well established. The later Vedic texts indicate an even greater admixture of non-Aryan words.

The Vedic society was internally differentiated and it was pluralistic. It was a synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan, including tribal elements. Since its very beginning Hinduism has been a "mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas". Most records reveal that totemic deities such as fish, tortoise and boar were made into incarnations of Vishnu. Shiva was formed by a fusion of the Vedic Rudra with some non-Aryan deity. Shiva in its tribal and folk form is observable in several parts of peninsular India, including plains of northeast India, particularly in Assam -north-Bengal regions. Enough material exists which confirm the fact that Brahmanism immersed the deities of tribespeople and 'low-castes'. The popularity of the saga of Jagannath cult in Orissa and that of Vitthala in Maharashtra testify this. Similarly, serpent worship and phallus worship, which later found their way into classical Hinduism, were taken over from local communities. Unorthodox sects and cults, such as Shakta and the Tantric tradition, incorporated several esoteric features from indigenous, including tribal cultures (Momin 1996, Singh 2003, Das 2003). Thus, some interrelated critical foundations of unity may be delineated at the pan-Indian level. We may categorize them first as the Sanskritic Hinduism at the social structural levels and through a system of pilgrimage centres. Then we may consider a composite cultural tradition born out of the protracted interaction and exchange between Hindus and Muslims and adherents of other faiths through the length and breadth of the country. In this context one may notice social reforms and humanistic tendency as exemplified in the Sufi and Bhakti Movements. The secular-democratic philosophy, which is enshrined in the Constitution of the country and a Gandhian vision of Indianness, which was well founded during freedom movement, are manifestation and demonstration of our composite culture in modern India.

Since the late medieval period India witnessed a creative synthesis of Hindu and Islamic civilizations and thus grew a composite tradition, a pluralistic synthesis of the Indo-Islamic tradition including inter-faith convergence. There are two interrelated dimensions of the Indo-Islamic tradition. On the one hand, it manifested itself in syncretistic traditions of music, art, literature and architecture, and on the other, it found expression in folklore, dress patterns, food habits, names and surnames. If we turn to rural landscape we discover the distribution of material traits at the regional level indicating a certain complementarities in that it is marked by both local differentiation and interpenetration. Not only that a cluster or complex of material traits at the regional level unites different sections and communities (Bose, 1961), different communities have brought with them often innovations into regions of their adoption and internalized them effectively (Momin 1996, Singh 1985, 1994), though a proper mapping of same is unlikely to be accomplished shortly. This phenomenon is seldom subjected to a critical examination in a diachronic framework anywhere.

Language is an important attribute of a population, and has great relevance and significance in a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic country like India. The language literature generated by census over the last more than one hundred years has thrown much light on the ethnic and the linguistic characteristics of the population. The total number of mother tongues returned in 1961 and 1971 censuses was around 3,000, in 1981 around 7,000 and in 1991, it was more than 10,000. Tribal languages cannot be dismissed as dialects; many of them have a growing literature and at least two have their own scripts. Their multiplicity is baffling. Consider the case of Nagaland, formerly a district but now a State. It has as many as twenty different languages. The Kohima station of All India Radio used to broadcast in twenty-five languages, besides Nagamese, the lingua-franka.

The pan-Indian, civilizational dimension of cultural pluralism and syncretism encompasses ethnic diversity and admixture, linguistic heterogeneity as well as fusion, and variations as well as synthesis in customs, behavioural patterns, beliefs and rituals. The process of synthesis and integration has been extensively at work at the regional level (Das 2003). Though each group or community has a distinctive identity and ethos of its own, it does not exist in a social vacuum. Rather, it forms part of an extended and dynamic network. Often, interaction, exchange and integration characterize inter-community relations. The sharing of space, regional ethos and cultural traits cut across religions and sectarian differences and bind the local people together. It is now revealed and established more vividly those cultural

and religious practices in diverse eco-cultural zones of India have historically converged and people shared common traditions extensively. Thus, we witness a fine balancing between pluralism and syncretism pervading the base of Indian culture. While enough literature exists on this aspect of cultural manifestation in historical writings, not much is known about the religious syncretism and its stretch in contemporary India.

## II

Hardly a central theory in anthropology, "syncretism" has recently re-emerged as a valuable tool for understanding the complex dynamics of ethnicity, interconnectedness and post-modernism. In the present era of increasing cultural condensation, syncretism is a prevailing event. The sociologists and social anthropologists have thrown much light on the variety of religious forms through their studies of belief systems, rituals, symbols and meaning all over the world but they have not paid adequate attention to the phenomenon of syncretism, though we find a few exceptions (Raymond Firth, 1970:87). In anthropological literature the Cargo cult has been described as a form of syncretism. Cargo cults are essentially syncretistic, blending the "Christian doctrine" with "aboriginal beliefs" (Worsley, 1990). Anthropologists have also included the blend of African, Native American, and Roman Catholic saints and deities in Caribbean "voodoo" cults as instances of syncretism. Though the process of syncretism provides an independent field of study, it was nevertheless ignored by the anthropologists and when discussed it was imperfectly included within "the study of acculturation" (Kottak 1991:407).

Acculturation results when groups of individuals come into continuous firsthand contact, (with) "changes in the original culture patterns" of either or both groups (Redfield, Linton and Herskovites 1936: 149). In much of anthropological studies these days the acculturation concept is stated to be replete with shortcomings. Indeed in different societies the pre-change culture traits, culture patterns and religious customs survive in greater or lesser degree and therefore "acculturation" persists in such societies only as an incomplete and imperfect process.

Shaw and Stewart (1994), have observed that within anthropology, where notions of the 'purity' of traditions have not had much credibility for some time, syncretism has been ascribed a neutral, and often positive, significance. Recently, there has been criticism of concepts such as 'cultural purity', wholeness or 'authenticity'. In post-modern-anthropology in which syncretic processes are considered basic not only to religion and ritual but to 'the predicament of culture' (Clifford 1988: 14-15) identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere groups improvise local performances from (re-) collected pasts. Organic culture (is indeed) reconceived as inventive process or creolized 'interculture' (Clifford 1988: 14-15).

Syncretism has always been part of the negotiation of identities and hegemonies in situations such as conquest, trade, migration, religious dissemination and intermarriage. The growth of a western-dominated world economic system, however, was accompanied by the growth of a Western-dominated world cultural system (Hannerz 1987, 1992), in which processes of capitalism and cultural hegemony transformed not only relations of power and production but also experiences of personhood, of the body, gender, time, space and religion. The appropriation of totalizing and globally spread processes such as capitalism, commodity consumption and 'rationalist' models of development is often inseparable from the appropriation of totalizing and globally spread religions... (Shaw and Stewart 1994). Van der Veer argues that there are debates over syncretism in societies in which identities are defined through religion. Since India combines these by being a secular state in which religious affiliation partially defines cultural identity, it makes sense that syncretism and multiculturalism are often equated in Hindu political discourse (1994).

Hendry (1999; 12) has observed that in complex societies, people have come to live with apparently conflicting worldviews increasingly. In Japan a sick person simultaneously consults a diviner as well as a doctor, and may also visit a shrine or temple to pray for recovery (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984). Religious movements and plethora of religious ideas, in varied historical phases, motivated the people and brought them closer towards numerous religious

cults, sects, reform movements and diverse belief systems (Das, 2003). The underlying assumption seems to be that people need solace and assurance about fulfilment of all their wishes ultimately; hence they solicit refuge and sanctification of their expectations through their trust on varied religious and sectarian dogmas. Syncretism as this author has elucidated elsewhere is a matter of degree, some societies have blended prominent aspects of two religious dogmas, in others only certain aspects of the original or adopted religion/sect has been retained and internalized. It is shown that syncretism pertains to a commingled religious sequence whose ill-defined frontier shapes its fundamental collective character (Das 2003a). Mingling of exterior religious beliefs with pre-existing religious belief of people may not be regarded as an aberration. It is also not a system within system but the survival and situationally determined growth of multifaceted religious beliefs systems existing as a rational order.

