

The meaning of oneness in ‘one nation’

It is the oneness independent of the language we speak or the religion we practise



SUNDAR SARUKKAI

Philosophy as a discipline or practice is not popular these days. However, today we are faced with many challenges in the political arena that need philosophical reflection. Unintentionally, the government’s actions and utterances create the possibility of a new climate for public philosophy, which in turn is important for a functioning democratic society.

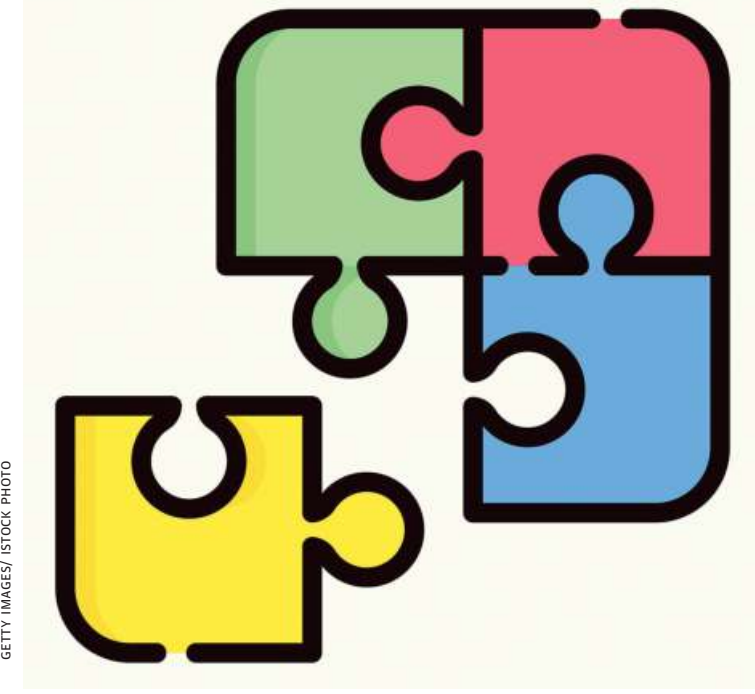
The claim by the Home Minister about ‘one language, one nation’ is an instance of this. While much has been said about the idea of a nation, here I want to point out how even the word ‘one’ in this phrase has many complex meanings embedded in it.

The notion of one

At the surface it seems as if this idea is about imposing a particular language. But the idea of ‘one’ that is invoked here is not only philosophically rich but also culturally common. It is impossible not to come across the notion of ‘one’, whether in philosophy, art, science or everyday cultural practices. And now, increasingly in politics. The search for one underlying truth, one underlying principle, one unified theory or one language has been privileged through the ages in all cultures.

But what is this idea of ‘one’? Although even children know about this number, there is nothing simple about it. There are many complex ideas hidden within this number. The most foundational principle of mathematics lies in the simple fact that 1 should always be equal to 1. Whatever you do to numbers or even equations, at the end the rule that cannot be violated is that 1 = 1.

The mathematical one has two other important properties. All integers can be produced by adding one. So if we begin with 1, we can then create 1+1 = 2, then create 2+1 = 3, and so on until infinity. Infinity itself is imaginable by us only because it is impossible to imagine the largest finite number. This is so because given any number which is the largest, we can always add 1 to it.



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There is another way by which infinity is created from 1 and this is by dividing 1. Starting with 1, we can create fractions out of it such as one-half, one-third, and so on. There are infinite divisions that we can make. We can thus say that one contains the infinity already within it and that it is defined as much by its divisibility as by its countability.

The one and the many

In philosophy, these questions are part of a fundamental problem called the problem of the ‘one and the many’. It is the puzzle of how is it that many different things can be ‘seen’ as one and at the same time how the ‘one’ can be seen as being made up of ‘many’. For example, what is in our cognition and language – in the way we experience and understand the world – that makes us perceive the many things in a room as being part of ‘one’ room?

This is not merely a question about how we perceive the world. The moment we use terms like unity, unified, together, collection, group, set, identity etc., we are actually talking about the idea of ‘one’. We do this in our conceptual thinking too. Concepts, one could argue, are really nothing more than creating oneness out of many. For example, the moment we use the concept ‘chair’, we are putting all the different, indivi-

dual chairs into ‘one’ family called ‘chair’.

