



# MANY NOTES ONE SYMPHONY

Understanding Pluralism

KAMLA BHASIN

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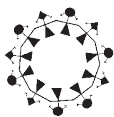
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Sangat



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# MANY NOTES, ONE SYMPHONY

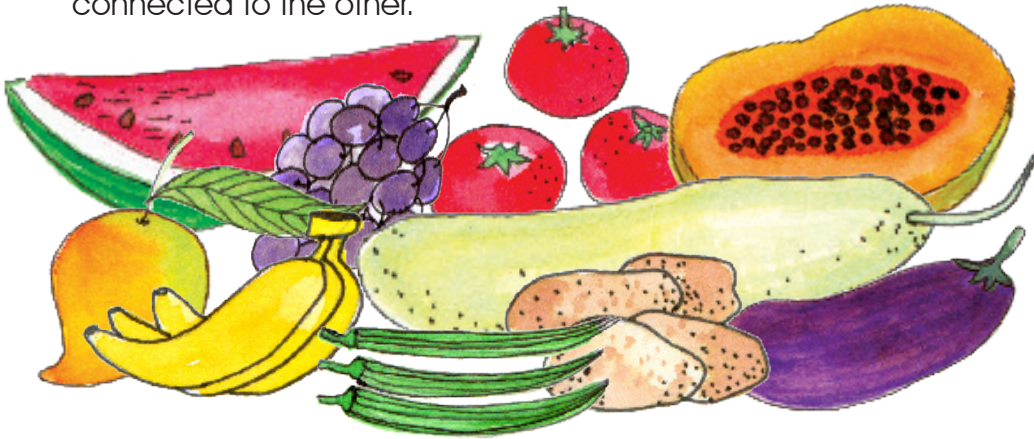
Understanding Pluralism

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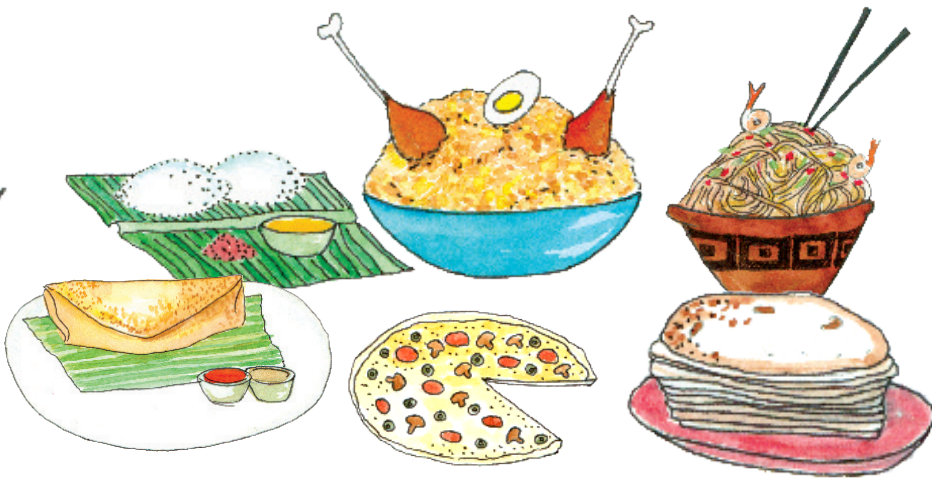
## Many notes, one symphony

To survive and to thrive, nature requires diversity. Different plants, creepers trees grow in different climates and in different seasons. There are a multitude of vegetables, fruits, nuts; a variety of insects, birds, fish and animals. Each one with its own uniqueness, space and role, each connected to the other.




Like in nature, there is diversity amongst humans. Different climates make the colours of our skin different—black, wheatish, white, brown, yellowish, and so on. Because of different climates, our clothes are different. So are our houses, livelihoods, jobs, ways of living, thinking, expressing and being.

Climates, needs and tastes also make for differences in our food and food habits. Some eat *biryani*, *idli* and *dosa* made of *rice*, while others eat *naan*, *rotis* and *paranthas* made of wheat. Some love pizzas, while others crave for *noodles*. Some cannot live without meat and fish. Others cannot or do not go near them. Some enjoy mangoes, melons and pineapples, while others cherish cherries, berries and apricots.



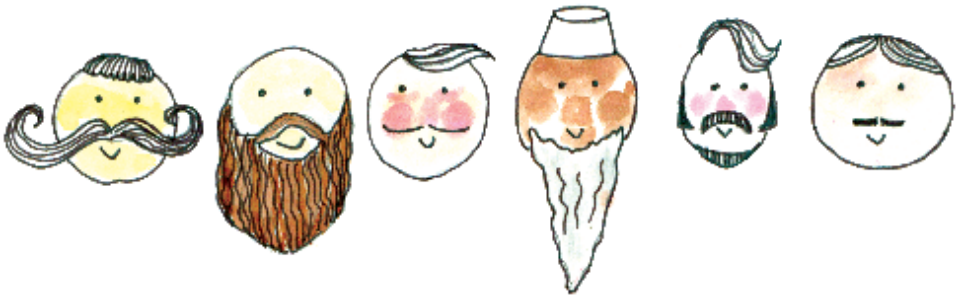
Not only are our complexions, features, height and weight different, our abilities and skills also vary. Some people are not able to see well or see at all, but by touching, hearing or smelling they can perceive a lot. Some are not able to hear or speak. There are some whose hands or legs do not function well. The minds of many work differently.