### III

Ethnic identities and culture traits of Indian people have never been frozen in time or in space. They have been in state of flux. This and similar processes may be determined by re-interpreting and re-evaluating the data of People of India (PoI) project. Based on data collected under the countrywide People of India (PoI) project (1985-1992) the Anthropological Survey of India had compiled initially a list of 6748 communities. After checking them in field, finally 4635 communities were accepted for study. These communities were studied by 500 scholars in 3581 villages and 1011 towns, spread in 421 districts and 91 cultural regions. Information was collected for 775 cultural traits. For comparison, data gathered under another project of the Survey, Material Traits Survey (1959-61), supervised by Nirmal Kumar Bose, was used, as far as possible. As regards ethnic/cultural/linguistic identity, PoI data revealed that people perceive their distribution at regional (state), inter-regional and national level. More than one hundred communities, including Nagas, Mizos and many others, perceive their distribution across international borders. We found that among all People of India, 16.2 per cent are S.C.s, 13.7 per cent S.T.s and about 70.1 per cent other communities, which included OBCs, and minorities. Nine religious categories (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Tribal Religions) are the faiths proclaimed by Indian people.

The people of India identify themselves through various markers. The major markers are male dress, female dress, male shawl, female shawl, turban, male headgear, female headgear, male ornaments, female ornaments, male body marking, female body marking, male tattooing, female tattooing, flag and emblem. Every second community identifies itself as such. A flag is the identification marker for 41 communities spread over 17 states. North-east India has a large number of the communities with female dress as the identification marker. Central India uses tattooing more frequently as a marker. Ornaments used by females as identification markers occur sporadically in most parts of India. Significantly, turban and female headgear in Jammu and Kashmir and male and female shawls in Manipur and Nagaland are important identification markers (Das and Imchen 1994).

India's population is largely concentrated along the major rivers or in the coastal belts. Parts of the hilly terrain of the north-eastern states, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and northern parts of Uttar Pradesh have a thin population density. In the coastal area a large number of communities have fishing as their primary occupation. The Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs are markedly absent in coastal areas. A few communities live in the high rainfall and low rainfall zone. Agriculture flourishes in this zone. The snowfall zone of the north-western Himalayas is mainly inhabited by Buddhists, and by Hindu and Muslim communities which comprise pastoral nomads. It is in this entire belt that we witness strong processes of syncretism. The Arabian Sea group of islands has Muslim populations such as Manikfan, Thakurfan, Koya, Malmi, Melacheri, Raveri and Thakru, while the islands in the Bay of Bengal have Negrito and Mongoloid components in their tribal populations, such as Jarwa, Onge, Sentinelese, Shompen, Nicobarese and others-besides a very large population of immigrants (Singh 1996).

A community is internally divided into a number of units, viz. lineage, clan, gotra, phratry and moiety. The existence of social divisions is almost universal, particularly among the scheduled castes (99.9 per cent), scheduled tribes (97.0 per cent) and to a slightly lower extent among the 'other communities' (96.4 per cent). Clan organisation is almost ubiquitous. About two-thirds of the Indian communities have clans, including 115 Muslim communities. Generally equated with local notions of gotra, biradari etc. clan organisation exists in almost all states but is reported on a lesser scale in the states of Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala. A clan is either patrilineal or matrilineal. Traditionally, the Onge and Jarwa have been divided into a number of bands. Lineage is a characteristic feature of all categories of communities and all occupational groups in rural and urban areas. A nuclear family is the most widely prevalent type of family (69 per cent) in India. In spite of the responsibilities shouldered by women, their status among two-thirds of the total Indian communities is perceived as being low as compared to that of men. Most of the tribal and Buddhist communities do not accord women a low status (Singh 1992(2002), 1996).

#### IV

There is probably more diversity of religions in India than any where on the earth. Apart from having representations from almost all the major religions of the world, India was also the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. It was also the home to one of the oldest religions of the world, Zoroastrianism. While India is the cradle of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, Islam too has a long tradition of existence. So also Judaism, Christianity and Baha'ism have their followers in India. As early as by the 12th century, India began to have Islamic bases as wave after wave of Islamic groups came down to India. And the confluence of the two religions gradually produced a cultural syncretism, which is exemplified by the Urdu language – an amalgam of Persian and Hindi. Out of the fusion of the two cultures arose new religious denominations characterizing the Hindu-Islamic interface. The best example of this synthesis is the Ahmediyas – a sect that abides by the Koran and the Prophet, yet practicing idolatry, which is a decidedly Hindu custom. Ahmediyas in some areas are not recognised as “proper Muslims” (personal communication Dr. S. I. Ahmed) because of their syncretic traditions, but then we have several Muslim communities in West Bengal who are not derecognized as Muslims, even though they continue to worship of Hindu idols, besides following Islam (personal communication Dr. Saumitra Barua). Inter-faith convergence which is revealed here has its parallels in other parts of India ( for regional studies of Muslims of India see Roy and Rizvi 2003). Christianity came to India with St. Thomas who came to India in 50 A.D. and brought the teachings of Jesus along with him – even before the Messiah was adopted by Europe. Contacts between India and other cultures have led to the spread of Indian religions throughout the world, resulting in the extensive influence of Indian thought and practice on Southeast and East Asia in ancient times and, more recently, in the diffusion of Indian religions to Europe and North America.

In the anthropological study of religion in India, the major emphasis has been on descriptive account of religious customs and their association with ethnic groups, including the tribes, the themes of purity/pollution in relation to caste system, descriptive concepts relating to religious phenomena and the modernization processes. Milton Singer, who along with Robert Redfield and Surajit Sinha, studied the 'anthropology of Indian civilization', states that the Great Tradition of Indian civilization may be identified with what Srinivas calls "Sanskritic Hinduism" which has an all-India 'spread' and to which Monier-Williams called "Brahmanism" . Singer also used Srinivas's concepts of "All-India Hinduism", "Peninsular Hinduism", "Regional Hinduism" and "Local Hinduism" in his various studies. Srinivas's "Sanskritization" model through which lower castes and tribal groups are brought into the Hindu fold with elements from the Sanskritic tradition of Hinduism (Srinivas 1952, 1968), is clubbed together by Singer with model of "Hindu method of tribal absorption" (N. K. Bose 1953). Singer uses the term “popular Hinduism”, to include within it numerous beliefs and religious practices observed among tribal people, including the worship of numerous godlings, animal sacrifice, witchcraft and magic (Singer 1972: 45). 'Tribal religions' indeed remained essential element of Hinduism in the writings of American and Indian anthropologists belonging to Chicago school, and this tendency largely survives. Singer as per his own admission is indeed not sure about the basis and persistence of "Lower Level" popular Hinduism. Singer quotes Surajit Sinha (1959) who

says that "the culture of tribal India represents a "folk" dimension of the "Little Tradition" of Hinduism, while the culture of Hindu peasantry represents "a mixture of folk elements with elements from the greater and Sanskritic tradition of Hinduism" (Emphasis added, Singer 1972:46). With new data that are with us now it is felt that this whole perspective indeed calls for a reappraisal.

Little over a century ago, Alfred Lyall (1899) wrote that 'Brahmanism' is all over India a necessary first stage for the outlying tribes towards Indian civilization or admission to the citizenship of the 'Great Hindu community'. He pertinently stressed that such movement very rarely implied any ethical change, or even a formal abandonment of one ritual for another, it is usually a rapid sliding into Hindu customs and an attempt at social assimilation. Alfred's ideas were seminal which were picked up and explored in regional situations by Indian ethnographers later. Alfred's polemic was, however, part of a debate whether or not Brahmanism was a proselytizing religion, which in turn would justify a similar role for Christianity in India. Of the four major modes which H.H.Risley (1892 p.242) proposed as part of Hinduization process were "a tribe or its section enrolled as a caste, in the ranks of Hinduism" and "a tribe is gradually converted to Hinduism without losing its tribal designation or abandoning completely its tribal deities". In fact perusal of Sir Alfred Lyall's (1899) description shows that Lyall had already spoken about them. Kulke has made important contribution in this regard, particularly by examining the Orissa situation Indologically. At first he narrates the stories of 'tribal' deities who become ishtadevatas or chosen tutelary deities of tribal chiefs, in Hindu-tribal frontier areas. It is this intended intermixture of various levels within one cult, which makes these deities so important in socio-religious context---provided this broader context is studied (Kulke 1993, 114-115). Indeed our report on Binjhal Zamindari system and religious syncretism in western Orissa, awaiting completion of writing, deals with this very issue critically.

