From Fluidity to Rigidity:
Borders, Identities, and Perils of Postmodern Angst

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Most Asians are vaguely aware of a diverse world outside their homes, but the extent of this diversity generally remains unknown. People are usually aware of subtle distinctions among their own groups but tend to classify those different from themselves as being alike. This saga of great internal diversity among groups that look all the same to even their neighbors is repeated far and wide.

For example, people in other countries, and often, even for people in the country, there is only one stereotypical Indian. There's a misconception, prevalent outside India and increasingly even in some parts of India, that all Indians speak Hindi, and eat vegetarian food. The awareness of the 800-odd languages and a diversity of cultural and culinary traditions to match is often missing.

When we extend our imaginations to our neighboring countries, the situation obviously gets worse. Most ordinary Indians only have the words "Pakistan" or "China" to frame their ideas of these countries. They don't even know the maps. Whatever internal diversity exists within those countries is a mystery to all but the handful of experts on those countries.

Apart from the names, for ordinary people, there is only the news. It's an old cliché in the news business that "dog bites man is not news; man bites dog is news." So, if everything is normal, it's not news. Only the abnormal or unusual is news. In theory it may be something unusually good or unusually bad, but every editor and reporter worth his or her salt knows another cliché too: "If it bleeds, it leads." Meaning, blood and gore makes for a better news story than someone saying or doing nice things. High-minded people often blame the media for this, and there is some blame to be apportioned for sure, but unfortunately, it seems people are more attracted to stories of sex and violence. The number of hits on websites shows this. In a world where success is measured by numbers this matters. I think the only exception to this that the Internet has shown to us is cat videos.

However, television news channels do not show cat videos from neighboring countries. In the case of India, they are more likely to show heated arguments in television studios over the security threats, real and imagined, that emanate from our neighbors. This is mirrored to varying degrees in the other countries as well. The media in those countries spend a lot of time showing the supposed threats to their people from India and elsewhere.

The blank that exists in people's minds about their neighbors in countries that an overwhelming majority of them have never visited, and will never visit, is therefore filled with a simple vision of a place full of dangerous and perhaps disgusting people, all of them conforming to some simple stereotype, that poses a threat to their security.

The sense of threat is projected both back and forward in time, in most instances. A story is usually crafted of an ancient, homogenous national identity, based on a single dominant ethnicity, language or religion, that existed for thousands of years in a relationship of antagonism with other ethnic, linguistic or religious groups—and eventually prevailed over them. This is done by right-wing political outfits in several countries, but it is rooted in the insecurities of the project of nation-building itself.

This oversimplified caricature of reality is the first and perhaps the foremost barrier to enriching interrelationships across borders. If we are to enrich relationships across borders, we must begin by recognizing the plurality that in fact exists everywhere in Asia and the world. Recognition of actually-existing diversity is the first step.

In an essay titled "How many languages are there in the world" the linguist Stephen R. Anderson had used year 2009 data from the Ethnologue database, which then listed 6,909 distinct languages, to state that 2,197 of these languages were spoken in Asia. Only 297 were spoken in Europe. The latest edition of Ethnologue lists 7,097 languages, and it is possible that the tally in Asia may have increased.

There are obviously far less than 6,909 countries or even provinces in Asia. The idea that a single language and ethnicity corresponds to a nation therefore seems to be a rather absurd notion for places with greater inherent diversity than Western Europe where the idea originated.

The business of standard languages and maps and territories to match is a fairly new development in the history of the world. The scholar Benedict Anderson, in his celebrated work *Imagined Communities*, had delineated the processes by which modern nations and nationalisms were invented, mainly in the 18th and 19th century. He pointed to the printing press and the Census as two major contributing factors in the creation of national identities.

For most of known history, the majority of human beings, at least in the highlands of Southeast Asia extending from Northeast India to Vietnam lived in non-state spaces, according to another well-known work by Professor James C. Scott. He pointed out in his work *The Art of Not Being Governed* that difficulties in transport and communication generally limited the effective range of state power on land in Southeast Asia before the

advent of all-weather roads, motorcars and railways, to a maximum radius of 120 km from the state core. During the monsoons, this figure would go down further.

Where states in the form of kingdoms or empires did exist for any length of time, they were almost always multi-ethnic and open to absorbing manpower especially in the form of slave labor from wherever they could. In time the people from different parts of the empire would take on the geographical identity of their new homes.

Professor Scott has detailed how kingdoms in what are now Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar were similarly multi-ethnic in every sense of the term, with large numbers of people from many ethnic groups changing their ethnic identities over time to become Thai or Khmer or Burman. Similar processes are evident in India as well, where for instance the Ahom identity grew and mutated over the centuries, with people from various ethnicities who worked in the Ahom kingdom's administration becoming part of the ethnic group now called Ahoms.

Even tribal identities were fluid, Scott persuasively argued in the case of Southeast Asia. There is evidence of such fluidity among the tribal communities of adjacent Northeast India where I come from. The Khasi tribe of Meghalaya in Northeast India, for instance, is seeing a politics of purity of blood even to this day. However, the tribe has a custom called "tang jaid" by which new clan lines are created incorporating outsiders who marry into the tribe. Many of the most important clans in today's Khasi society come from such mixed origins. While elsewhere this may be difficult to determine, in the case of the Khasis it is fairly easy as the clans with mixed origins are marked by surnames that incorporate the word "dkhar" which is the Khasi word for outsider or non-Khasi.

These stories of the hybridity of tribes, races and ethnicity, and of the fluidity of borders and identities, need to be taught in schools and shared through the media if we are to enrich interrelationships across boundaries. The current globally dominant narrative is of ethnically pure and homogenous nations striving to stave off threats—especially in the form of old or new migrants—from across borders. It would be useful to remember that all large ethnic identities are hybrid.