For surviving and fulfilling our basic needs, we need different occupations. So, there are farmers, blacksmiths, cobblers and factory workers. There are teachers, doctors, lawyers and traders. There are rickshaw-pullers, drivers and pilots. There is endless variety.

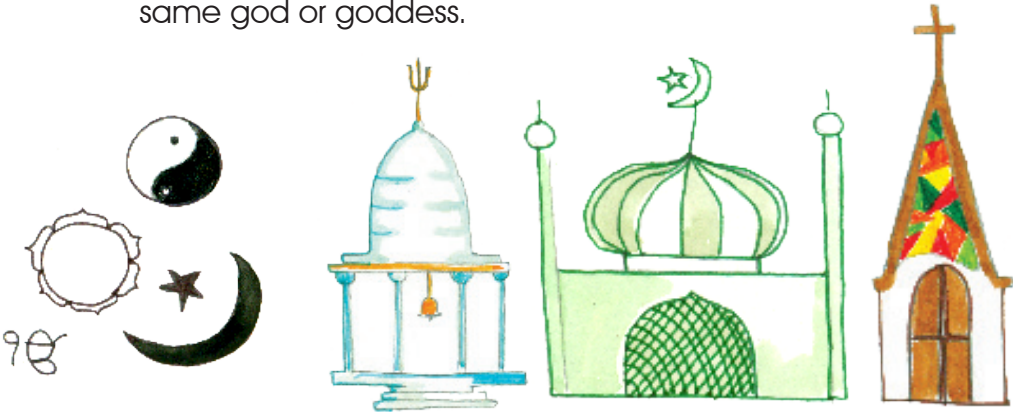
What to talk of differences in manners, behaviours, likes and dislikes. Some have long hair, some short and some are totally bald. What about the multitudes of styles and sizes of moustaches and beards?



Then there are varieties of body pierces, body art, tattoos and adornments.

On top of all this, some like to sing, others to dance; some are lost in books, others in sports; some love to cook, others do not go near the kitchen; some wake up with the sun, others hate to get up early.

In this diverse, multi-coloured world of ours, there are all kinds of beliefs and religions—some worship nature, while others are Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Baha'i, Sikh or Jain and so on. Not just between them, there is even diversity within religions. Almost every religion has different sects. For example, there are Shias, Sunnis, Wahabies, Bohras within Islam. Amongst Hindus, there are worshippers of Ram, Krishna, Durga, Kali, Shiva and many other gods, goddesses and gurus. Even then people from different places have a variety of ways of worshipping the same god or goddess.



While millions believe in God, there are millions of atheists and agnostics who do not believe in any God.



There is so much difference and variety around us that it is impossible to say what is normal.





Other names of life are

## Interdependence and cooperation

All living beings are inter-connected and inter-dependent. So, to survive and to live with ease, cooperation is essential—cooperation in nature, amongst human beings and between nature and us. To live we need air, water, food, sun. To survive, we need the support and cooperation of many natural phenomena and people. For example, an orange which we eat and enjoy, has been produced and made available to us with the help of nature and many people. Land, soil, air, water, sun, insects, farmers, traders, transporters, shop keepers, have all helped. If the orange is of some new variety then agriculture scientists have also contributed. This is true of everything we use or consume. Each link of this chain is essential and important.

In this world no one can be completely self-reliant. My "self" is interlinked with many other "selves" and species.



## Diversity is both essential and attractive

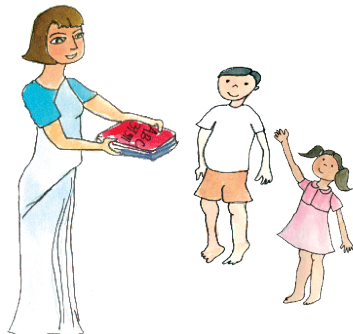
Diversity has a special attraction. Are we not attracted by a colourful bird or a sky filled with colour, or by a multi-coloured rainbow?

Diversity doesn't just please us, it is essential to life. The cycle of changing-seasons keeps us going. Vegetation and humans will be burnt to death if the sun was to shine all 24 hours of the day. This is why night has to accompany day. There has to be a balance. In this cycle of life, each has its/her/his place, role and contribution.

Just as in nature, diversity is necessary also amongst human beings. If everyone becomes a scientist, who will write poetry? If all start farming, who will make clothes, shoes, pots and pans?

If all dance, music, dresses, housing, manners, life styles were to be exactly the same across the planet, there will be nothing new to see, experience and marvel at.

If you were to eat the same food every day, would you enjoy it as much as trying out new foods and experimenting with new flavours? Just imagine if there was no diversity in our life, if everything and everyone was the same what the world would be like.



## Difference and inequality are not the same

Difference does not mean inequality or inferiority-superiority. None is superior, none inferior in nature. Can we say which is better-fire or water? Birds, butterflies or animals? Ants, cats or elephants? Seas, mountains or villages? Day or night? Winter, summer, rains or spring?

Similarly, in our families and communities, every one has his/her own place, role and importance. Together we support and contribute to each other's lives.

Just as hundreds of plants, flowers, birds make a pretty garden; different kinds of people make functioning communities.