In a recent review, K.S. Singh (2003) discards the views of the Orientalists and anthropologists, who described 'tribal religion' in terms of a set of 'primitive values' surviving in Hindu religion, and the sureness of tribal religion being swallowed up by major religions, acclaim equally made by colonial scholars and Indian anthropologists alike. In his view nothing has happened. It was indeed J. H. Hutton, an administrator-anthropologist, who was the first to have reconstructed tribal religion as an integrated whole. He is credited rightly with having liberated tribal religion from the waste paper basket of 'animism', identified the parameters of its autonomy and the range of its linkages with Hinduism. But like most census officials he too was prone to describe tribal religion as the "surplus material not yet built into the temple of Hinduism"(Hutton, J. H. Census of India, 1931, Vol. I, p. 399). Indeed W. G. Archer had at one stage blamed the Hindu enumerators for returning tribals as Hindus, and pointed out that the census questionnaire was even skewed to achieve this. One may speculate why this was not contained. Singh however adds a corollary: Was this because the census enumerators were only recording a process? Singh opines that many elements of tribal religion are as alive, even vibrant as ever. As studies have recently shown tribal religion has not lost its distinct identity in spite of its long years of interaction with Hinduism and Christianity. It has maintained its system of beliefs and practices including propitiation of spirits, magic and witchcraft, its priesthood and its calendar of fairs and festivals, which reinforce the tribals' sense of identity. Recent trends even suggest the revival of many of pristine elements of tribal religion by those who have gone out of its fold (Troisi, 1979, Singh 1985, also see Das, 1989, 1983, 2003). In fact branding variously pre-existing religions of tribal communities, as "essential ingredients of Hinduism" will be a serious negation of empirical findings. Several studies have revealed that tribespeople in many parts of India closely resemble peasant societies; even though they exist outside Hindu social order. Continually pre-existing multi-religious, multi-linguistic and multi-ethnic situations in India demand more value-free conceptualizations and objective models. Old theories indeed seem to serve limited purpose in our understanding of multicultural Indian situation today. What indeed lie behind India's multitudinousness are a variously and continuously interactive process of discoverable interculturalism and a vibrant process of syncretism shaping our composite culture. This will be the main thrust of our argument below.

On account of various levels of culture-contact, adoption and incorporation, the tribes of India had often borrowed cultural traits and religious practices of various sects and major religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity. H.H. Risley had noted long ago in 1873 that the tribes all over India are gradually being transformed into castes. However, the tribespeople were never swallowed up by any cultural or religious adoption/incorporation. They indeed perpetually adhered to original religion. Native religious specialists also continued to operate in such societies. This author has observed this fact in vast parts of central and eastern India where tribes live in abundance (Das, 1988). The same fact was also noted in Ahom society in upper Assam regions; where the Hinduization process hardly operated in entirety (Das and Gupta, 1982). Indeed several reformist Bhagat movements and sects such as Mahima dharma, which have large tribal supporters, could never erode the native religious beliefs of the tribes. Eschmann and other scholars (Eschmann 1986, Das 2003) have spoken of several stages in which tribes could be placed in terms of their cultural or religious adoption/incorporation. Eschmann (1986) has made a valid point that Brahmanical incorporation of tribal deities and "Cults" occurred more frequently in post-Buddhist times. In fact no notable research is yet available about Buddhist-tribal culture contacts. Many western Orissa tribes exhibit remnants of Buddhism, assimilated within tribal religion. This author has done fieldwork recently in a tribal dominated village of Ganiapali (actually Gyan Palli), in Bargarh district of western Orissa, where excavated Buddha idols, since their recovery, are being worshiped by the tribal priests, mixing tribal ritualistic procedure with utterances of Buddhist shlokas, as recorded by us. In medieval times when Bhakti cults came to gain ground a process of Hinduization came to occupy centre-stage. Brahmans, often with considerable economic interest, developed Rajput myths for tribal chiefs, and offered them Singh title of Khatriyahood. Slowly tribal royal deities were also absorbed, transformed and rechristened as Hinduistic deities. Thus the Samalei tribal deity has been accepted into the Hindu pantheon and renamed as Samaleshwari in Sambalpur. The fact remains however that tribal priesthood associated with Samalei could never be eroded completely. What is more the tribals in whole of western Orissa continue to propitiate Samalei tribal deity in typical tribal manner involving animal sacrifice. At the same time today when the ritual model is hardly important in any part of India, the Binjhal Zamindars have done away with "Singh" title or no value is attached to such title. The Binjhal today strictly prefer to remain attached to their old tribal position. Tribal priesthood has not only been reinstated- old tribal festivals and rituals are being enacted and celebrated in greater zeal, and even caste Hindus endorse them and participate in them. It is in situations like this that we clearly see a syncretistic phenomenon in operation, particularly looking from the tribal angle. As we discussed above there are various stages in which the process of syncretism is observable empirically. In regional set up such process may look static trend, though it may prove to be bendable, when analysed thoroughly. In some of the best ethnographies we are told of an "intermediary stage" in which tribal societies are placed. This is actually presupposing and accepting uni-laterally a "straight attainment of a pathway" of culture change (say Hinduization), which was sadly often proclaimed as 'acculturation' (Das 2003). This is an arbitrary and prejudiced attitude. More critical studies indeed have shown 'Hinduization' to operate only ineffectually, incompletely and often haphazardly, in most cases. For Eschmann "Hinduization" acts (restrictively) only on the level of Hindu village cults that is in such village communities, where tribal groups constantly live together with caste Hindus.

The next decisive stage of Hinduization is reached, when an aboriginal cult (either from the intermediate stage of a village cult, or directly from the tribal level) becomes incorporated into a Hindu temple. Such a "temple" is distinguished by three characteristics, daily performance of puja, recognition by all castes and more than local importance". Eschmann further says, "The temple level may be a definite stage of Hinduism, but not necessarily the end of the process of Hinduization .... one may identify the foci with the main stages of Hinduization – tribal cult, tribal cult with elements of Hinduization, Hindu village cults, temples of sub regional importance, and great temples of regional importance". Eschmann has rightly observed that tribal goddesses are often identified with Durga, who continues to accept animal sacrifice and assures fertility, even though they retain their original tribal names. Only at a second stage we see a Brahman called to impart the prana pratistha – mantra. Mangala, Pitabali, Hindula, Baunthi and Stambhesvari are such "incorporated" tribal goddess of Orissa. Stambhesvari has existed as a tribal goddess since about 500 AD. She was tutelary deity of the Sulki and Bhanja dynasties and widely worshipped in West Orissa (Kulke 1975). Stambhesvari or

Khambhesvari (in Oriya) "lady of the post", is represented and worshipped through stones only. In the shrine at Bamur, Khambesvari is represented by a simple stone worshipped daily by a Dehuri priest of Suddha, a tribe. In the neighbouring culture area of Chhattisgarh this author, after prolonged observations, found that: "---the tribal priest Baiga not only ministers to the "Twenty One Village Deities", he also handles the cases of the illness. Baiga and such other shamans, Guniya and Ojha, who form the principal category of priest-sorcerer/shaman in Chhattisgarh, simultaneously guide caste Hindus and tribespeople. If, at interactional level, the tribal and Sanskritic elements were to be considered, than it may be surmised that 'Sanskritization' had scarcely begun even in the past in this region, where tribalization process remained unbroken (Das 1988, 2001). K.S.Singh has tried to see the vital tribal presence even in established hubs of major religions. He says while the spread and influence of Vaishnav ideas upon the tribal societies is better known, the roles of tribes in major shrines of India are less known. Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh, Guruvayur in Kerala, Kamakhya in Assam and Jagannath in Orissa, are important centres of Hinduism and which have emerged as symbols of cultural identity at the regional (and national) level, in which local communities including tribes are involved.