The existing global architecture requires the nation, and national boundaries, but the conflation of the nation with ideas of purity, pollution, and supremacist pride has been proven to be extremely dangerous in the past, particularly in the years of World War II. It would be foolish to go down that path again. The project of nation-building requires foundational myths, but once the nation is securely established, it arguably faces more danger from excessive nationalism than from too little.

This program, the ALFP, had members from eight Asian countries. On the day we met, we knew each other only by our nationalities. A month later the national identities had receded in importance, because we now knew each other as real people. Personalities came to have greater significance than nationalities. The stranger from Pakistan became the man of poetic temperament and ready humor. The stranger from China became the kind poet. And so on.

The best form of enriching relationships across borders is still the simplest, most direct one: of people-to-people contact. Let like-minded people from opposing sides of contested boundaries meet.

After greater connectivity, easier visa regimes, and events and platforms for people in various fields to interact, a better quality of media, that humanizes people from elsewhere rather than demonizing them, is required.

Beyond these obvious measures, there is also the dominant narrative. I have earlier mentioned the flawed vision of pure, ancient nations in long conflict with other pure, ancient nations. This needs to be challenged.

Today there is only an endless battle between Left and Right, Liberals and Conservatives. It seems to me that the battle is useless because more and more evils are perennially being added to an already long list. Everyone seems now to belong to some group that has either been historically oppressed by some other group, or been an oppressor, or both. The idea that has taken root is that peoples and communities should pay for the sins of their ancestors. This seems to me like the logic of revenge stretching through the centuries.

The scholar Francis Fukuyama, who famously declared the end of history some decades ago, is now writing about identity politics. He has pointed out in his new book that identity politics is being reinforced by both Left and Right.

The roots of identity politics of the Right do not need elaboration. The roots of identity politics on the Left are more interesting. There is the obvious relation of group identities such as class to Leftist politics. The core value for this Leftist politics of identity is equality. So far, so good, but then with postmodernism it starts to get into a place of privileging of sentiment over empiricism. For instance, how someone feels about, say, a word or a statue, becomes more important than anything else. There have been several prominent examples from the Anglophone world, particularly US university campuses, of this.

This privileging of sentiment, combined with the desire to judge history by the standards of the present, is in my view a dangerous thing.

When postmodernism declared war on metanarratives, it listed science as just another metanarrative. From there to denial of climate change and evolution and the dismissal of anything inconvenient or unpleasant as fake news are short steps. Everyone was set free to create their own "alternative facts." The world of "post-truth" was inaugurated. This is a world that the Right has now appropriated with a vengeance. There is no surprise at all in this sequence of events or state of affairs.

The vast majority of the human race never experienced Enlightenment ideals. The rule of reason and science never really reached the masses in Asia or Africa, and never shaped the thinking of the majority of religious people in the continent of America. They were thrown from premodern to postmodern with nothing in between. In order to restore sanity to an increasingly mad world, restoration of empiricism and reason to the place they had earned through the Enlightenment is essential.

Along with empiricism, liberalism too needs some restoring. Liberalism is based on ideas of individualism and the equality of human beings. If the accident of birth condemns a child to a lifetime as either oppressed or oppressor, it is determinism based on race, caste, gender, nationality, or skin color. It comes from essentializing one aspect of a person's identity. This is what Liberals set out to end.

I expect neither those on the Left nor those on the Right to agree with my prescription, because ideological commitment will prevent them. However, I suspect that their agreement or disagreement will not matter in the slightly longer term.

It is possible that despite appearances to the contrary, the best days for identity politics of both Right and Left are actually over. There is a disjunct between the way time is experienced in daily life now, and the politics of identity aimed at anything more than securing additional economic benefits or additional freedoms.

Measuring and organizing space and time and monetizing both are the keys of modernity and capitalism. The commodification of time keeps us increasingly busy every moment of our waking lives. Long, slow time is replaced by quick time. In a culture of fleeting attention spans and instant gratification, it is unlikely that the politics of long memories will move large masses of people to do anything more than post a quick message on social media or turn out in their fashionable best one day of the year for a gay pride march. In other words, identity politics may create resentments, but those resentments will probably not prevail over the imperatives of trade and connectivity. What we could be left with are festering resentments among relatively small groups of people—identity politics is forever dividing the masses into niches—that never quite boil over into actual revolution or war. We are unlikely to see a

repeat of the Russian Revolution, or Germany's wars of conquest to restore lost glory, because there's no single unifying identity and no appetite for any of that.

Absence of war is not the same as peace. Societies and polities marked by perennial angst over practically everything are, at the least, painfully annoying. It will be difficult for societies and countries to find peace if the politics of angst collides endlessly with its opposite, a politics of supremacy. In the geopolitical and economic spheres, some contests for supremacy are perhaps unavoidable. However, in the social and cultural spheres, and in the ordinary interactions between people in their daily lives, they can certainly be minimized.

A good way to start doing that would be to cherish what philosopher Michael Ignatieff calls the "ordinary virtues" which he defines as the "virtues of ordinary life and ordinary people." These are virtues such as friendliness, hospitality, compassion, tolerance, and pity. Fraternity as a value has historically received less importance from both actual revolutionaries and keyboard warriors than liberty and equality, but perhaps it is no less important than the other two.

We cannot build a happier world merely by fighting evil. In order to build a happier world, it is also necessary to do good. What is good is a hard question for philosophers but perhaps it is an easy one for ordinary people around the world, who intuitively respond in largely similar ways to love and hate, joy and sorrow, and indeed, even to the silly cuteness of cat videos.

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