Nature created differences and diversity. She did not create hierarchies. Nature did not judge that amongst flowers, roses are the best, amongst metals gold, amongst human beings Whites. Nature's abundance was given free and without ranks and grades. By putting a value on things and living beings we humans have created hierarchies, grades, ranks and inequities.



By converting different occupations into castes and classes we created rich and poor, Brahmins and Dalits, superior-inferior. Nature gave us skins of different colours, we created racism. Instead of uniting us, our differences have been used to divide and separate us. Instead of togetherness, oneness and unity in diversity, we have divisions, separations, tensions, conflicts. The result is all kinds of violence around us. There is so much violence that survival itself is threatened. If we wish to save the only Earth all of us have and share, we have to believe and make others believe, that:

We cannot survive without diversity  
Diversity cannot survive without us

Rabindra Nath Tagore said, 'Where there is difference there is diversity, where there is togetherness there is unity'.



To understand what Rabi Babu said, let us look at our own families. There are different people in our families—young and old, students, professionals and the retired. Our age, activities and interests are all different. Our likes, dislikes, personalities are also different, but if there is love and harmony amongst us, our family is one and there is unity in diversity.

Many family members	one family
Many students	one class
Many plants and flowers	one garden
Many classes	one school
Many rivers and rivulets	one sea
Many communities	one world

In spite of our differences there can be harmony and unity if there is togetherness, mutual understanding, respect for each other and love. If different members of the family fight, the family cannot remain one. It will be divided.



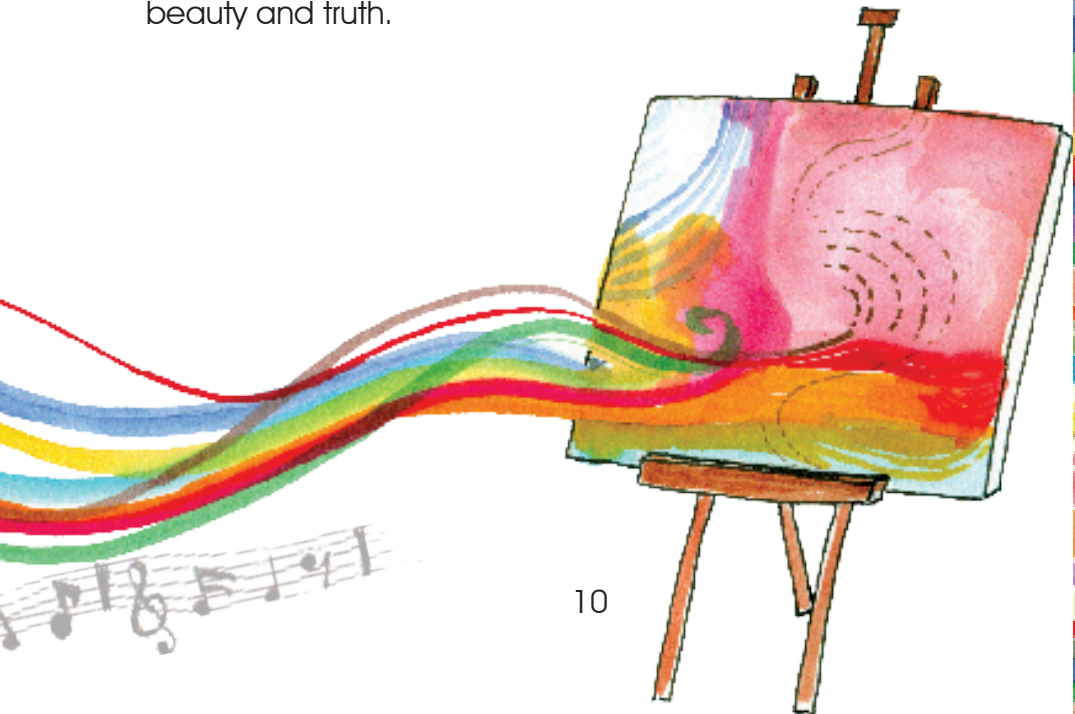


We can join together only if we are different. If all notes are the same, how will their coming together make a raga and create music?

One note does not create music  
One colour does not create paintings

Human beings have always striven to look for unity despite differences. These endeavours created human communities. Searching for unity in the diversity of nature created some principles of science.

When we walk in unison and togetherness we advance faster. But if two neighbours or neighbouring countries always fight and come in each other's way, both will remain unhappy, suspicious and backward. In the absence of understanding, differences turn into conflict and pain. Togetherness creates strength, unity, well being, beauty and truth.



## Togetherness protects diversity

In Rabindra Nath Tagore's words,

Differences give birth to diversity  
Togetherness protects diversity

In the absence of togetherness, diversity is not safe. In fact, it disappears. For example, in a group of five friends, all of us are different. Our families, languages, religions, regions, even the colour of our skins are all different, but still there is friendship among us. We are MANY, but because we are together we are ONE and UNITED. The day our togetherness is gone, we are reduced to one, separate, alone and perhaps even weak.

However, without justice and equality it is difficult to have genuine togetherness. Unity among different people is possible only when there is justice, mutual understanding and respect. Because unjust relationships lead to tensions between different castes, races and classes.