## VI

According to Rajani Kothari more than any political system, it was the civilizational framework, which provided the unity amongst the people of the land in the past. Sharing of space and culture traits indeed has been an ancient phenomenon in India, mainly on account of internal movements, migrations, pilgrimages and regular cultural – exchanges. People visited sacred centres all over the country and thus a process of continuous interaction operated continually at the grassroots level in all historical phases. Regular exchange and sharing of cultural and religious traits, thoughts and ethos contributed to cultural synthesis. Based on data collected under People of India project, which is mentioned above, Singh has described Indian society as a "honeycomb" in which communities are engaged in vibrant interaction, sharing space, ethos, and cultural traits (Singh 1992 (2002): 111).

The Pol survey has identified 91 cultural regions all over India. Culture regions are not shown to be static units but are in a state of continuous flux. What is significant about this study is pinpointed identification of communities in terms of their multiple adoptions- adaptations of linguistic, religious and other cultural traits in a given 'culture' region'. Andhra Pradesh has the largest number of Hindu communities (340) followed by Tamil Nadu (299), undivided M.P. (285) and Orissa (259). Gujarat has largest number of Muslim communities (87) followed by undivided U.P. (70) and J & K (59). T.N. has 65 Christian communities followed by Andhra (29) and Manipur (23). Even though Pol has revealed existence of greater adherents of 'tribal religions' in Eastern India, viz. Orissa(58), Bihar/Jharkhand(46) and W.B.(41), in other parts of India too there are followers of 'tribal religions' often included under major locally prevailing religions. In North-East (Das 2003), for example, the 'tribal' Hindu/Christian and Buddhist groups continue to hold old tribal religious beliefs. Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh have the largest number of Jain communities; Punjab, Chandigarh and Delhi have the largest concentration of Sikh communities; whereas Buddhist groups are mostly located in north-east India, viz. Arunachal (18) and Assam (11). A number of communities have segments, which follow different religions. For example, there are Khasi segments following a tribal religion, Christianity and Islam. There are the Jat Sikhs and Jat Muslims too (Singh 1996). Among religious groups the followers of Sikhism (36.2 per cent) widely perceive their distribution at an inter-regional level, followed by those of Hinduism (22.0 per cent), Islam (21.1 per cent), Jainism (15.0 per cent) and Christianity (13.9 per cent), and so on. Among occupational groups the most widespread at an inter-regional level are those pursuing business and trade (23.7 per cent) (Singh 1996). Communities following the Buddhist faith have the highest number of communities (17.2 per cent), which perceive them transnationally. They are followed by Muslim (7 per cent), Christian (5.6 per cent) 'other religions' groups (4.0 per cent) and so on. Most of the communities are from the northeastern part of India. Mizoram has the highest percentage of communities (47.1 per cent) which identify themselves transnationally followed by Sikkim (44 per cent), Tripura (34.6 per cent) and Meghalaya (11.1 per cent). Some of the communities which identify themselves across the international

boundaries are: Arab, Shia Imami Ismaili, Sindhi of Andhra Pradesh; Manipuri, Bengali of Assam; Pathan, Sheikh, Syed of Bihar; Gurkha/Gorkha of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh; Chinese, Christian of Himachal Pradesh; Afghan, Syed of Jammu and Kashmir; Faqir of Karnataka; Sikh, Bohra of Maharashtra; Syrian Christian, Rajput of Rajasthan; Bhotia, Lepcha, Sarki (Nepali) of Sikkim; Latin Catholics, Khoja of Tamil Nadu; Bhotia, Irani of Uttar Pradesh; Armenian, Syed, Chinese of West Bengal; Indo-French, Indo-Vietnamese of Pondicherry and so on. Gujarat; Ahir, Jogi/Jugi of Haryana; Jain, Acharaj of Himachal Pradesh. Jati Purana, which deals with the origin and distribution of communities, exists in respect of one-sixth of the communities; most of whom profess Jainism or Hinduism.

Most of the communities of India are migrants who recall their immigration in folklore or history. Our data on migration is based on peoples' memory of their movement, whether it was short distance or long distance (Singh 1996). The minorities generally profess Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and 'other religions'. In almost every state one religious group or the other has a minority status. The Hindus are a minority in Nagaland and Jammu and Kashmir, and the Sikhs are a minority in most of the states/union territories, except Punjab and Chandigarh. The Anglo-Indians, i.e. people of Indian through British parentage, are distributed mostly at urban centres. They are all Christians. Muslims are mostly engaged in organized and unorganized services, as also in business (Singh 1996).

Each major religion is sub-divided along the lines of religious doctrines, sects, and cults. This is true both of indigenous religion – Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism – and of introduced religions, especially Islam and Christianity. The Hindus are broadly divided into Shaivite (worshippers of Shiva), Vaishnav (worshippers of Vishnu and his incarnations), Shakta (worshippers of the Mother goddess in various manifestations), and Smarta (those who worship all three-Shiva, Vishnu, and the Mother Goddess). Even among them there are sub-divisions based on doctrinal differences and details of ritual. Sects and cults add to the complexity of Hinduism. The Indian Muslims are divided broadly into the Sunni and Shia communities. The majority of Indian Sunnis follow the Hanifi School. The Shias have their own Imami law. In addition, there are fourteen religious orders, of which the Chisti order, the Suhrawardi order, the Shattari order, the Qadiri order, and the Naqsbandi order are important. Indian Christians are divided into Roman Catholics and Protestants and into many denominational churches. Though Sikhism is a synthesizing religion that emphasizes egalitarianism, it has not been able to undo some of the less wholesome aspects of the "caste" system. For example, the lower Jatis converted to Sikhism are known as Mazhbis; they live in separate hamlets. Khushwant Singh, the eminent writer on Sikh history and himself a Sikh, has observed that equality within the community has never meant marriage across traditional caste lines. The Jat, the Kshatriya, the Brahman, and the artisan castes continue to have separate identities and are still endogamous. Buddhism was spread widely in India once, but with the revival of Vedic Hinduism, it lost its hold in the country of its birth. Buddhism in India had a two-tier structure and not the conventional four-fold Varna division; in the upper tier were placed the Brahman, the Kshatriya, and certain categories of Grihapatis, and in the lower tier were tribal and other marginal groups (S.C.Dube 1990). Jainism is mainly found in northern and southern States. They have two main divisions: Digambar – unclothed, and Shwetambar – white robed. The Jain community is divided into jatis. An earlier study (1953) estimated nearly 60 endogamous groups among the Jains. The Parsis first came to India in the eighth century A.D. from Persia. The Jewish faith, like Christianity and Zoroastrianism, has been established in India for over a millennium. The small Jewish population had two main settlements – one in Cochin (in Kerala) and another in Maharashtra. In Maharashtra the number of Jews is larger, some 14,000 people. Now known as Bene Israel, for centuries in the Konkan villages they were called Shanwar Telis – oil-pressers who did not work on Saturdays – for oil-pressing was their main occupation. They were treated like Hindu Telis, but they observed some Jewish dietary regulations and festivals. The tribes constitute an important section of India people and many of them have a close affinity with Hindus, sizeable groups have converted to Christianity, and a few have adopted Islam. Most of them still retain their tribal identity.

The Indians who converted to Islam in most of the cases remained in the same social status as they had before their conversion to Islam. Hindus from the higher Varnas remained at the higher levels of Indian society. Hindus from the lower levels of the hierarchy thought that by converting to Islam they would come out from the Hindu hierarchy system, but in most of the cases they remained in the same hierarchy level after they converted. Among the Muslims of India there has developed a two-tier hierarchy, called Sharif Jat, and lower class, called Ajlaf Jat, includes Muslim converts from lower castes. Other religions which were established in India - Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism - also have some marks of caste system, even though they oppose caste system. Sikhism rejects caste system. But different Jats who adopted Sikhism act according to traditional Jat lines. The different Jats normally marry within caste lines. The Jains also have separate communities who marry within the community lines. The Buddhist in India have a two-tier hierarchy and just like in the cases of Christians and Muslims it is also related to the status of the community to whom the person belongs. On the other hand the Mahar communities of west India, who were 'untouchables' (but converted to Buddhism), prefer, to recognize themselves as Mahars, as an important segment of the local caste ridden society, because of different social-political reasons.