Many great thinkers have repeatedly invoked the idea of one. Narayana Guru imagined a casteless society or, equivalently, a society of only one ‘caste’, what he called the *manusha jati*. There have been countless thinkers who have called for ‘one humanity’ as the ideal that we should follow. In the Advaitic philosophy of Shankara, the true reality is a oneness, and difference is only an illusion. Religious traditions focus on liberation, which is nothing but achieving oneness with god, as the central goal of human life.

Quality and quantity

So when the government invokes the idea of ‘one nation, one language’, what could be the meaning of ‘one’? It is surely not the meaning associated with the mathematical number. First of all, if it is the number one, then ‘one nation’ does not make sense since the nation (as it is singular) is always only one. If we say ‘one apple’, the meaning of one here is that it counts the number of apples leading to terms such as ‘one apple’, ‘two apples’, and so on. When the government says ‘one nation’, it is not using one in this countable sense. That is, the meaning of the word one in ‘one nation’ is not a measure of quantity.

So what else could it be then? The only possible meaning is if ‘one’ is understood not as a quantity but only as a quality. It is the quality of oneness that is the meaning of one in ‘one nation’. And herein lies the problem: quantity does not matter to the qualitative meaning of one. So even if 100% of the people in the country speak Hindi, it would still not be enough to create the quality of being one nation. (In fact, having a common language to define oneness is not a good idea since it is the common language which makes conflict easier!) At the same time, even if none of the people in a nation share the same language, it is still possible to have the quality of oneness.

Quality cannot be reduced to or totally converted to quantity. Social science methodology is based on this distinction between quantity and quality. So the problem in the government’s view is really this: when they use the term ‘one nation’ they are thinking of one in terms of quantity (such as majority). But the meaning of one in ‘one nation’ cannot be based on quantity and has to be only a quality. When any of us relates the oneness of nation to sheer numbers of majority, such as majority in language or in religion, then we are not really talking about the quality of oneness. Majority does not create oneness, it only creates bigger numbers. The importance of the quality of oneness lies in its strength to remain a simple ‘one’ and not get inflated by bigger and emptier numbers. Oneness should not be confused with sameness.

The oneness in ‘one nation’ is the kind of oneness talked about by Narayana Guru, Shankara, the saints in the Bhakti movement and the Sufi poets. It is the oneness between the humans and the world, and oneness between each one of us independent of the language we speak or the religion we practise. Those who talk about ‘one nation’ must realise that the true meaning of oneness lies in its quality of unity and togetherness. It does not arise through measurable and majoritarian views but only as a quality that comes through recognising the common humanity in all of us, independent of our gender, caste, class and religion.

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Live and let live-in

The order of the Rajasthan State Human Rights Commission on live-in relationships is problematic



SHRADDHA CHAUDHARY

While referring to women in live-in relationships, a Bench of the State Human Rights Commission of Rajasthan said on September 5 that the “concubine” life of a woman cannot be termed a dignified life. In the absence of any specific reference in the order to the complaints that triggered these provocative comments, it is difficult to say what the honourable justices sought to achieve by making them. The kindest interpretation would be that they were overcome by benevolent patriarchy, the kind which prompts universities to have more conservative curfews for female students. However, this seemingly innocuous need to ‘protect’ women is a symptom of a more pernicious disease: the need to ensure that women don’t challenge the patriarchal structures and institutions meant to keep them in their place.

The rights of parties who cohabit

In demanding a law that would provide avenues to formally recognise live-in relationships, the Bench touched upon an important legal issue. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, extends remedies in the legislation to ‘relationships in the nature of marriage’, and courts have repeatedly held that long, continuous cohabitation raises a presumption in favour of marriage. Notwithstanding this, there is a legal vacuum as regards the rights of parties who cohabit. The Supreme Court has passed several landmark judgments on intimate relationships. In *Shafin Jahan v. Asokan* (2018), it held that the right to choose one’s life partner is an important facet of the right to life, and social approval of intimate personal decisions should not be the basis for recognising them. In *Navtej Johar v. Union of India* (2018), it read down Section 377 of the IPC which criminalised consensual homosexual relationships. In light of this, it is important to note that being in a live-in relationship is a valid choice which deserves the recognition and protection of law. That said, there may also be those who cohabit informally because they cannot formalise their relationships, such as inter-caste/religion opposite-sex couples who are barred from marrying by social norms, or same-sex couples, who are barred from marrying by law. Informal cohabitation, like marriage, creates vulnerabilities due to divisions of labour that leave

one party, usually the woman and her child, in greater need of financial support when the relationship ends. The law provides ways to address these vulnerabilities in marriages through the provision of rights to maintenance or inheritance, but the needs of informal cohabitants are left up to the discretion of judges, without any legal framework to guide them. However, it is not for these reasons that the SHRC has demanded the law. The real apprehension of the Bench is the alleged proliferation of live-in relationships, a social institution through which sexual freedom can be exercised outside marriage.