Conflicts and tensions between religious communities are on the increase. Religious intolerance is being fanned. People are misusing religious sentiments for political gains. Religion is close to most people's hearts. Some however use violence, discrimination, exclusion, disrespect, blame




and intolerance of those from other communities in the name of protecting their religion. They do not realise that their actions do not reflect the values of their own religion. These, pseudo-religious people are creating hatred between different communities in India and elsewhere. They do not seem to realize that whether it is Muslims or Hindus who die or suffer in these conflicts, it is human beings who suffer. Livelihoods destroyed during riots may belong to Sikhs or Christians but it is the country which loses.

If we reject minorities in India like Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs etc, will Hindus be safe elsewhere? Millions of Hindus live abroad today. Large numbers of Hindus live and work in the Middle East, Malaysia, and Singapore. What will be their fate if the virus of intolerance and hatred spreads? If the American government uses brute power to control other countries, will American citizens be welcome anywhere? If we disrespect and hate others can we expect them to love and accept us?







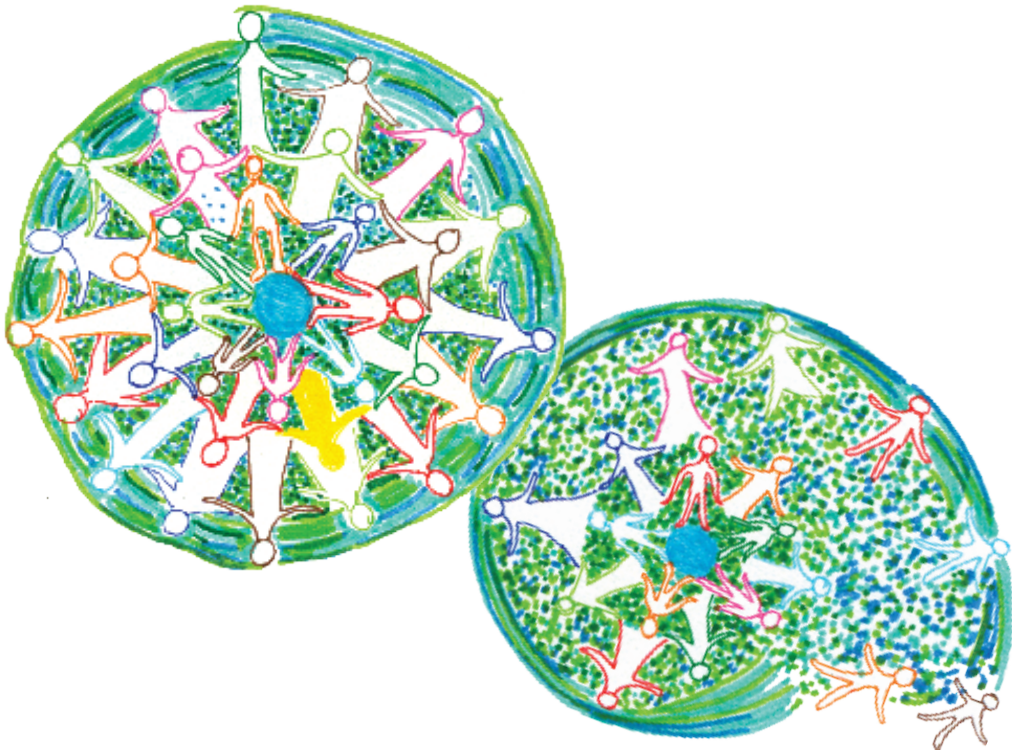
*'Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam'*, is a beautiful concept where we consider the entire earth to be one family. But today, pseudo Hindutva people only want a *'Hindu Kutumbakam'* or an exclusive Hindu Family. The world is globalising but these pseudo Hindus are promoting narrow and, exclusive identities. They are sowing seeds of civil wars all over. They are making neighbours fight, and even Indians fight other Indians. They are destroying whatever togetherness and unity exists. Pseudo Muslims are doing the same and so are pseudo Christians and some political leaders. Unfortunately, this is happening in many countries.

There seems to be a sort of competition going on about who can spread more hatred, who can violate more people's rights and kill more brutally; or who is more vicious and merciless. All this is being done in the name of religious nationalism, freedom, democracy or even peace.

Today it is Hindus and Muslims who are fighting in India, but once intolerance and hatred for the 'other' spreads, there will be no end. The devotees of *Ram* who cannot tolerate Muslims today will reject and kill devotees of *Krishna*, *Shiva* and *Kali*. The Sunni Muslims who dislike and violate Hindus today will reject and violate *Shias*, *Bohras* and *Wahabies* tomorrow.

Once the habit of rejecting the 'other' takes over, no one would be safe. Women become special targets for they are the 'other' for men of all communities. Fundamentalists of all kinds and shades violate women and rob them of their freedom and autonomy. In the name of religion and morality, they put immoral restrictions on women's clothes, mobility, education, employment and participation in public spaces and decision-making.

If we look a little carefully, we will find that behind this intolerance of the 'other' is greed and lust for power. You reject the 'other' and take over their property, resources (oil in the Middle East; diamonds, gold, forests and so on elsewhere) and jobs. You deny them a voice in decision making and rule over them.