In the People of India study (1985-1992) a large number of communities has identified themselves in terms of dual religious configuration, such as Hindu-Sikh, Hindu-Muslim, and Hindu-Buddhist. Thus amongst the people of India all those having Hindu-Sikh segments are: Bania, Bazigar, Khatik of Haryana; Chuhra, Chamar, Megh of Himachal Pradesh; Banjara of Maharashtra; Punjabi of Orissa; Gujjar, Gagra, Ahluwalia, Bairagi, Kumhar, Bauria/Bawaria of Punjab; Sonar, Banjara, Chamar-Jatav, Chippa of Delhi; Saini Bazigar, Chamar of Chandigarh; Chimba of Jammu and Kashmir. Some of the communities with Hindu-Muslim segments are: Bohra, Manka of Gujarat, Ranghar of Himachal Pradesh; Mirasi, Sonar, Rajput of Punjab; Bhil-Tadvi of mahashtra; Cheeta and Singhwala of Rajasthan; Sabar of West Bengal, Orissa; Bihari of Assam, Meghalaya, West Bengal, Nagaland, Sikkim; Koch of Tripura; Cheintz of Jammu and Kashmir; Siddhi of Karnataka; Arora, Taga of Dadra and Nagar haveli. Some of the communities with Hindu-Buddhist segments are: Gurkha/Gorkha/Nepali of Assam, Haryana, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh; Chamar of Haryana; Swangla, Kinnaura, Khas of Himachal Pradesh; Mahar of Maharashtra; Koli of Rajasthan; Gurung, Tamang of Sikkim; Bhotia, Limbu, Tamang of Uttar Pradesh; Mahar, Tamang of West Bengal, Chakma of Mizoram; Indo-French of Pondicherry (Singh: 1992(2002), 1996). There are communities such as the Khasi Muslim of Meghalaya and the Nicobarese of Andaman and Nicobar islands which have segments professing three or sometimes four religions, such as Islam, Christianity and tribal religion. The communities with segments professing Buddhism and tribal religions are: Singpho, Turung of Assam; Khampa of Himachal Pradesh; Lepcha of West Bengal; Na, Sherdukpen, Singpho of Arunachal Pradesh; Mag/Magh of Mizoram. The communities with segments professing Christianity and tribal religion are: Karbi/Mikir, Mizo-Hmar, Munda, Oraon, Riang of Assam; Kharia, Munda, Santal of Bihar; Nahal of Madhya Pradesh; Anal, Chote, Gangte (Singh: 1992(2002), 1996).

India has emerged as the centre of many socio-religious movements which have arisen from the need felt by various communities to reform their customs. According to our data, one-eighth of the communities have been affected by such socio-religious movements which also include conversion from one religion to another. Many pre-change religious practices survive among communities after they have embraced other religions/faiths; among the scheduled castes it is 3.3 per cent and among the scheduled tribes it is 5.5 per cent. The pre-conversion practices survive among the Christian communities (16.2 per cent), Buddhists (10.8 per cent), Sikhs (8.5 per cent), Jains (4 per cent), Muslims (2.9 per cent), Hindus (2.7 per cent) and 'other religious' groups (5.4 per cent) (Singh: 1992(2002), 1996). About two-thirds of the communities engage sacred specialists from other communities, such as Brahmans of all grades, and the Deori, Baiga and Paharia who serve tribal and village communities by performing rituals. The Sevak Brahmans of Rajasthan are also priests in Jain temples where they perform rituals. There are about one thousand communities which avail of priests from dual systems. The role of sacred specialists includes officiating over life cycle rituals, propitiating deities, curing ailments, and so on. A high proportion of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Jain communities engage sacred specialists from other communities, whereas sacred specialists from the same community are common among the Christian, Buddhist and some 'other religious' groups. The pastoral and non-pastoral nomads mostly engage sacred

specialists from other communities. Among the rural, rural/urban and urban communities too sacred specialists from other communities are extensively engaged (Singh: 1992(2002), 1996).

The 'analysis of cultural values and practices' of communities (caste/tribe) in terms of culture traits the Pol survey indicates 'significant commonalities' (Singh, K.S.1992, Yogendra Singh 2000:30). Communities in India share common culture traits irrespective of their distinctive religious traditions, even though the religious groups are themselves segmented (Muslims have 584 communities, Christians have 339 communities, Sikhs –130, Jains-100, Buddhists-93, Jews-7, Parsis-3 and tribals-411). According to Pol survey there is very high correlation of traits between SCs and STs, between STs and Hindus, between Hindus and Sikhs between Hindus and Buddhists and between Hindus and Muslims. There is a phenomenal growth in bilingualism in India during last two decades (1961 census – 9.7 percent, 1971 – 13.4 and according to Pol survey done in 1985 = 64.2 percent bilingualism). It signifies expansive syncretistic growth in cultural interaction. Yogendra Singh has studied the Pol data. He says "the fact that the local cultures of castes, ethnicity and communities dispersed into over four thousand entities (4635 communities are identified and studied) which lend itself to rationalization of culture zones into 91 configurations affirms the presence of linkage and interaction between the local and trans-local cultural manifestations (Y. Singh 2000: 46-47). In a recent publication, "Culture, Religion and Philosophy: Critical Studies in Syncretism and Inter-Faith Harmony", this author has compiled and presented over twenty case – studies examining thereby the varied manifestations of syncretism in religious experiences of diverse people of India (Das, N.K. 2003 - 'Introduction: An outline of Syncretism'). The above-mentioned studies explain that despite contradictions and diversities, there exists vibrant sharing of cultural and religious traits. Many significant culture changes have taken place in India since independence. While on the one hand ethnic and regional self-consciousness or identity of castes, tribes, and minorities and other groups is increasing, there is prevalence of many integrative-cultural processes. In India now there is 'increased inter-regional migration' which makes it possible for regional cultural traits, cooking patterns, cultural performances, ritual forms, styles of dress and ornamentation to flow to other parts and mix together. A basic sense of harmony prevails which dissolves our animosity and ultimately contributes towards shaping our cultural uniformity.

## VII

One phenomenon that crosscuts and pervades all differences of language, religion, region and gender is caste --- the most influential feature of Indian society. Caste in the works of European scholars became almost the exclusive focus of the sociological writings on India. Caste came to be exclusively equated with the Hindu religion, even though a proper definition of Hindu religion was always lacking. However the caste system remains an important feature of the Hindu social system and it even operates in Muslim, and Christian societies to a considerable extent, generally in non-ritual sphere, even though marriage institution may be depending on such system crucially. The caste identity of the tribe is a debatable issue as far as the 'ritual dimension' or 'marriage alliances' are concerned and more importantly in modern age of contempt and disapproval shown towards caste factor even in most rural India, under impact of politicisation / democratisation and 'secularisation' of society at large, any generalisation based on old conceptual models is replete with risks. Here we may repeat ourselves about the status of 'tribal religion' whose recasting and autonomous existence is ascribed to Hutton's efforts during early 1930s. The 19th century perception of Hinduism may again be restated in the words of Sir Alfred Lyall who said, "Now just as the word Hindu is no national or even geographical denomination but signifies vaguely a fortuitous conglomeration of sects, ---, hereditary professions, --- castes, so the religion of this population of Hindus is at first sight a heterogeneous confusion"(quoted in Singh 2003). Thus Hinduism does not have any element of a structured religion; in fact it is loosely structured and that is why it has been resilient and tenacious enough to survive and expand (Das 2003, Singh 2003). It is

probably the very quality of Hinduism which leads to syncretic traditions to grow, in diverse regional set up.

