Indian Institute of Advanced Study

Rashtripati Nivas, Shimla – 171005

Three-days National Seminar

On

Diversity and National Integration: Addressing Contemporary Challenges

(18th-20th November 2026)

Theme-Note

The idea of national integration has primarily been understood in terms of the political unity and territorial integrity of a state. Such unity and integrity are undoubtedly fundamental, particularly in a country as geographically, socially and culturally diverse as India. However, the meaning of integration cannot be exhausted by the capacity to hold together states and regions within a common political and constitutional framework. It must also concern the conditions under which individuals and communities, despite differences of language, culture, region and social location, come to experience themselves as equal participants in a shared national identity. National integration is, therefore, as much an economic and social process as it is a political one; as much about everyday interaction and cultural recognition as about institutions and constitutional arrangements. India's plurality has historically required a continual negotiation between unity and difference, one in which the constitutional protections extended to linguistic and religious minorities, the reorganisation of states along linguistic lines, and the framework of affirmative action for historically disadvantaged groups have all represented attempts to translate formal equality into a more substantive experience of participation. The continuing evolution and contestation of these arrangements reflect the changing circumstances through which this relationship between unity and difference has had to be renegotiated, an effort to widen the substantive conditions of participation and belonging rather than a task completed at the founding. The challenge, therefore, has not simply been to preserve diversity, but to ensure that difference does not become a basis for exclusion, hierarchy or estrangement. Integration, in this sense, is concerned with creating the conditions under which diversity can coexist with social cohesion. This challenge acquires new dimensions in contemporary India. Economic and demographic transformation, uneven regional development, large-scale internal migration, expanding educational opportunity and digital connectivity are reshaping patterns of interaction, identity and aspiration at a much faster pace. These transformations create new possibilities for mobility, participation and exchange,

while also raising sharper questions about who benefits from economic mobility and who is displaced by it, whose language and cultural idiom organise public institutions, and whether expanding access to education and digital platforms is narrowing or deepening existing inequalities of voice and representation. Integration, then, is continually shaped and reshaped by the extent to which people participate in shared institutions and economic life, and encounter and understand one another across social and cultural difference. The question, therefore, is how a society can transform diversity into a source of collective strength while ensuring that a shared national identity remains compatible with the plurality of identities that constitute its social life. It is this broader and more fundamental understanding of integration, encompassing economic, social and cultural dimensions alongside political and constitutional ones, that forms the subject of this seminar. Addressing the contemporary challenges to integration requires examining how India's economic transformation, educational and institutional structures, and evolving public sphere are shaping the ways in which diversity is experienced, whether as a shared strength or as a continuing challenge to social cohesion. It is this broad and consequential question, across its many empirical and theoretical dimensions, that the seminar invites scholars, policy practitioners and independent subject experts to examine. **Rationale and Significance**

This proposed seminar is designed to connect India's extensive civilizational heritage with current efforts toward social cohesion and effective governance. History and the Constitution provide a guiding framework within which the Indian experience regarding how unity can be maintained without sacrificing diversity should be placed.

The Indian civilization is strong not because of uniformity, but because it has the power to synthesize differences. Through Vedic times into the modern republic, Indian society faced and integrated an endless variety of streams of cultural and religious influences-Persian, Greek, Central Asian, Mughal, and European-while retaining its moral and philosophical distinctiveness. Core concepts like dharma, anekāntavāda, and sarva dharma sambhava have long served to make Indian society absorb diversity while sustaining coherence. The result is a composite culture, capable of transformation without rupture.

It is this philosophy of integration through plurality that the Constitution of India, framed by rigorous debate and foresight, has upheld. From the Constituent Assembly deliberations on secularism, minority rights, and linguistic autonomy comes a vision of its framers: unity rooted in justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. The "constitutional morality" espoused by Dr B.R. Ambedkar, which invokes ethical citizenship beyond legality, is of great relevance for

contemporary nation-building. Yet, successive amendments and practices have spurred an ongoing debate on whether the secular architecture of India ensures genuine equality or strengthens asymmetries between communities.

The recent spate of communal incidents and the rise of identity politics urgently require sober, evidence-driven inquiry, not rhetorical polarization. Similarly, caste hierarchies continue to dent the promise of equality under the Constitution. Linguistic and regional disputes-whether over the three-language formula or fiscal federalism-call for a nuanced understanding rather than zero-sum competition. Equally, the digital ecosystems have created new spaces for integration as well as division that call for new regulatory, ethical, and educational responses. Finally, the cultural pride that comes with civic nationalism invites scholars to consider how heritage and modernity-along with inclusivity changing in India. Programs like Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat point to an institutional recognition that national integration has an emotive and a cultural dimension. In such a scholarship, one would explain exactly how shared cultural identity and constitutional values reinforce yet do not exclude each other.