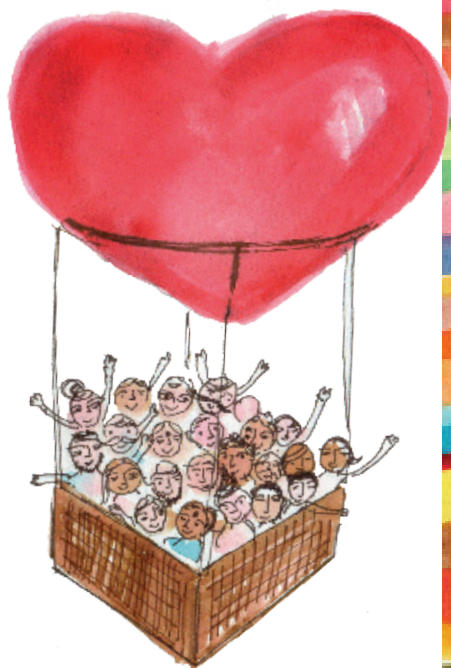


Once unleashed, where will this intolerance for the 'other' end? Where will we draw the line? The 'other' is all around us. Diversity is everywhere. Can we survive by rejecting differences and diversity? Who all, to what extent and for how long will we hate, reject and kill?

Since we cannot live without diversity, it is advisable to accept, understand and protect it. In the absence of diversity, we will shrink. Our identities will get narrower and smaller. It is entirely up to us whether we consider ourselves to be humans first and then a Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. Are we first global citizens and then French, Bolivian, Nigerian, Bangladeshi? Are we Indians first and then Punjabi, Tamil or Bengali; or Rajasthani first and then a Rajput, Jaat or Gujjar?



We believe it is narrow-minded and small-hearted people who take on and promote narrow and exclusive identities. Large-hearted people are inclusive and they like sharing and living together. Large-hearted people are not obsessed with selfishness. They believe in 'may all beings be happy'. This is why all spiritual people talk of harmony and togetherness. They give emphasis to removing separateness and discord.



People involved in self-centered power politics are the ones who divide people in order to control and rule. We believe, by definition, any one who divides people and spreads hatred cannot be religious. Truly religious are those who have compassion and love for all, and who are truthful and just.

We also believe it is better to have broader and more inclusive identities. We are all born human and only later we are given other identities of religion, nationality, caste, class and race. Why should we give up our original, real and broader identity for a narrow limited one?





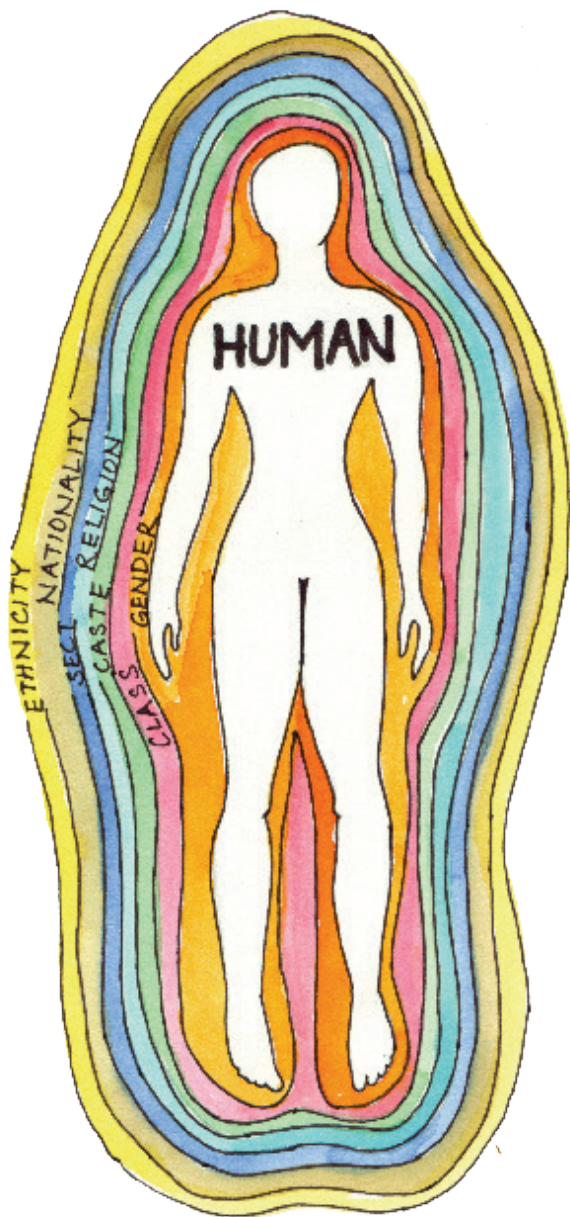
## Let us understand and accept differences


Diversity is our wealth and our inheritance. It will remain with us only if we understand and protect it. Protecting diversity means protecting ourselves.

If I do not understand and accept others, will I be understood and accepted by others? If I insult and ridicule those who are different, will the same not happen to me? Even within our families, not everyone is identical in appearance or thoughts. Will we then reject them and in turn be rejected within the family too?

However, it is not enough to **tolerate** differences and diversity. Let us suppose that I cannot see. Merely tolerating my blindness and not making fun of me is not good enough. For us to live together, it is necessary that you understand my blindness. You understand that I may not be able to see with my eyes, but I can sense with my ears and my touch. You understand that my being visually challenged is only one of my identities. I am a lot more besides being blind—I am a girl, a student, a singer, a daughter, a sister and so on.