The people of India belong to thousands of caste (jatis and upa-jatis), and among the Hindus they are hierarchically ordered named groups into which members are born. Caste members are expected to marry within the group. Particularly noteworthy are differences between caste structures in the north and the south, especially in the realm of kinship systems. Offensiveness and rudeness, which characterised this system, led to dissent and reform within the society. Quests for equality, salvation and social recognition remained integral parts of such reformist movements. Most of these movements that aimed at reorganizing the society were couched in religious terms and were great source of syncretistic tendencies, and humanism (Das 2003, 'Introduction'). During medieval period (Thirteenth to Seventeenth century) Hinduism underwent a drastic transformation. Focus was now on one god. The religious sect founded by Ramanuja (1017 – 1137 AD) was intended to propagate Vishistadvaita school of philosophy. The followers of Ramanuja styled themselves as Shri Vaishnavas. Ramanuja propagated the doctrine of qualified Monism in which self-surrender and grace (prapatti) formed the central theme (Gnanambal, 1970). While Sankara and Ramanuja had pan-India impact, the movement of Madhava (14<sup>th</sup> century AD) was confined to south India. Ramanuja understood that to engage in a three cornered fight against Buddhism, Jainism and the Pure Monism of Sankara; he had to simplify and liberalize the recruitment procedure. Ramananda (1400-70), a follower of Ramanuja, having settled down in Varanasi, established his own sect, Ramanandi. Ramananda strongly opposed the injustices of the caste system and opened his sect for all, and his twelve personal disciples are said to have included women, an outcaste Dalit, and even a Muslim. The Ramanandi sect has great historical importance as it created the conditions for growth of innumerable sects from within the Ramanandi sect. The Ramanandis paved the way for the Sikhism, which has grown as a distinct religious order, and Kabirpanth. Kabir (1440-1518) started out as a disciple of Ramananda, but later developed his own characteristic eclecticism. Vaishnavism, Hatha Yoga, Vedantic Monism, and Sufism influenced Kabir's theology (Jordan 1975). Among the Saivites, the sect of the Lingayats was led by Basava (14<sup>th</sup> century AD). The adherents wear a Linga (Phallus) suspended on a string round their neck. Lingayats cannot be called Hindus since they do not accept the differentiation of castes, the pollution of birth, death, menstruation, contact or look. The Lingayat women have equal ritual status with men (Gnanambal, 1970).

Both the Bhakti and Sufi saints had helped to recast and reorient the prevalent value system of the time. These saints propagated the fundamental equality of mankind. These saints patronized the nirguna theological stance, based on a notion that the divine is formless, without qualities. A directness and unorthodoxy that was to give form to the priorities of new-sprung religious thought and practice typified the wave of Bhakti. Much as Bhakti did, the Sufism deemphasized the role of the clergy and elevated the love between a devotee and his god to ecstasy. Studies have revealed that the Pir and Darvez in different periods played a positive role in bringing about synthesis between the Hindu and Muslim cultures. The Fakir Darvez, Qualandar, and Baul of west Bengal are all known wandering mendicants of India. Followers of Bhakti movement in twelfth and thirteenth century included the saints such as Namdev, and Kabir. Like Kabir, Nanak identified himself with the most deprived sections in the society. Like Kabir, Nanak also denounced attachment to rituals (like prayer, fasting, bathing, image worship) and forgetting true faith in god. According to main philosophy of the Sikh religion there is only one god. Guru Nanak taught that the Hindu, Muslim and people of all religious denominations are children of the same god. Influenced by the school of "devotion" (bhakti) of Ramananda, Kabir, Namdev and having assimilated the philosophy of Sufism and Islam, Guru Nanak gave a true syncretistic form to Sikh religion. Indeed the leaders of several reform movements belonged to the lower economic classes and Dalit castes. Reformist leaders emerged among the Muslims and Tribals also. These rebellious saints were products of processes of dissent and reform. They reformed the rituals, deemphasized the supremacy of the Brahman priests and preached egalitarianism (Das 2003).

## VIII

India's epic and Puranic traditions have diffused throughout India and beyond and have been readapted, recreated and re-interpreted by tribal groups in local milieu in terms of local ethos. Even when the tribes have come in little contact with Hindus they have internalized aspects of Ramayana/Ram-Katha in their folk tales. Some tribes also identify themselves with anti-heroes, such as Ravana. Elwin was first scholar who described the aboriginal Purana. Jesuit scholar Fr. Camil Bulcke collected not only tribal (Indo-Aryan and Dravidian) versions of Ram-Katha, but also Buddhist and Jain versions of Rama Katha.

The Munda tribe offers an indigenous etymological explanation of Sita -'found under (ta) the plough (si)'. Ravana is described as a noble hero who belonged to a clan of the Munda tribe. The Pradhan, an occupational group belonging to the Gonds, have an account of Lakshmana which is different from the ideal younger brother portrayed in the classic Ramayana. The Mech tribals in Assam trace the Hindu-Muslim conflict to their version of Rama-Katha, according to which Lakshmana ate beef, became a Muslim and begot two sons, Hasan and Hussian, who were killed by Lava and Kusha (Roy Burman 1958). Singh (1993) says the spread of Rama Katha and its readaptation illustrates yet another facet of India's cultural formation – the interaction of homogenizing influences with vibrant local cultural systems, which makes our pluralism a living and ongoing process. In Assam, the Bodo Kacharis have reconstructed the Ramayana. Beyond Assam Rama Katha was carried outside India by the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century and was readily accepted by Mons, Khmers, Khotanese and Mongolians giving rise to newer versions of the epic incorporating local traditions. The Ramayana travelled to South East Asia and other remote areas through a band of intrepid missionaries as also through sailors, traders and settlers who travelled overland through Assam to South East Asia. The local versions that have developed in Sri Lanka, Siam, Laos, Burma, Tibet, (even though they maintained the basic structure of the story), introduce slight variations by adopting and mixing strains from their local cultural milieu (Swami Bangovinda Parampanthi, 1993). The Khanti Ramayana is of Buddhist religious affiliation. The Rama of Khanti Ramayana is a Bodhisattva who manifests himself in this form to punish and subdue the sinful and tyrannical Ravana (B.Datta 1993). The Tai people who migrated later, after arrival of Ahoms in Assam, such as Tai-Khamptis, Khamyanas, Aitons, Tai-Phakes and the Turungs also brought the Tai Ramayana (Shyam 1993). In these examples, which have linkages in far South East Asia, we witness a process of blending of elements of Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly observable in adoptions and reinterpretation of Rama-Katha.

## IX

The Dalits, the scheduled castes/ communities of India, have often contested the religious oppression and rigid religious authoritarianism in different parts of India. In order to seek spiritual democracy in different historical phases, they often adopted several regional sects and religious orders including the Sikhism and Buddhism. There are Dalit castes such as Mahar and Balahi (Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh) who have adopted Buddhism and Jainism respectively. The Balai (Rajasthan) have adopted Dadu Panthi sect. The sect shuns idolatry and believes in the unity of god. The Balmikis of Delhi are divided into several endogamous religious groups, such as Hindu Balmiki, Sikh Majhabi, and Muslim Mussali (Singh, 1995: 101-109). The Bazigars (Punjab) have adopted Sikhism. Earlier they venerated the Pirkhana. They visit gurudwara and at the same time they also celebrate Holi, Diwali, Dashahra and Lohri. The Banjaras (Himachal Pradesh) are divided into the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The Hindus and Sikhs inter-marry; hence there has been a great deal of admixture between their religious life and practices (Singh, 1995:130). The Bedia (Orissa), called Bedia Kudmi, profess both the traditional religion and Hinduism. They were participants of Medi movement of Orissa. The Bhangis of Gujarat consider Balmiki Muni as their god. They are also followers of Kabir, Ramananda and Nanak. The Chamar profess different religions and sects. In Himachal Pradesh, they are Ravidasis and also Nirankari Sikhs (Singh : 1995:311).