Problematic proclamations

The SHRC’s order is problematic on many levels. One, Article 19 of the Constitution, which protects the right to freedom of speech and expression, includes the freedom to express one’s identity, sexual preferences, and love. The right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 includes the right to privacy. The right to choose how to organise one’s personal intimacies is an important facet of the right to privacy and, therefore, outside the purview of the state. Demanding that the government seek to prohibit live-in relationships is therefore brazen contempt of the decisions of the apex court.

Two, the language of the SHRC promotes sexist and heteronormative stereotypes, and ignores social reality. At one level, in stating that women in live-in relationships are ‘kept’ as concubines, it ignores the possibility that such relationships could be a viable alternative in cases where marriage is legally or socially prohibited. It also assumes that marriage is, or ought to be, the only relationship through which women sexually associate with men. At another level, by equating women who cohabit with concubines, it trenches the patriarchal Madonna-whore dichotomy: women can either be good women who abide by the societal boundaries set for them or bad women who dare transgress these boundaries. The fact that this language was used by a body tasked with protecting and upholding human rights makes the proclamations doubly egregious.

Finally, the language in the order will likely create a chilling effect, preventing vulnerable citizens, in need of legal protection, from seeking redress.

The SHRC also demanded that governments run awareness campaigns against live-in relationships. It is worth considering whether that time and money might be better spent in campaigns to sensitise the functionaries of the justice system instead.

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Glitches after the glitz

After the Modi-Trump bonhomie in Houston, cracks are appearing in the India-U.S. relationship

NARAYAN LAKSHMAN

The personal chemistry between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and U.S. President Donald Trump is partly based on the convergence of political world views regarding immigration, “radical Islamic terror”, and trade. It is also partly based on shared values of the global right, which encompasses the rejection of a liberal-progressive ethos which includes the notion that a free press is an essential element of a democracy.

Against that backdrop, there could have been little doubt that the ‘Howdy, Modi’ event in Houston, Texas, would be a resounding public relations victory for Mr. Modi. Not only did he get the commander-in-chief of the world’s most powerful nation to play second fiddle in his formulaic diaspora-connect event, but Mr. Modi also managed their back-channel parleys so adroitly that potential sources of structural friction, including deep-festering concerns over tariffs, possibly divergent views on the ground situation in Jammu and Kashmir, and entrenched positions on how to deal with Pakistan received nary a mention in official remarks.

But then public relations exercises are simply that – window dressing. The sponsors of such events hope the euphoria will stick for long enough that some people who aren’t already drinking the Hindutva Kool-Aid buy into the paradigm and join the multitudes across the world keeping the saffron superstructure afloat.

Trade differences

However, the cracks are already showing. The much-vaunted big-bang announcement on trade that was hinted at prior to ‘Howdy, Modi’ did not materialise. Talks may still be in progress over the more troublesome parts of a potential U.S.-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA), including tariffs on medical devices, electronic, telecommunications and dairy products; the expiration of India’s preferential trade status under the Generalized System of Preferences; and perhaps Mr. Trump’s bugbear – the export of Harley Davidson motorcycles to India. Yet the more troubling aspect of this bilateral conversation is the direction that it is taking –