Our ability to see is different but we have many things in common. For example, we are human beings, citizens of a country and live in the same city. Our basic needs are very similar. We cherish our friendship and love, and do not like being insulted etc.

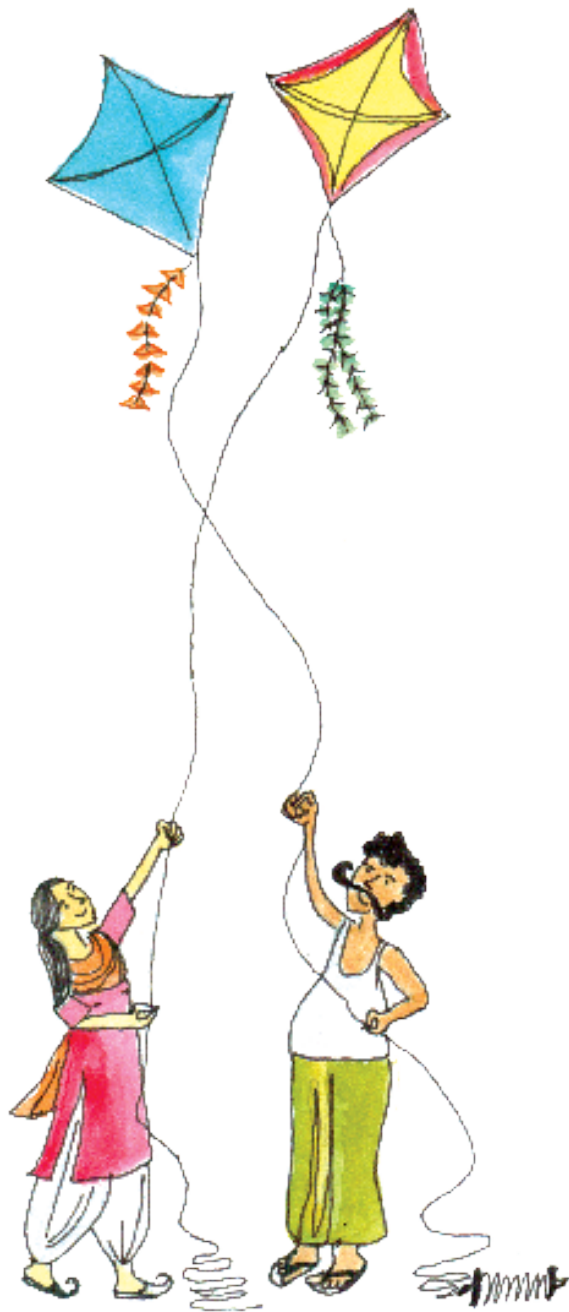




Similarly, you and I may belong to two different religions but we can still appreciate and respect each others beliefs and learn from each other. Our religions may be different but our religiosity is similar. Both of us accept the presence of a higher being. Both strive to become better and more humane. All these similarities can become the basis of our living together as good neighbours.

There is **novelty** in diversity. It provides the possibility of give and take, learn and teach. There is **life** in diversity. It is our attitude which determines how we look at others. If we are intolerant we cannot get along with our own brother, sister, husband or wife. Such a mentality creates conflicts all around us.

So actually, the question is not that of differences. The question is whether we like togetherness or separateness? Whether we connect with each other or create walls of misunderstandings? Our uniqueness and differences can either become hatred or attraction. It is up to us to decide whether we create walls of hatred or the open skies of friendship.







We need respect and restrain

to safeguard diversity

To protect and promote diversity, in addition to mutual understanding, we need limits and restraints. In families, factories or offices, if everyone acts and works in an orderly, disciplined manner, we become an efficient and strong collective. But if each acts according to his/her own will, without consideration and restraint, the same group becomes a crowd and we push, step on and trample each other.

The same is true of traffic. If **each** moves according to rules, **everyone** moves forward. If each moves in a selfish, self centred manner, everyone is stuck.

**Diversity is safe if each one is responsible.** The sun, the moon and the stars all move in their own orbits, respecting each other and maintaining order and diversity.

Our diversity and uniqueness is protected only if we appreciate diversity, and respect and protect the identity and uniqueness of others while we cherish and protect our own.

Diversity has always been part of our social life, but in today's interconnected, globalized world, it is more integral to our life and being. Today in a small town in Kerala, you can find Punjabi Sikhs, Bhaiyas of UP and Muslims from Maldives,

all trying to make a living. In the *basties* of Mumbai and Delhi, there are people from all over India living together. One *basti* has many languages, communities, castes, religions, food and manners. All are different but all poor, all migrants in search of livelihood and survival.

Television has today brought diversity into our homes. Images from all over the world are in one box. People in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, watch Indian films and sing their songs. Indian children sway to western music, wear clothes from all over the world and dream of making a living abroad.

Millions of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews have made the US, UK and Europe their home. Like India has had *gurudwaras*, churches, mosques, synagogues along side temples for centuries, so do these countries today.