In Haryana the Julaha are the followers of Kabir though some Julaha have adopted Buddhism, and some follow Sikhism and even Christianity. In Punjab they are Ramdaasi Sikhs. The Jatav are one of the foremost of the Dalit castes whose struggle for emancipation continues through varied movements. They refuse to be called Chamar. Most of them have adopted Buddhism. A common blend of beliefs and practices of Hinduism, Buddhism and "Ambedkarism" shapes their cultural life (Singh 1995:328). It has brought about a unique consciousness in every Jatav notwithstanding an individual's formal affiliation to a particular faith. The Dhanak of Delhi profess Hinduism and Satnam dharma. They are also followers of Arya Samaj, Radha Soami and Kabir panth sects. The Satnamis of Chhattisgarh state also refuse to be called Chamar and they regard Satnam-panth as a distinct religion even though they continue to celebrate Diwali, Dashara and Holi festival without involvement of Brahman priests (Das 2000).

The Dhanak of Delhi profess Hinduism and Satnam dharma. They are also followers of Arya Samaj, Radha Soami sect, and Kabir panth etc. The Doom of Punjab are either Sikhs or Hindus. There are also Arya Samajis among them (Singh, 1995;430-490). The Julaha of Delhi and Chandigarh are divided into two groups, Kabirpanthi and Julaha. The Kabirpanthi Julahas derive their name from Kabir. The Hindu Julahas also follow Kabir teachings. There are both Hindu and Sikh Julahas among them. In Jammu and Kashmir, the Kabirpanthi are also known as Bhagats. The Khatik of Himachal Pradesh are divided into Hindu and Muslim, but in Haryana, they are also Sikhs. The Koli of Rajasthan follow Hinduism, Buddhism and Kabirpanth. The Christian Madigas of Tamil Nadu observe pre-conversion Hindu life cycle rituals and share water sources and burial grounds with other (Hindu) Dalits. The Mazhabi (Majhabi/Mazabi/Mazbi) of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh follow Sikhism. Some of them have become Nihangs (Singh, 1995 : 923). The Hindu religious customs are also observed by the Mazhabis in Rajasthan. During the nineteenth century, the Matu Sanga, on the one hand, and the Brahmo Samaj on the other hand, played important roles in uniting and uplifting the Namasudra of West Bengal. In Assam they are followers of Damodardeo Sect and Vaishnavism (Singh, 1995:980). The Koch in West Bengal, Assam and Tripura are Hindus. Many among them have become Muslims (Singh, 1995:740). They are also known as Rajbanshi. The Rajbanshis of North Bengal have spread into the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The Rajbanshi took part in the Tebhaga movement of 1946, and now they are involved in a regional Kamatapur ethnic-separatist movement, mostly concentrated in North Bengal.

The Mahars of Maharashtra call themselves Neo-Buddhists, after their adoption of Buddhism in 1956, under the leadership of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, but elements of Hindu religion and caste system persists among them in entirety. The Neo-Buddhists are also referred to as Nav Buddhist. They are found in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab. They celebrate festivals connected with Buddhism and birth anniversary of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar. In Karnataka they have converted from Mahar, Holey and Madiga communities. But in Karnataka the Neo-Buddhists celebrate most of the Hindu festivals and venerate Hindu deities. The Panchama, the Fifth One, have been described as "avarnas" and "untouchables", hence they are placed outside the four varna scheme, and hence they declare themselves the fifth Varna. Panchama is a generic term. It includes many endogamous groups. In Andhra Pradesh many Panchamas have embraced Buddhism (1995: 1045). The Rehar of Himachal Pradesh are followers of a Shaiva sect, but they believe in supernatural powers residing in forest, high hills and water sources. They employ sacred specialists from the Brahman and Sipi communities respectively (Singh, 1995:1117). The Badaik are also called Chik or Chik Badaik. The Badaik priests are called Pahan. These priests are drawn from the Munda and Bhuiyan tribes. The Badaiks, as observed in the field by this author in Orissa, draw elements from both Hindu as well as local tribal religious practices (Das 1998).

The above critique suggests that religious syncretism persists in an inconceivably vast number of Dalit communities of India extensively, particularly among those who have shifted their religious allegiance.

## CONCLUSION:

In this paper an attempt is made to comprehend the synthesized structure of Indian civilization through the vantage point of syncretistic religious and cultural traditions of India. Syncretism refers to the synthesis of different religious forms. In Indian context religious synthesis/syncretism has had a positive implication as a foundation and form of resistance to cultural dominance. The case studies show how religious ideas, rituals and cultural traits mediate between diverse ethnic communities, religious communities, sects, and cultural regions and give rise to a complex unity. The complex cultural unity of India is built up through protracted inter-relationship of the diverse cultural traditions, both literate and pre-literate. We have primarily depended on data of Pol project to establish certain of our arguments. The People of India (Pol) data have reestablished the truth of unity in India's diversity. It has provided a scientific basis to the identity of Indian communities, and it also revealed the multiple patterns of bio-cultural and linguistic linkages, which define ultimately India's pluralism. We have compared some of the main findings of Pol project with other available data, as also with more recent writings which help us substantiate our basic supposition of this paper. As a people we are one of the most diverse people in the world. There are 4635 identifiable communities in this country, most of whom have their unique dress patterns, languages, forms of worship, occupations, food habits and kinship patterns. Some of the major fundamentals of this paper, based on our re-interpretations of retrieved data from different sources, and which have bearing on our basic themes of diversity and syncretism, are that large numbers of populations show diversity in biological traits. Most Indian communities have a mixed ancestry, and it is today impossible to separate our roots. Indian roots derive from a mixed ancestry that includes the Proto-Australoid, Paleo-Mediterranean, Caucasian, Negroid, and Mongoloid. Every community recalls its migration in its folklore, history and collective memory. All received the regional ethos of the area that they settled in, and contributed to its local traditions. Indian culture has enriched itself by adopting elements from diverse sources. Language is an important source of diversity. There are as many as 325 languages and 25 scripts in use, deriving from various linguistic families - the Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Andamanese, Semitic, Indo-Iranian, Sino-Tibetan, and Indo-European, apart from thousands of dialects. At least 65% of the communities are bi-lingual; most tribal communities are tri-lingual. The numerous mother tongues are important instruments of cultural expression and preservation of diversity. Language contact through bi-lingualism is a major vehicle for social and cultural interaction and creolisation. A total of 85% of the Indian communities are rooted in their resources. The lives and livelihood, the occupations, dress patterns, the songs and hut settlements of the different communities cannot be really separated from their landscape, climate and occupations deriving from their resources. The "rootedness in the eco-cultural zone is an outstanding characteristic of our communities; no matter what religious label attaches to them". Even the migrants seek to identify themselves with their local environment except in the matter of languages they speak at home or in marriages. Only 3% of the communities derive their names from religious sects, while 71.77% live within a single regional or linguistic boundary and are rooted in its ethos. About 55% of the communities derive their names from the traditional occupations they pursue, while 14% have their names associated with their environment i.e. mountains, plains, river etc., and 14% from their places of origin, such as Gond, Alhuwalia, Kanpuria, Chamoli, Arandan, Shimong. Many surnames derive from occupations pursued, offices traditionally held, and original villages, cutting across community boundaries and region. Singh, Acharya, Patel, Naik, Prasad, Gupta, Sharma, Khan are examples. Popular cultural expression cuts across religion. 775 cultural/material traits have been identified (in Pol) - relating to ecology, settlement, identity, food habits, marriage patterns, social customs, social organization, economy, and occupation, linkages, and impact of change and development, which reveal a sharing of traits across religious categories. Hindus share 96.77% traits with Muslims, 91.19% with Buddhists, 88.99% with Sikhs, and 77.46% with Jains. Muslims share 91.18% traits with Buddhists, 89.95% with Sikhs. Jains share 81.34% traits with Buddhists. The Scheduled Tribes share 96.61% traits with OBCs, 95.82% with Muslims, 91.69% with Buddhists, 91.29% with Scheduled Castes, 88.20% with Sikhs (K.S.Singh, 1996, Identity, Ecology, Social Organisation, Economy, Linkages and Development Process: A Quantitative Profile). Markings of identification by different communities are mainly non-religious. In dispensing their dead, 3059 communities cremate them; while as many as 2386 bury them. Many

communities follow both practices. So is the case with many marriage symbols, food habits, dress, dance and musical forms. Clans bearing names of animals, plants or inanimate objects cut across religions, language, region etc.