Given this tradition of interdisciplinarity, the IIAS is the ideal forum for such conversations. Being intellectually independent and academically sophisticated, it is uniquely qualified to take on frontier questions in history, philosophy, politics, and culture.

1. Historical-civilizational dimensions: cultural synthesis, dharmic pluralism, and the living continuity of Indian civilization.
2. Constitutional Vision and Debates: Framers' Perspectives on Secularism, Diversity, and Constitutional Morality
3. Secularism and Equality in Practice: Reconciling “equal respect for all religions” with differential legal treatment across communities.
4. Federalism and Linguistic Accommodation: Reconciling national integration with regional and linguistic autonomy.
5. Caste and Social Justice: Challenging Persistent Hierarchies with Affirmative Action and Institutional Reform.
6. Regional and Economic Imbalances: With a view to reducing developmental imbalances through cooperative federal policies.
7. Digital and Media Ecosystems: Understanding the Dual Potential of Social Media for Cohesion and Conflict
8. Cultural and Educational Pathways: This includes bringing Indian knowledge systems into mainstream education and ethical education.

Participants and Methodology

It will bring together approximately 20-30 participants comprising well-known scholars, constitutional experts, policy actors, and civil society leaders. The format combines the presentation of papers with panel discussions and roundtable discussions. Case studies, empirical research, and cross-regional comparisons form the core of deliberations.

It is the negotiation between tradition and modernity, identity, and citizenship through respectful deliberation - and not assimilation or confrontation - that is the pathway to national integration in a plural democracy such as India. A seminar proposed here is aimed at fostering such a dialogue rooted in the civilizational ethos of India and informed by constitutional morality.

Linking historical continuity to the concerns of contemporary scholarship will, therefore, reaffirm the intellectual and ethical base of an inclusive India, drawing its strength from its diversity and unity into a common destiny.

4. **Aims and objectives**

The seminar aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

Overview

It shall review the roots of India's unity and diversity from a historical-philosophical perspective.

Read major constitutional debates relating to secularism, minority rights, federalism, and linguistic autonomy and bring out their relevance to the contemporary period.

Present findings on modern challenges: communaliism, caste hierarchies, regional inequality, and digital polarization, based on empirical research.

- Constitutional morality as part of the ethos that shall guide just majority-minority and national-regional interests.

Assessment of policies on integration in the field of education, economics, and culture, that is, Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat, among others.

- Evidence-based, actionable policy recommendations in support of true equality, cooperative federalism, and informed digital citizenship.

The outputs of the seminar are:

- A peer-reviewed edited collection of research papers and key interventions on national integration.
- A policy brief with actionable recommendations that contribute toward social cohesion. • Collaborative academic networks of historians, jurists, social scientists and educators

• Teaching resources for university courses on Indian polity, society, and culture.
• Engaging with the wider public through lectures, op-eds, and outreach projects that bridge the gap between academia and civil society.

5. Significance of the seminar- How it will create new knowledge or contribute to the discipline

This seminar addresses a critical juncture in India's civilizational journey where the forces of globalization, westernization, and ideological confusion threaten to sever the cultural roots that have sustained national unity for millennia. The urgency stems from multiple converging crises: an alarming 84% surge in communal violence during 2024, the persistent challenge of pseudo-secularism that privileges certain communities while discriminating against the majority, and the systematic deracination of Indian youth through educational curricula that glorify external narratives while marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems. The seminar's significance lies in its potential to reclaim and articulate India's civilizational consciousness as the authentic foundation for national integration, moving beyond the failed framework of distorted secularism that has deepened rather than bridged communal divides. By examining how ancient values of dharma, shared sacred geography, and spiritual unity have historically prevented India's fragmentation despite invasions and colonial rule, this scholarly engagement offers pathways to contemporary cohesion rooted in cultural pride rather than imposed uniformity. The location at IIAS, Shimla—an institution committed to exploring questions of deep human significance through interdisciplinary inquiry—provides the ideal neutral academic space for rigorous examination of these sensitive issues. At a time when external forces seek to exploit internal divisions and separatist ideologies threaten territorial integrity, this seminar's contribution to understanding how cultural nationalism can strengthen rather than weaken pluralistic democracy becomes not merely academic but essential for national survival and resurgence. The expected outcomes—scholarly publications, policy recommendations, educational reforms, and a research network committed to Bharatiya perspectives—will equip India with the intellectual resources necessary to navigate the challenges of maintaining unity while celebrating diversity, ensuring that the nation's ancient wisdom informs its modern trajectory toward becoming a strong, confident, and culturally integrated Vishwaguru.

6. Conference outline, including sessions: The seminar will be organized around the following thematic sessions:

1. Political Representation and Democratic Participation
2. Media, Technology and the Political Economy of Information

3. Demography, Migration and the Evolving Nature of Citizenry
4. Growth, Federalism and Regional Development
5. Political Economy of Public Institutions
6. Human Capital and State Capacity
7. Education and Development
8. Pathways Forward: Policy and Practice