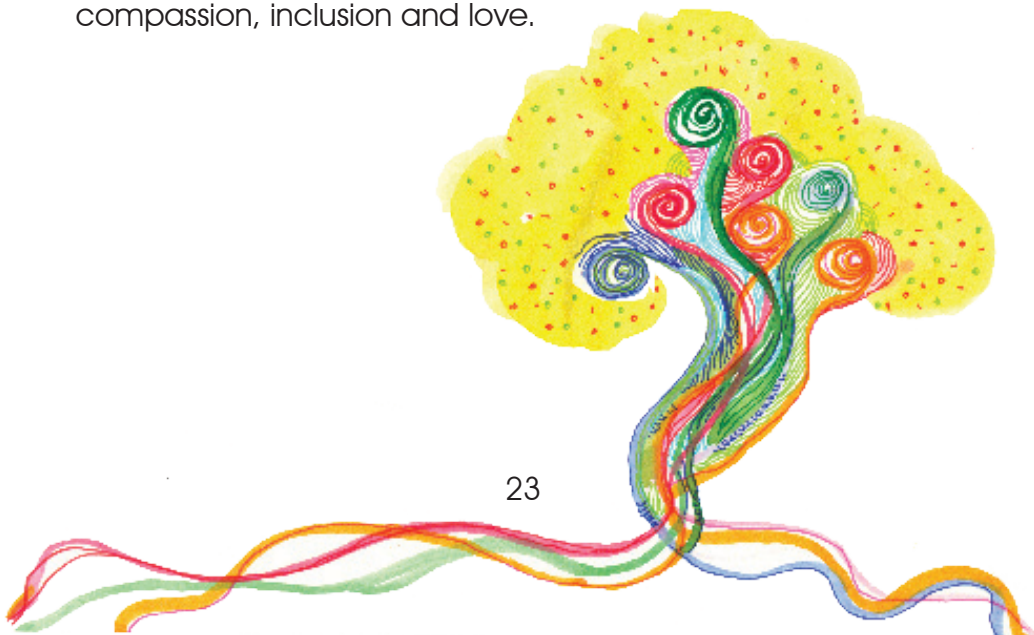
## Pluralism protects diversity



As we said earlier, it is not enough to accept diversity. We need to understand and promote pluralism. Merely acknowledging or accepting diversity does not give birth to pluralism. Actively appreciating, engaging with and protecting plurality is pluralism.

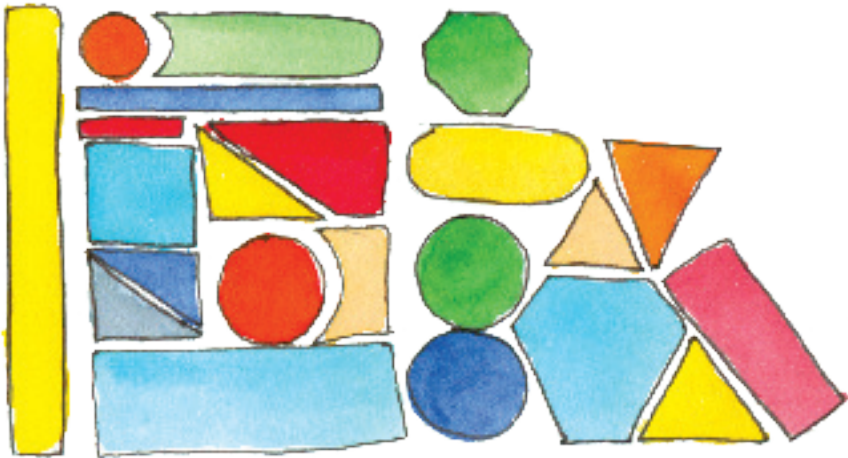
Tolerance of differences and of the 'other' is often lauded and promoted as a solution. But we actually need to go beyond tolerance of differences. We need to make an effort to know the 'other', appreciate and respect it. So pluralism is not simply tolerance, it is also the **seeking of understanding**.

Pluralism, therefore, is a belief in and respect for plurality. It is a commitment to protect and promote plurality. Pluralism is the belief that just as the meeting of rivers creates *sangams*, the coming together of different religious communities creates beautiful communities. Pluralism is the belief that conflicts in the name of religion are anti-religious. Religion can and should only mean compassion, inclusion and love.



## Living with differences deepens our humanity

When we try to live together with understanding, appreciation and acceptance of differences, we become better human beings. Our capacity to understand and tolerate improves. We develop sympathy and compassion. We become less selfish and less self-centred. As we try to understand others, we get to know ourselves better. To live in harmony with others, we have to introspect and review our own reactions, competitiveness, jealousy, insecurity and so on. If we stick to our own opinions and positions, keep pandering to our ego, we are hardly likely to achieve togetherness with others. We will remain alone and create problems everywhere.