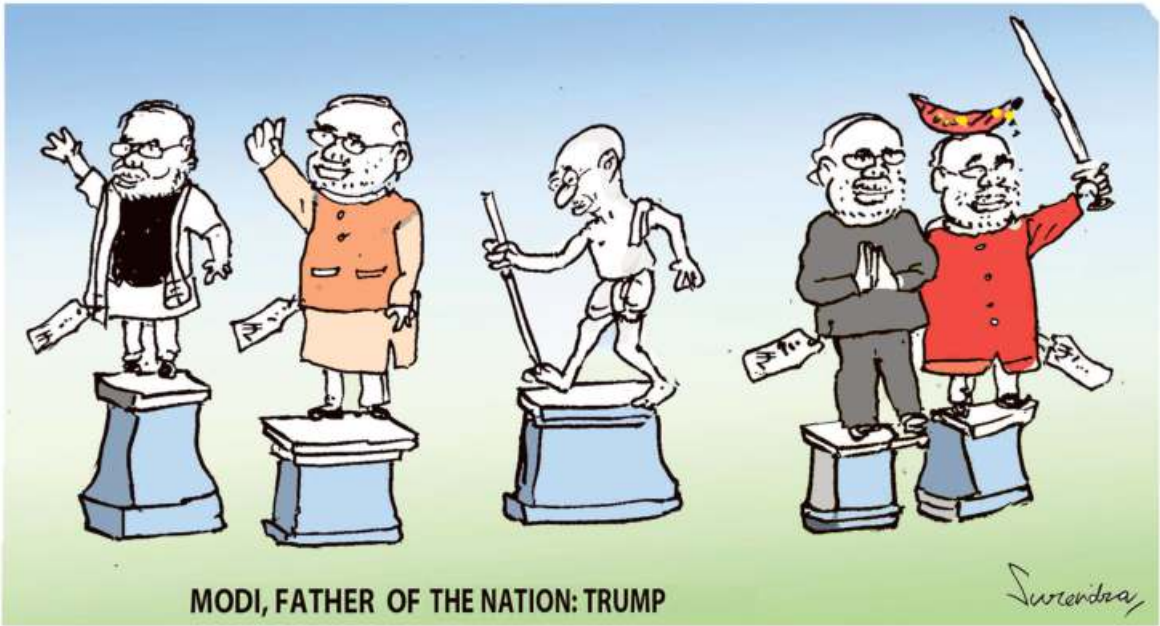
implicitly pushing “mini trade deals” over the broader commitments made to the WTO. This is nothing new for Mr. Trump, who is also pushing a similar bilateral-based trade agreement with Japan. But has there been a broader discussion in India about the costs and benefits of undermining the multilateral system in favour of a limited trade agreement, even with a strategically important ally? The fact is that a U.S.-India FTA might well run contrary to the WTO requirement that its members only accede to trade deals that cover “substantially all trade” – thereby avoiding a situation where countries partner up and unfairly discriminate against a third country or trading bloc. In the past New Delhi has certainly leaned heavily on the dispute resolution mechanisms afforded to it under the WTO’s arbitration facilities (ironically including against Washington on multiple occasions), so how could we not ask, a priori, if we are ready to throw that away before rushing into the Trumpian embrace?

