

Democracy Guaranteed to Protect Identity



*L-R: **Sumantra Bose**, Professor of International and Comparative Politics, London School of Economics, UK; **Elliot Gerson**, Executive Vice President, The Aspen Institute USA; **N.K. Singh**, Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha; **Ashley Tellis**, Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA; Moderator: **Arun Maira**, Senior Advisor, Boston Consulting Group, India*

Globalization poses no danger to people's identity as long as a robust democracy and political system is in place, was the common thread that emerged at a panel discussion in **Ideas India 2008**, organized by Aspen Institute India.

Participating in the concurrent session on 'The challenge of Identity in a Globalizing World,' however, saw a threat from the increasing trend of fragmentation and sub-regionalism.

Setting the tone for discussion, **Dr Ashley Tellis, Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA**, noted that multiple identities within India have been held in balance by democracy and culture. Our Constitution and political system allows people to be themselves even as it holds them together as a nation. Identity may become a problem only when the political system fails.

Dr Sumantra Bose, Professor of International and Comparative Politics, London School of Economics, UK, saw a warning signal in the increasing trend of regionalism after the 1989 election. More than half of Parliament is occupied by regional parties now, he said. Although the shared commitment to

solidarity among the fragmenting groups is good for expression of identity, there is a danger of the political system being overwhelmed by the competing agendas, he warned.

Mr Elliot Gerson, Executive Vice President, The Aspen Institute USA, found fault with the public education in India, which has 35 per cent illiteracy rate. He said that he found it surprising that some elite people did very well, but the common people with same level of education fared badly. He said that choice and democracy allows people to vent their grievances, but in failed states like Pakistan and Afghanistan, the people may have to choose between a failed government and Taliban.

Mr N. K. Singh, Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha, noted that national boundaries are becoming more difficult to administer and called for free movement of people across borders in the globalization agenda. He said that nations use the handle of sovereignty to stop free movement of people. On the other hand, he noted with concern the demand by the states within the country to restrict the free movement of people as it distorts the structure and identity of the local population.

Observing that there is a built-in incentive for further fragmentation of parties, Mr Singh noted that the most recent election trend in five states, where electorate gave overwhelming support to major parties, could be the beginning of a positive change.

Mr Arun Maira, Senior Advisor, Boston Consulting Group, India, who moderated the discussion, compared people's identity to the ecological equivalent of Amazon Rain Forest, which is a global concern now.

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