## Pluralism does not mean removal of differences

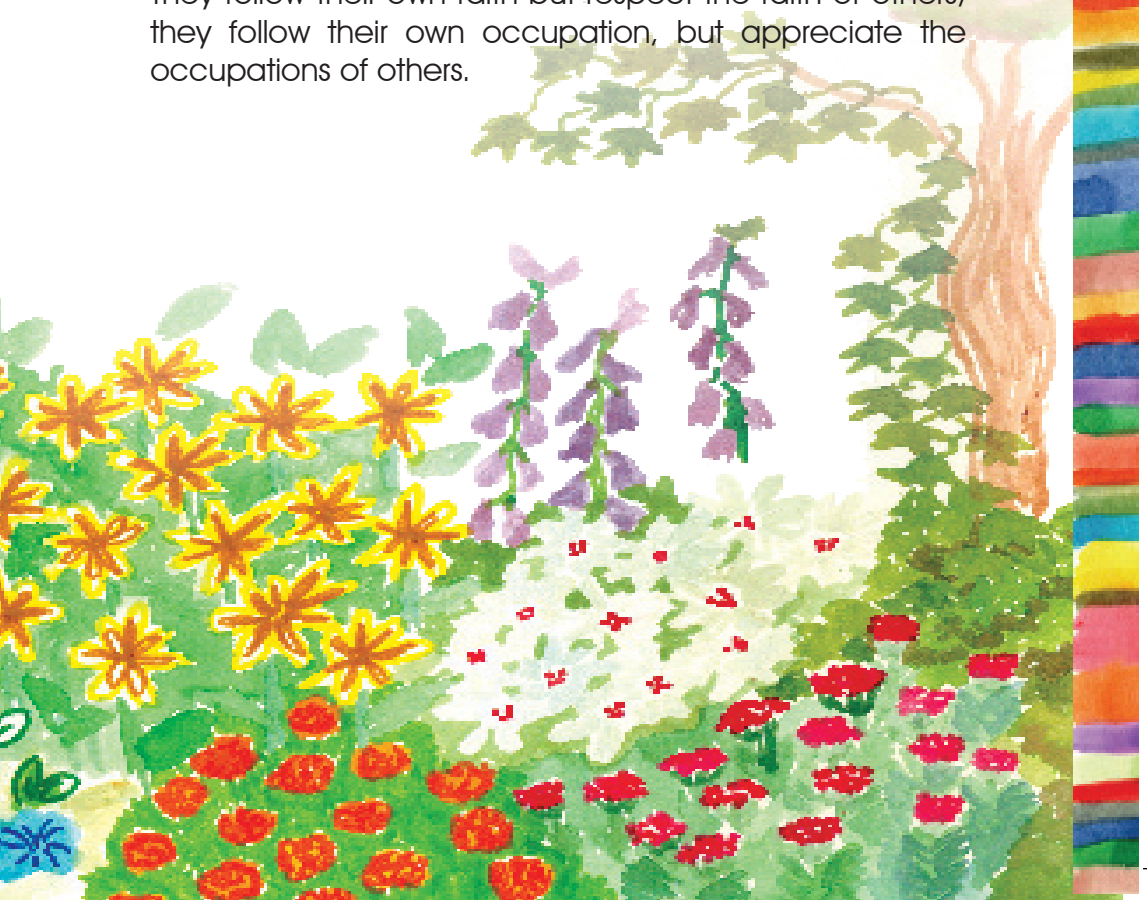
Some people think that in order to bring unity in diversity, we have to or should remove all differences. But we believe it is neither necessary nor possible to wipe out differences. How can people belonging to different religious faiths, communities, linguistic groups or races negate or wipe out their identities? In order to live together will Hindus, Muslims, Christians give up their faith?

To live together, we do not all have to be or become similar. We do not have to wipe out all differences, get assimilated into others or force others to get assimilated into us. This is not togetherness. This is loss of identity. Can one even think of making flowers of different colours into ONE flower, with one (mixed up) colour?



Everyone has a right to have her/his own identity and faith. Pluralism accepts everyone's right to be oneself. We can imagine pluralism to be a **beautiful, multicoloured painting** which is beautiful because different colours have come together retaining their differences. They are together and different. Some others have imagined pluralism to be like a **symphony orchestra** in which each instrument is different, but together they produce music. The music is created only because **even the smallest note retains its uniqueness.**

Unity in diversity is many plants, trees, flowers in one garden; people belonging to different communities, faiths, and speaking different languages, living in one community. They follow their own faith but respect the faith of others; they follow their own occupation, but appreciate the occupations of others.



## Pluralism is based on dialogue

Pluralism requires **dialogue** that is based on equality and mutuality. When only one person speaks and others listen, when one point of view is imposed on others, it is not a dialogue. In a true dialogue, we listen with our hearts. We listen to understand. We talk to remove misunderstandings. We talk to understand and appreciate our similarities AND differences.





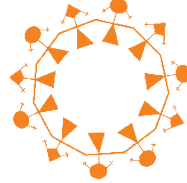
If many of us believe in, practice and promote pluralism, it is possible to have a world with justice, peace and harmony. If many of us dream this dream, we can make it come true. The best and the most effective way to begin is to start with ourselves. If we change, the world around us cannot remain unchanged.







# Sangat



A South Asian Feminist Network

The word “Sangat” means, in some South Asian languages, a gathering, community of like-minded people.

Sangat was created in April 1998 at a South Asian Workshop of Gender Trainers, held at Koitta (Bangladesh) and organised by FAO-NGO South Asia Programme. The founders of the network were 27 women and men from five countries of South Asia and three countries of Europe. As one of the participants at the workshop put it, the need for creating Sangat was felt because “the space for transformatory gender work is being squeezed and the fear is that it may further decrease, unless we use every opportunity available to us to push for transformatory and feminist gender trainings and advocacy”. It was felt that a South Asian Network would be the logical extension of several existing national networks of gender equality activists and trainers.

The belief that understanding, peace and co-operation are essential for meaningful South Asian progress, prompted the formation of this regional alliance.

**WE WANT PEACE IN SOUTH ASIA  
NOT PIECES OF SOUTH ASIA**