As we discussed above in India there has been continual interaction between communities and they have constantly maintained cultural linkages, particularly by sharing of resources, traits, and space (observable at grassroots level) and these trends indeed shaped the unique patterns of India's composite heritage and cultural unity. India's constitutionally enforced secular democracy remained more of a distant anchor for our diversity rather than a convention in action. Citing the People of India project data, Asghar Ali Engineer says that there are large numbers of communities who profess mixed religions. There are twelve communities among Muslims who admit to be Brahmins, 24 communities who declare themselves as Kshatriyas, 6 as Vaishyas and 11 Muslim communities as Sudras. Among Christians too we have such caste groups, 8 professing to be Brahmins and 48 as Sudras (Pluralism & Civil Society, [www.islam21.net/pages/keyissues/key3-21.htm](http://www.islam21.net/pages/keyissues/key3-21.htm)). It can be stressed ultimately that our culture which is often provided a polarized identity is a pluralist culture and we have deeply influenced each other in practically every field.

Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart (1994), the editors of the volume, *Syncretism and Anti-Syncretism*, have observed that within anthropology, where notions of the 'purity' of traditions have not had much credibility for some time, syncretism has been ascribed a neutral, and often positive, significance. In anthropology as a matter of fact now the essentialising of culture is generally dismissed. What is more there has been increasing criticism of concepts such as cultural purity, wholeness or 'authenticity'. In post-modern-anthropology in which syncretic processes are considered basic not only to religion and ritual but to 'the predicament of culture' (Clifford 1988: 14-15) identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. Everywhere groups improvise local performances from (re) collected pasts. Organic culture reconceived as inventive process or creolized 'interculture' (Clifford 1988: 14-15). These scholars feel that although syncretic processes currently loom large in new writings, there seems to be an uneasiness about the term in post-modern anthropology: we hear far less about culture as syncretic than about culture as collage, as creolized, as fragmented, as 'interculture', as subversive hybrid invention (Shaw and Stewart 1994: 2). We have made a particular mention of acculturation theory and its limitations in studies in India. What are especially problematic about the concept of 'acculturation' are its teleological and quantitative assumptions, proceeding along a continuum towards some ultimate completion. Indeed, one problem with the continued utilization of the term acculturation - a formulation originally coined in 1920s, and regrettably constantly used by Indian scholars, is the "linearity" (Gutmann, M.C.2004). Since 1950s most anthropologists have discovered sufficient reason to discard the term, especially owing to its excessively monochromatic implications. Indeed very seldom it is possible to trace culture change in such a unidirectional and unidimensional way (Gutmann, M.C.2004). If we recast the study of syncretism as the politics of religious synthesis, one of the first issues which needs to be confronted is what 'anti-syncretism': the antagonism to religious synthesis shown by agents concerned with the defence of religious boundaries. 'Authenticity' or 'originality' do not necessarily depend on purity both pure and mixed traditions can be unique. Van der Veer argues that there are debates over syncretism in societies in which identities are defined through religion. Since India combines these by being a secular state in which religious affiliation partially defines cultural identity, it makes sense that syncretism and multiculturalism are often equated in Hindu political discourse (see Shaw and Stewart 1994). Shaw and Stewart (1994) agree with Richard Werbner who, argued that the term 'syncretism' should be limited to the domain of religious or ritual phenomena, where elements of two different historical 'traditions' interact or combine.

Nadel (1954:7-8) has rightly observed that however the sphere of 'things religious' is defined; there will always remain an area or border zone of uncertainty making it difficult to portray the dividing line between religion and non-religion. This statement seems truer for Indian context where pluralistic cultural religious traditions provide solid syncretistic coherence. In dealing with religion one deals with many different things. Religion is an affair of the community and anthropologists indeed are more competent to do empirical study of religion in its social context. The fact remains that the notion of 'community' has itself been subjected to

analytical deconstruction (Haim Hazan, 1995; see also David Morley and Kevin Robins, 1995). Cohen (1985) has reduced 'community' to its symbolic boundaries. Here it may not be out of place to restate that cultural practices are integrated in religious practices and vice-versa. Throughout in our above account we have tried to elucidate in a broad anthropological-historical perspective mingling and fusion of religious/culture practices and traits as observable in day to day life.

Gauri Viswanathan in an article titled "Beyond "Orientalism": Syncretism and the politics of knowledge" (SEHR, volume 5, issue 1: 1996) has reviewed the issue of syncretism from a broad historical –sociological angle. Beginning the arguments around "In an Antique Land", by Amitav Ghosh, Viswanathan finds it disturbing to see Ghosh's twist to a culturally and religiously hybrid medieval past and its engagement with the romance of syncretism, as a solution to sectarianism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and religious intolerance. Does syncretism offer truly global possibilities for a merging of religious difference, or is it a code word for the incorporation and assimilation of "minority" cultures? Is syncretism indeed the language in which, as Ghosh claims, people "once discussed their differences". Peter Van der Veer has established that the historical roots of syncretism's semantic association with transdenominational universalism lie in the rise of Protestantism and the decline of the absolute authority of Catholicism; and he further argues that syncretism's subsequent identification with cultural relativism accompanied the spread of colonialism and the politically charged contact with alien religious cultures that colonial expansion promoted(1994). Viswanathan, while putting the 'state' and 'law' above other considerations, argues that this syncretism gets transferred to the secular plane of plural identities, (thus) allowing for the creation of a homogeneous national identity, mediated by law. This point indeed may require valid data based evidences and justification, particularly in reference to India. Viswanathan is particularly insensitive to any official data, such as Nandy's use of 1911 Census wherein the Muslims of Gujarat identified themselves as "Mohammedan Hindus". Contrary to what Viswanathan and many sociologists believe, Nandy rightly concludes from this example that there existed "a prior state of harmony" between Muslims and Hindus which was disrupted by the colonial state (1990, emphasis added). While equating the syncretism of Ghosh's narrative voice as analogous to Matthew Arnold's culture, Viswanathan suggests that both culture and syncretism have been able to deal with difference by amalgamating difference to a totalizing, homogeneous whole. Syncretism in the review presented by Viswanathan is closely seen from certain basic 'difference' perspective, viewed at larger macro -national level. This approach will eventually lead us to miss the core of very process of coming together of practices and beliefs of people (in cultural –religious sphere) which result in multiple levels of syncretic traditions to be seen in unique manner in places like south Asia. Christophe Jaffrelot has recently advanced the concept of "strategic syncretism" as a sub-category of the invention of Hindu tradition and Hindu ideology. Such an ideology is syncretic, argues Jaffrelot, because its content is supplied by material taken from the cultural values of groups who are seen as hostile to the Hindu community (1993). Christ no longer is a threatening alien religious figure, but made into an Indian god. Indeed, 'indigenization', (discussed elsewhere by this author, Das 2003) is the term comes close to what is stated above.

Societies in various parts of India have evolved through dialogue and interactions at many levels. The multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious society like India could survive because of dialogue and exchange of ideas. Scholars agree that the great heritage of Indian civilization spanning over 5000 years is sustained broadly through its pre-dominant agricultural and rural character of its population. Appadurai finds the use of traditional techniques and folk knowledge as critical for survival of Indian farmers. Similarly, playwright Girish Karnad sees continuity in indigenous Indian dramatic forms and finds a sense of energy in folk theatre. For Girish Karnad, the past coexists with the present in a parallel form. Similarly, Muslim painter, Gulam Mohammad Sekh revealed a close convergence of Hindu and Muslim rituals in family custom and ceremonies.

The reality, however, is that every culture has, in fact, ingested foreign elements from exogenous sources, with the various elements gradually becoming 'naturalized' within it. As Said (1979) argues 'the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically

“different” inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture or racial essence, proper to that geographical space is a highly debatable idea’ (quoted in Clifford, 1988: 274). As many authors have noted (for example, Appadurai, 1990; Bhabha, 1987; Hall, 1987), cultural hybridity is, increasingly, the normal state of affairs in the world, and in this context any attempt to defend the integrity of indigenous or authentic cultures easily slips into the conservative defence of a nostalgic vision of the past – what Salman Rushdie (1982) has described as an ‘absolutism of the pure’.

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