Other cracks

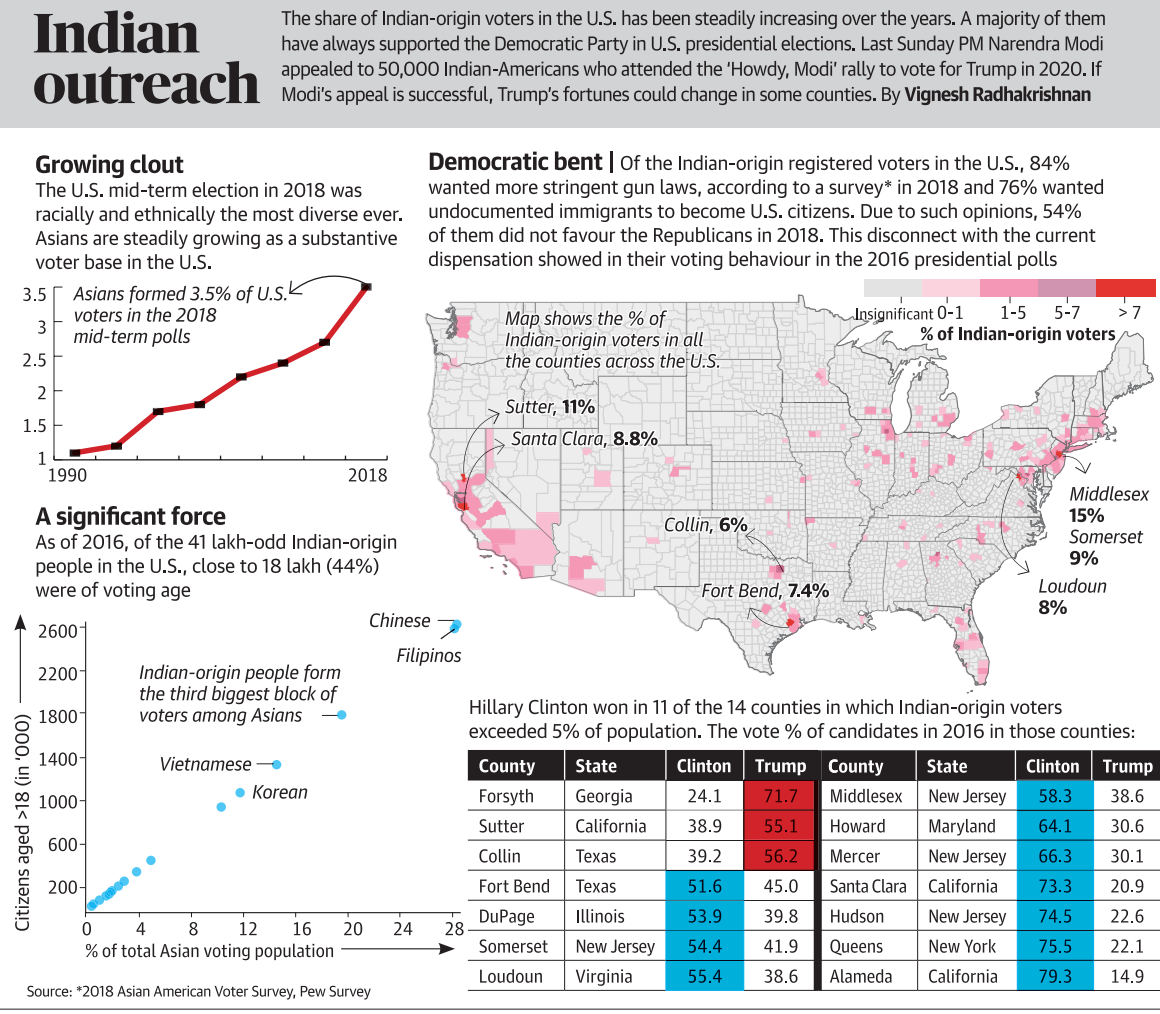
Visible post-‘Howdy, Modi’ cracks are appearing in spheres other than trade as well. Mr. Trump characterising of Mr. Modi’s remarks on Kashmir or Pakistan as “a very aggressive statement” belies the ostensible warmth that was on display at the NRG stadium between the two leaders. Similarly, Mr. Modi’s government and governance in Jammu and Kashmir has spooked numerous U.S. Democrats, including Senator Bernie Sanders, Representative Ilhan Omar and at least five members of the U.S. Congress who have explicitly voiced concern over the prevailing conditions in that region. And even though most of the mainstream media did not cover them, ordinary Americans and activists took to the streets in Houston to protest human rights abuses in India under the current dispensation and #AdiosModi did the rounds on social media.

While Mr. Modi may bask for a while in the event’s afterglow, it will not be long before he is back to tussling with the economic and social challenges that await him at home.

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DATA POINT



The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 26, 1969

17 killed as mobs attack train

Seventeen passengers were killed when violent mobs attacked two trains - the Ahmedabad-bound Janata Express from Delhi and the Ahmedabad-Karanja local - this evening [September 25]. The Express was attacked near Amblihayana station and the local at a point between Kalol and Dhangarwa stations on the meter-gauge section of the Western Railway. According to the Railway authorities here [Ahmedabad] in the attack on the express train thirteen persons including three women were killed and several others injured. Four others were killed when the Ahmedabad-Karanja local was attacked, the authorities said. The mob of about 200 was said to have stopped the express before attacking it. On board were a few armed guards who were helpless before the overwhelming numbers of the mob. The train left for Ahmedabad after being detained for over 40 minutes, the reports said. According to reports received by the Western Railway area Superintendent, Mr. R.D. Mishra, the mobs pulled out several passengers from both the trains and beat them.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 26, 1919.

Future of Mesopotamia.

London, September 23. — Opening of a series of articles in the “Times” on Mesopotamia, Sir G.C. Buchanan emphasises that, in the present economic crises there is no money to spend on visionary and philanthropic enterprises, that cannot possibly show an adequate return for a generation. We have already spent far too much money on Mesopotamia. He declares that a great deal of the abuse of the Government of India in connection with the “Mesopotamian scandal” is unmerited. The Government of India was very badly served in Mesopotamia and India and kept ignorant of events. But when the Mesopotamian report was published, very great changes occurred and the situation is well in hand. The wastage under the War Office regime was shocking. There seemed to be absence of financial control. All departments were extravagant, chiefly the Inland Water Transport, with the Directorate for the Development of Local Resources a good second. The strictest economy is now required. There must be an end to ordering towns to be built regardless of expense, building concrete roads with material from India and carrying out other large public works, without estimates properly drawn up by competent men.