

Challenges of Moving from Diversity to Pluralism

The overarching theme of this Conference is “Seventy Years of Development: The Way Forward.” The preamble refers to such milestones as representing “a journey” and presenting people with the opportunity to reflect upon what has been achieved and what is still required. For South Asian states in general and Pakistan, in particular, this journey has been a slippery slope with regards to the fostering of pluralism.

It is crucial to distinguish between diversity and pluralism. All South Asian states are rich in diversity – comprising many different ethnic groups with different cultural traditions, religions and languages - but impoverished in pluralism. Diversity refers to variety or multiplicity while pluralism moves beyond that and constitutes an engagement with diversity and a commitment to it. Modern nation states comprise multiple religious and ethnic groups but the dominant narrative is that of the numerical majority. Diversity therefore has the potential to lead to tension and conflict – the fear of the “other”. Discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities at both the individual and institutional level and erosion of their rights is an obvious reflection of this.

Pluralism has been defined by Diana Eck (2006) as having four components. Firstly, it is the energetic engagement with diversity. Secondly, it is not just tolerance but the active seeking of understanding. Tolerance does not remove ignorance or the stereotypes and fears that lead to divisions and violence. Thirdly, pluralism is the encounter of commitments and fourthly, it is based on dialogue, which involves both speaking and listening, give and take.¹ Pluralism therefore means respecting each religious and ethnic group as an equally valued element of society, with equal rights and privileges.

Taking the example of Pakistan and the current state of its religious and ethnic minorities it is evident that we have been rapidly sliding downhill and the establishment of a pluralistic society, as envisioned by its

¹ Eck, D. (2006) The Pluralism Project. Harvard University.

founders, seems a distant dream. Seventy years on, we need to examine the challenges faced by Pakistan, along with other South Asian nations, in moving from diversity to pluralism and focus our attention on how these can be overcome.

This panel aims to explore and address the following questions:

- What are the specific challenges in moving from diversity to pluralism?
- What steps can be taken by governments to promote the establishment of pluralistic and inclusive societies, with free and equal rights for all citizens?
- What role can be played by civil society to promote pluralism?

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